

ART / ARCHITECTURE

Beatified by E-Mail: The Lives of a New Collection of Saints

By ANDY YOUNG

JOSH GOSFIELD, a commercial artist living and working in Manhattan's West Village, was going about his business two and a half years ago when he was transported by a vision. It was a saintly vision, the likes of which he had never experienced. Stranger still, it was a saintly vision of an old friend, and it came to him when she stopped by his studio for a visit.

He photographed her "for no good reason," he recalls. "I didn't really know what I was doing. Or why." But the Lord works in mysterious ways, and the Muses even more so. Mr. Gosfield found himself playing around with the image — centering his friend's face in a spiky halo, surrounding it with blocks of color that looked like stained glass. Before he knew it, he had transformed her into what he called the "patron saint of Mexican revolutionaries, cab drivers, dog walkers, and zoo keepers."

At first, he says, he was drawn to "the visual aesthetics of creating a saint — the closed eyes, beatific expression, airbrushed tones and symmetrically radiating graphics." But something more than aesthetics made him return to the project again and

Josh Gosfield turns both friends and strangers into holy figures for his Saint of the Month Club.

again. He had e-mailed his Santa Isabella to a group of friends, and that direct connection — the ability to show his art to a wide audience of his precise choosing, on his terms and at his pace — got him hooked. Since the beatification of Santa Isabella, he has turned all sorts of friends and strangers into holy apparitions, as well as vehicles for his cultural obsessions, political gripes and artistic experiments. And he has found an ever-larger audience for these experiments, now distributed via e-mail through what he calls the Saint of the Month Club.

Mr. Gosfield might seem an unlikely conduit for Christian iconography. He was raised by atheists in a non-observant Jewish household, and he practices no religion himself. But, as he recalls, "the first time I went to Mexico and saw roadside religious altars, it completely infected my artistic mind." In any case, the messages that his saints convey tend to be defiantly secular — on such topics as Mr. Gosfield's excitement about his wedding, his anger about the war in Iraq, or his belief that people work too hard.

"My saints aren't in the self-abnegation category," he says. "They're lusty, hard-drinking, partying saints." In July, a clothing designer and musician became Saint Petra, "an intergalactic space stewardess," who says that when the planet is in turmoil "it's time to get off the globe and go-go

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galactic." Saint Olga, the zaftig "Gypsy Saint of everywhere and nowhere" — who holds a bottle of wine in one arm, a pug in the other, and suggests we "get drunk, make a baby, and bark like a dog" — was sent out in December 2001 as an "alternative holiday" saint, "in response to all that sadness and smoke hanging in the air after 9/11," Mr. Gosfield says. (One of the few saints he describes as "hectoring" shows a woman — Mr. Gosfield's sister — somberly staring into the camera, amid the words "From Warsaw to Rwanda, From Wall Street to Baghdad, St. Lizette remembers all those who fall to bullets, bayonets and bombs.")

Mr. Gosfield, who has produced illustrations for a wide variety of major magazines, and who once designed a Christmas window for Barney's featuring the author David Rakoff as Sigmund Freud, brings a considerable degree of visual sophistication to his project. He combines references to the kitschy, high-gloss work of the French photographers Pierre et Gilles (without their overt homoeroticism), Barbara Kruger's text-based collages, Russian constructivist collages, and the Latin-American religious iconography that so inspired him. At the same time, they suggest the graphic style of greeting cards, with a cheery, art-of-the-people sensibility.

His work also suggests a degree of professional sophistication, as Mr. Gosfield has struck on a way to display his art while bypassing all of the usual channels, and hassles. By using e-mail, he says, "I don't have to ask anybody's permission."

"I don't have to have a show, get into a fuss with a gallery dealer about what images they want to hang on the wall, or deal with some art director who's going to say, 'I don't know about that blue background.'"

