

PAINTING THROUGH THE COLORS OF TRAGEDY

Art as companion in difficult times

BY RITA V. ROGAN, Ph.D.

I was asked to write this article shortly after September 11. That was before the air strikes began in Afghanistan, before anthrax became the disease *du jour* and before two national "high alerts." As I collected my thoughts then, I encountered the first warp of our newly defined reality—the lost illusion of a relatively predictable future. I wondered then what our reality would be by the time this article appeared.

When the future feels as though it

has collapsed before us, it can lead us to a new understanding of the wisdom of mystics and philosophers—that the present, the now, is our only certainty. In the present moment can be found timelessness and the richness of life.

Perhaps there is a parallel lesson for us as artists, one that illustrates what our mentors have told us: focus on the process (which also is in the timeless now) and not the product. If we can focus on the moment as individuals, life is enriched. If we can focus on the

process of making our art, then our art is enriched. These parallel lessons feed each other. If we live in the moment, of life and of art, we can not only create our art, but grow in the process.

The events since September 11 have touched our psyches, our souls and our individual ability to function. We have all had to find new ways to work, and to work through our emotions.

Periodically, as I write this, I am doing what I recommend to you. I am taking a "dose" of my own medicine,

Reflections on Creating "Ground Zero"

I went to the studio around 9:00 am on the morning of September 11, eager to get back to my painting. I had not been at my easel since the Friday before, since I was the instructor for an intensive workshop from Saturday through Monday. Then the phone rang, and changed everything: news of planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon tore me away from my work, and I watched on television the unfolding tragedy. Feelings of shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, insecurity and grief overwhelmed me for many days; watching CNN became a central activity. The World Trade Center had a personal

importance to me; it was there, in Governor Cuomo's office in 1985, that I had my first exhibit in America.

I couldn't possibly go back to painting what I had been working on prior to the attack—a series of oil paintings celebrating the joy and beauty of light and life. My heart was filled with the darkness of despair, so it was difficult to feel like painting anything. Yet I'm a painter, so I need to paint! As I have in the past, I turned to painting angels as a way of comforting myself. At first, I was going to paint a sad angel huddled in the moonlight, but then I realized the angel should embody strength along with tenderness. She would be

standing amidst the ruins; tall, beautiful and shining (as the twin towers once were), looking down in mourning for the victims buried beneath. One hand holds a sprig of red, white and blue flowers, their colors symbolizing the courage, justice and truth which the American Flag represents. Her right hand is clutching her dress at some folds that are suggestive of a sword's scabbard. Her gaze is directed toward some long piece of metal in the rubble which perhaps resembles a sword. Could she be contemplating retribution?

Once I had the idea, it nearly painted itself. I worked day and night for three days. The painting *Ground Zero* was complete, and my soul was comforted. I hope its image brings similar solace to all those who, like me, despair this tragedy.

—HongNian Zhang

Opposite page, *Ground Zero*, oil/canvas, 48"x36", by HongNian Zhang. Courtesy of Fletcher Gallery, Woodstock, New York. See www.fletchergallery.com for more information.

[Editor's Note: While we do not ordinarily include oil paintings in *The Pastel Journal*, the subject of this painting was so appropriate to this article as to be exceptional. Watch for new works in pastel by HongNian Zhang featured in our May/June 2002 issue.]

