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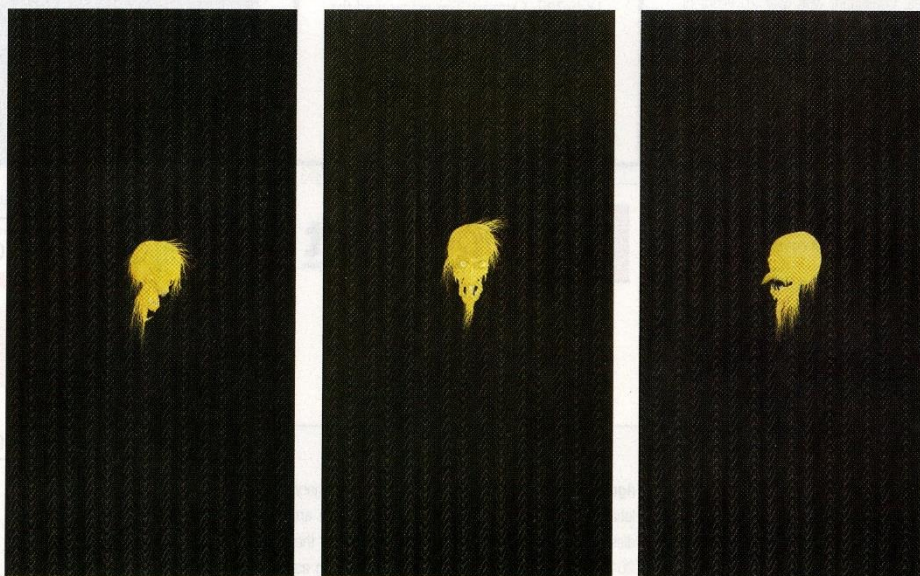
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ArtNews

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by Ann Landi

CRITIC'S PICK ANGELO FILOMENO



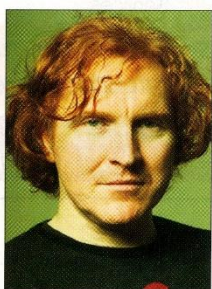
Angelo Filomeno, *Laughing Philosopher (Triptych)*, 2010, embroidery on silk moiré stretched over linen.

Defecating skeletons, decomposing heads with bulging eyes, glossy black roaches, and skulls adorned with lobsters: it may sound like a 12-year-old boy's breviary of creepy doodles, but Angelo Filomeno lifts the ghoulish repertory into the realm of enchantment. The artist transmutes his obsessions into exquisite embroideries and sleek blown glass, arriving, as he puts it, "at very beautiful things depicting very bad psychological subject matter."

Born 48 years ago in a small town in southern Italy, Filomeno came by his skills at a young age. His father was a blacksmith and his mother a dressmaker, and by the time he was seven, he had already learned to sew. He lost both of his parents while he was still a teenager, and he says his preoccupation with the grotesque comes from his "experience of life." Trained as a painter in Milan, Filomeno returned to his hometown in his early 20s for the exhumation of his mother's body. He remembers cleaning the bones, seeing the dress she was buried in, and consigning the remains to a mausoleum. After that point, his thoughts took a decidedly dark turn.

Filomeno's first career was as a fashion designer and tailor for a couture house in Milan, but in 1992 he moved to New York and supported himself working in a costume factory. He soon began experimenting with a zigzag sewing machine, the tool he uses to create his fantasies in silk thread on textured fabrics. The luminous tonalities he can coax from, say, three shades of yellow to arrive at his portraits of "laughing philosophers" are nothing short of dazzling.

Filomeno completed his first embroidered artworks at the end of 2000, and in 2007 he was included in the Venice Biennale. Soon after, he found a home at Galerie Lelong in New York, where his works sell for between \$10,000 and \$200,000.



The red-haired, blue-eyed artist, who looks more Teutonic than Italian, was always fascinated by Northern European art—paintings and engravings by Grünewald, Dürer, and Bosch—but the range of references in his mature work is vast, from traditional Japanese ghouls to Mesopotamian bull gods to African and aboriginal masks. Not all his works are obviously macabre: the glowing mandalas of embroidered fabric in his show at Lelong last year were inspired by the light streaming through cathedral windows. However, at the center of those works were masses of tiny stitched cockroaches.

In the last few years, Filomeno has been working with glassblowers in Brooklyn and at the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle to fashion objects like skulls with fangs and horns and long leather whips ending in glittery pendants. The process seems perfectly suited to his background and temperament. "I can remember my father's blacksmith shop, and like that work, this is very dangerous and hot and dirty. But at the end," he says with a smile, "you come out with these incredibly gorgeous objects."

—Ann Landi

Ann Landi is a contributing editor of ARTnews.