

Annette Esser

The Maleness of Christ is Not His Beauty

“The maleness of Christ is not His beauty – or should I say Her Beauty!?” – These words came to my mind when I reflected about what I could or should paint for the exhibition “Celebrating Images of Christa” that was to take place at Link Gallery, Winchester University 10th July – 9th August 2015. – I had first met Dr. Megan Clay in 2009 during the international conference of the *European Society of Women in Theological Research* where she was guiding the first subject group that was ever to take place in this society on visual arts. Out of that had also derived a Book on “Feminist Theology and Visual Arts” that I had edited (=Journal of the ESWTR, Vol 19, 2011) and also an exhibition in Salamanca, Spain, accompanying the conference. There, I had presented my first oil-painting “Fire of Paradise” that I had painted in 2007 and that is on the cover of my doctoral dissertation on “Feminist Spirituality”. All this being a reason for inviting me to join the exhibition in Winchester. Thinking of the theme of Christ as fe/male at first caused me quite a headache. In this article, I reflect on my hesitance that is also due to my long experience with life-style drawing and love for men!

What I wish to say at first is that I am not contributing to this project for any ideological reason. That is I am not interested in a kind of political correctness as a feminist theologian. Rather to the opposite: I am contributing to this project even though I have no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth as a historical person was himself a “man” belonging to the male gender; even though I am not simply “against men” who have been very important in my life (as my father, my son and many other men in my life); and even though the idea of painting a female Christ, a Christa, did not attract me at first.

So, the reason why I am contributing to this project is merely spiritual. It is all about my real dealing with Christ for many years in my life, as a Catholic girl (born in Cologne, Germany, in 1957), as the daughter and student of an artist (Georg Esser, born in Cologne in 1928), as an ecumenical scholar of theology in Germany, the USA, and The Netherlands, and not at last as a practicing art therapist.

The fact that I have done a lot of life-style drawing (“Aktzeichnen”) of women and men since I was 21 till very recently when I was accepted as a late art student at the Mainz Academy of Art at the age of 56, might prove that I do not merely know what men look like, but that I have also been dealing with their very physical appearance rather intensely in my life. So, I think that I am capable to draw a male figure in a way that is recognizable as such. Still, I do not claim that my drawing work is “art” already.



There is also the story of my religious images. As a spiritual woman, I always felt attracted to the figure of Mary of Magdalene, to the great sinner and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.



Annette Esser, "The Anointment"

I also felt theologically attracted to the tradition of bride mysticism that follows the Song of the Songs. The path of mystical union (“Unio Mystica”), mystical engagement and mystical marriage attracted me a lot (my graduation thesis of 1985¹). And, I already wondered whether or not, I was so much or so specifically attracted to Christ just because I am a woman!? For, as a woman I have a special relationship or I do feel a special love or I am able to sense a certain emotion for a man. But when I attempted to draw this emotion, e.g. in my image “The Anointment”, Christ did not really appear like an adult man but rather as a boy with female features in his face. Is Christ therefore “Christa”!?

I had three visions of Christ in my life. The first one occurred in a psychodrama-weekend when on a phantasy-journey with drum-music we were invited to imagine someone who is most close or intimate to us in our lives. In sharing about our experience, everyone in the group seemed to have imagined his or her closest boy-friend or girl-friend. But for me, it was clear that the loving one who was coming to me from behind, to be with me, to support me, to love me, was Christ. And I remember exactly how embarrassing it felt for me to share this vision in this secular group. This reminded me also to an experience of Santa Teresa where she perceived Christ at her right side in an intellectual vision. In my thesis, I interpreted Christ according to Jungian psychology as the “Animus” of Teresa (who also had named herself “Teresa de Jesus”). I have not painted that vision but in many of my dreams an unknown man appeared as lying on the ground, sleeping, calm, relaxed, attracting me as a woman, just to be there at his side.



My second vision of Christ occurred in a retreat at the Protestant Convent Wennigsen during the Holy Week. There, I saw Christ’s descent into hell and his resurrection in one image. This was also inspired by the Hymn of Christ in the Letter to the Philippians (2...?) which describes the three dimensions or realms in which Christ is present and is praised. – Unfortunately, I lost my original drawing at the train station of Hannover. But back in Cologne I drew it again- just having to say that by then the vision was no more so strong and the drawing lacks spiritual penetration, I found. Therefore, I need to paint this again, maybe.

¹ Annette Esser, „Die Mystik Teresas von Avila als Weg der Selbsterfahrung und der Gotteserfahrung“, Münster 1985 (=Erste Staatsexamensarbeit, unveröffentlicht)



The third vision I had during my pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago on August 25, 2014, just after I was invited to join this exhibition. I remember this, because I wrote and draw in my pilgrim's book. I went into the church of Fabio, sat down and closed my eyes. Then, suddenly out of a dark cave that had the shape of an eye, the figure of Christ appeared and became larger and larger. S/he approached me with a human size and looked at me.

