CYNTHIA HAMMOND

MENDING ICARUS’ WING: THE POETICS OF DESCENT

There is only one wing, but it is big enough for a person to curl up inside it. Or, to be covered by it (Fig. 1). Each handmade, paper feather shows the edge of a word: sanctum, apotheosis, hope. I made this wing, with the mythological tale of a father and his child – Daedalus and Icarus – in mind. Daedalus, the first architect of ancient Athens, built a labyrinth on the island of Crete for King Minos, to conceal the evidence of the Queen’s infidelity. The King would not permit Daedalus and his son, Icarus, to leave the island home of this cryptic creation. So the architect became an aviator and constructed wings from feathers and branches, held together with wax. Planning to end his exile, Daedalus speaks,

“Though he may block escape by land and water,” he said, “yet the sky is open, and by that way will I go. Though Minos rules over all, he does not rule the air.” So saying, he sets his mind at work upon unknown arts, and changes the laws of nature. For he lays feathers in order … Then he fastened the feathers together with twine and wax … and, thus arranged, he bent them with a gentle curve, so that they looked like real birds’ wings.

Father and son planned to fly to freedom, back to the mainland of Greece. “Don’t fly too close to the sun,” said the father, but the son was entranced by the luminous, burning disk, and fly too close he did. “The wax melted; his arms were bare as he beat them up and down, but, lacking wings, they took no hold on the air. His lips, calling to the last upon his father’s name, were drowned in the dark blue sea, which took its name from him.”

When the water returned Icarus’ body to the edge of the land, Daedalus became an architect once again, and built a shrine to hold the sacrifice his freedom had cost him.

Peter Bruegel the Elder painted The Fall of Icarus between 1558 and 1573, choosing to depict not the moment of narrative climax, when the sun melts the wax, but rather the moment of transformation. This image represents Icarus’ body as the meeting point between water and air, and furthermore as the pivotal point between life and death. Icarus does not burn to death, however. He drowns. In this painting, his tragedy is peripheral. As Charles de Tolnay writes, “lost in this vast landscape, the fall of the hero passes unnoticed by all: a little unimportant episode in the midst of immutable nature, dominated … solely by the sun’s magick.”

The sun must indeed be magic in this representation of the story, for it is unaccountably low in the sky.


Fig. 1. Cynthia Hammond, *Mending Icarus' Wing*, cast paper, wire branches, thread, 1996–7.

to have caused the requisite damage to Icarus’ wings. There is another curious element, or lack thereof, in this painting.

Flight and death. Ascendancy and loss. What happened to Icarus’ wings?

“Do you consider yourself an artist?”