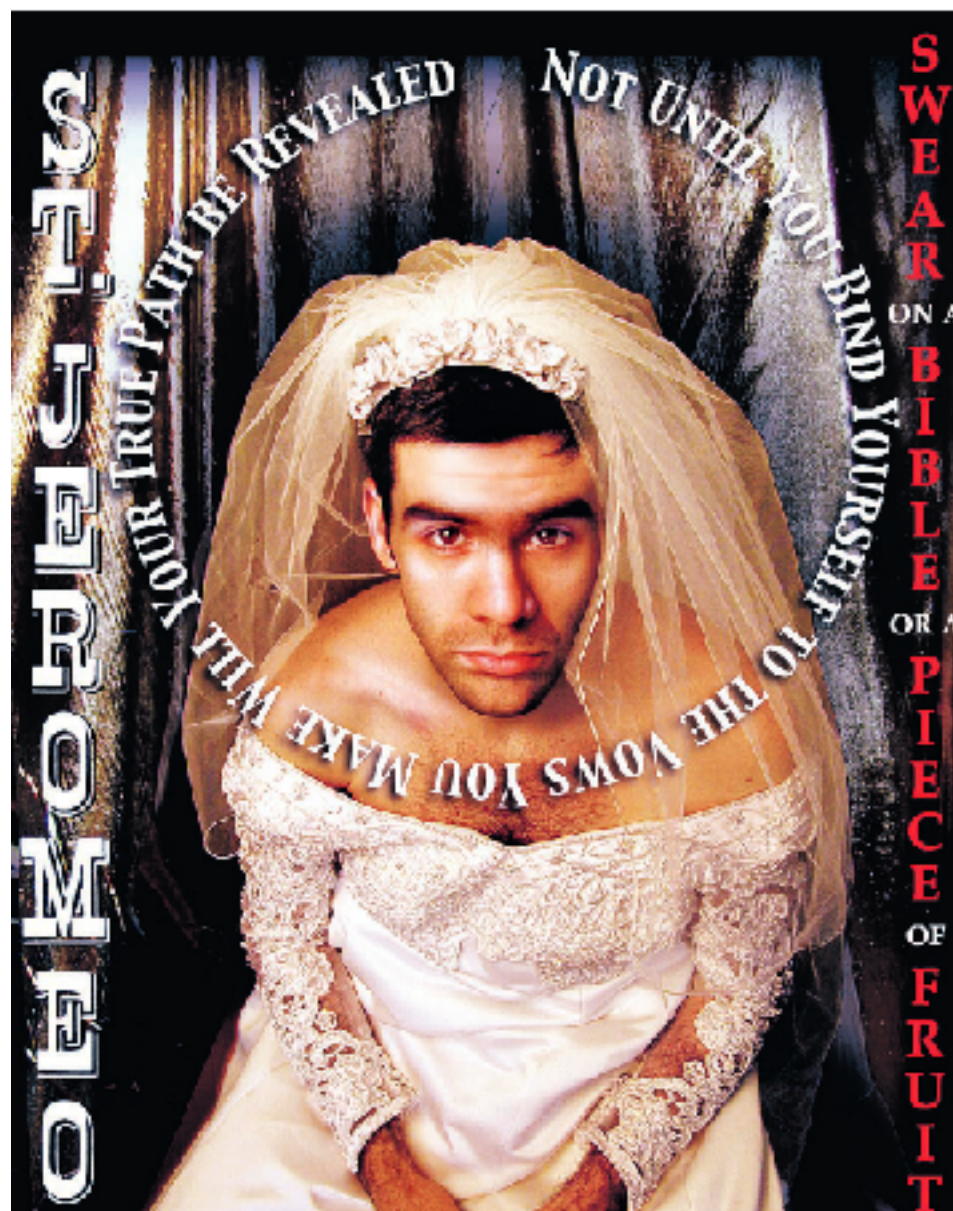
As a result, he says, "I get to spend all my time making this thing, then send it out into this very intimate environment of a person's computer." He compares the effect to that of "one message in hundreds of tiny bottles."

Over the years, the construction of these messages has become increasingly elaborate, involving props, locations, computer animation and music. "I'm so nervous before I send them out," Mr. Gosfield says. "Is everything spelled right? Is all the animation going to work with different browsers? Is this thing really stupid?"

But they have also become more intimate, reflections of some very private concerns. Last fall, his wife was hit by a truck. She survived, but not before being dragged for a block. "I turned her into a cowgirl who had been dragged under a horse, but survived in great fashion," Mr. Gosfield says. Set to "Happy Trails," an animated Saint Camilla is told by the "Great Cowboy in the Sky" to "Get yr cowgirl self out from under the truck and into the world and preach the gospel of hard ridin' and good times!"

For all his irreverence, Mr. Gosfield still sounds a bit awestruck when he talks about his saints, the figures at the center of all his stylistic and technological experimentation. "I kind of have crushes on them for that month," he admits. "I'm a saint slut."

The Saint of the Month Club can be viewed at www.joshgosfield.com/saints.html



Josh Gosfield's series of modern "saints" began when he turned a friend into Santa Isabella, bottom right.