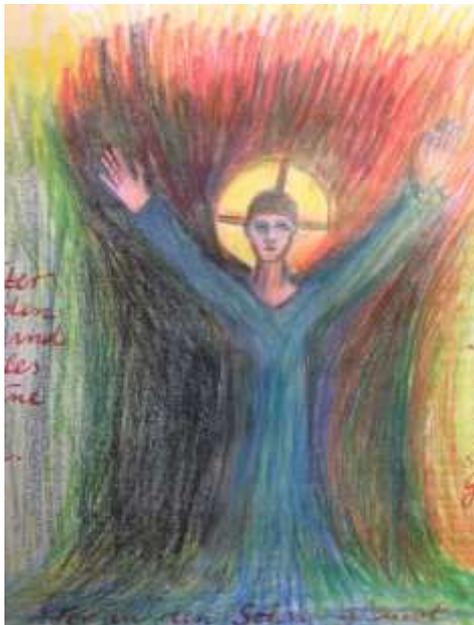
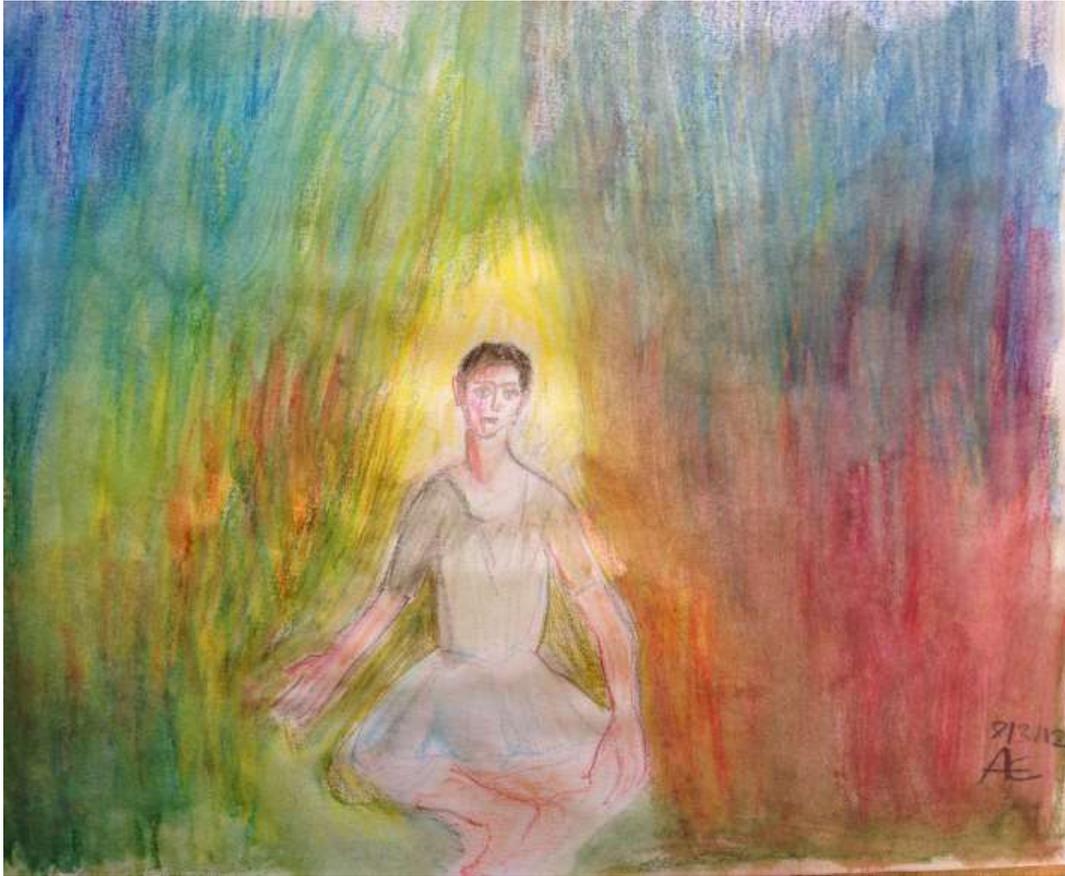


I am seen – I look at you – I see – you look at me

Then, Christ moved back again. His/her arms were lifted for a blessing. Then I could just see him the form of a cross in the cave again. Then the cage became an eye. Then the eye was closed. Then I opened my eyes. Again I made a bad drawing with just the crayons I had in my bag. I wish to paint this vision better since.



When I think about Christ and when I draw or paint “Him” rather spontaneously or intuitively, something has happened that I did not plan or consciously intend. For in my images, just “by accident” Christ never seems to really look physically like a “man”. I am also not sure about whether I could say that “he” looks like a “woman”. What appears on the surface of my paper is often an androgynous figure or a kind of male figure with a female face. I have not planned this. I only wish to witness here that since 2011 when I started my own spiritual project on drawing and commenting the Gospel of John, this has happened to me and to my drawings many times.



Sometimes, I feel about this as being a little embarrassing. Those are not good drawings, nothing I would wish to exhibit. Or should I?

All this is the background from which I now took up the challenge to paint images of “Christa”. Actually, it was on the Camino that the calling from Winchester reached me and made me think about my images of Christ in my life again. What I wish to present in this exhibition now are three oil-paintings that I have started to work on since:

- 1) Annette Esser, "Fire of Paradize", Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm, 2007
- 2) Annette Esser, "Born of Fire & Water", Oil on Canvas, 60 x 70 cm, 2015
- 3) Annette Esser, "Baptism", Oil on Canvas, 50 x 70 cm, 2015



Annette Esser with her "Triptychon" in the exhibition "Celebrating Images of Christa",
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**More information in the Exhibition Catalogue "Celebrating Images of Christa", published
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