

“On reflection you see that the painter’s design, so far as coherent, has been simply to offer an immense representation of Pity, and all with such concentrated truth that his colors here seem dissolved in tears that drop and drop, however softly, through all time.”¹

Guido di Pietro was born at the end of the 14th century in Vicchio di Mugello, not far from the city of Florence. Together with his brother, a calligrapher, he joined the Dominican Order in Fiesole between 1420 and 1422. There, Guido di Pietro became Fra Giovanni, and after his death he was named Fra Angelico: the blessed angelic brother.

Fra Angelico was a pious monk of the Dominican Order, whose members were mostly silent during the day, rose early in the morning for prayer, sometimes went without food for days, and slept in spartan rooms in the monastery. If we believe Giorgio Vasari’s account, Fra Angelico always prayed before painting. He never painted a crucifixion of Christ without tears running down his cheeks.

In Fiesole Fra Angelico made his first murals, a main altarpiece, an annunciation, a coronation of Mary, and some other frescoes. In 1436 the Dominicans left Fiesole for the convent of San Marco in Florence.

From 1438 on, Fra Angelico was then hired for an extensive commission there: painting the frescoes and decorations for the convent of San Marco. In the convent, however, Angelico painted for his fellow believers, men who had renounced worldly experiences and pleasures in order to come closer to God through asceticism, meditation, and prayer. Angelico’s frescoes in San Marco thus differed from his other works that were painted for a more mundane audience. In those works, nature functioned as a mediator between God and the soul. Through contemplating God’s creation, nature, through devotion and immersion, the soul would be able to recognize God as Savior. In San Marco, however, Angelico painted for monks. In this place, in this context, he no longer needed nature as a link between God and the soul.

The subjects of the frescoes in San Marco are more ascetic, the connection between painter and viewer more intimate, and the mystery of faith is rendered in symbolic form. An example of this strand of painting is his *The Annunciation* (ca. 1440–1445). In Angelico’s fresco in the second-floor corridor in the monastery of San Marco, Mary sits on a chair in a covered antechamber.

In front of her, the angel Gabriel is half kneeling with his arms folded in front of his chest and his head slightly bent. The space of the antechamber follows the laws of perspective, yet it seems as if the figures do not quite fit. By having the vanishing points of the angel and Mary intersect behind the two columns in the foreground, the symmetrical structure of the painting is broken, enough for the antechamber to no longer be perceived as merely a space, but as an abstract geometric form. Outside the anteroom is a semi-dark landscape that contrasts sharply with the white light of the figures inside. They are not illuminated by a natural light source, and it seems as though they themselves are glowing. Due to the lack of a boundary from the outside, they appear as if emptied of their own physical weight. The break in perspective and the lack of a physical volume in the figures reduce the scene to its pure graphical qualities and form.

¹ Henry James, *Italian Hours*.

Looking at Simon Mielke's paintings of empty rooms that contain nothing but their spatial expanse, no longer showing an outside world that could limit inwardness, one feels as if one were in one of the rooms of the monastery in San Marco. Renouncing the worldly influences, nature, one stands in a room of pure inwardness, surrounded by the white light of rectangular windows. Images that no longer allow the outside world to intrude and a light that neither modulates nor illuminates, but creates a space in which truth cannot be discovered through deductive knowledge, but only through asceticism, through withdrawal, through turning away. The longer one looks, the further one distances oneself, withdraws from the impressions of reality, sinks into oneself, withdraws back upon oneself. Into oneself.

With the disappearance of the outside, the possibility of demarcation, of collision, and of the limitation of one's own body also disappears, and so the body expands further and further—when I close my eyes, do I not begin to see? Aren't these empty figureless spaces with no possibility of entering the outside world like a promise, a reference to the possibility of seeing without opening my eyes? To know through withdrawing the body into itself, and ultimately to know without the body at all? A reference to being able to see not just colors, but light itself? To see not mere bodies, but the original unity which constitutes them? To see a truth that is pure cause, without needing to consider its effects in the natural world. A truth of pure inwardness, to see not with the eyes but with the soul?

- Emma Bieck

Simon Mielke (*1990) lives and works in Essen. His recent exhibitions include, *should we get lunch, I want to burn this place down*, Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, 2020, *poetry season*, Spichernstraße, Essen, 2019, *All this sweetie will one day be yours*, by Mélange & Moritz Scheper, Werthhalle, Cologne, 2019, *Double trouble*, by Root Canal, Althuis Hofland/ The Gemma, Amsterdam, 2019, *Trust camp normal*, by Phung-Tien Phan, Spichernstraße, Essen, 2018.