Michael deMeng’s projects are like an entire workshop in a few pages – and this one is no exception. In Ex Voto, this master storyteller combines his travel experiences with personal history and intertwines it all with a fascinating and beautiful folk art. Learn more in this excerpt from Michael’s book Dusty Diablos.

Ex votos are typically on tin and often not much larger than twelve inches and depict a moment of tragedy, or potential tragedy, that was thwarted by Divine Intervention. In this project, Michael deMeng, author of Dusty Diablos, provides instructions not only for the process of building your own ex voto, but also how-tos for a handful of creative techniques that will set your work apart, including “the tricky burnt paper routine,” and “the burning flesh trick.”
Have you ever had one of those experiences where something bad was about to happen, and then something unexpected happened instead that changed what seemed to be an inevitable tragedy into an unexplained miracle? I remember being on the freeway, a number of years ago, in the Bay Area, driving along at excessive speed in the fast lane, when a car in front of me slammed on the brakes. This in turn led me to slam on my brakes. Next thing I know, I’m spinning. I’m spinning past the center lane, and out of the corner of my eye I see a large semitruck cruising along in the slow lane.

At this point, time was moving pretty slow, and I was being pretty rational. I had already accepted that the truck was going to plow into my side and no more me, but as I said I was pretty calm . . . at least on the inside. Next thing I know, I am stopped. I am facing the wrong direction and in front of me is that semi, also stopped about one car distance from my car. How he stopped, you got me on that one, but it is one of those strange moments where you feel that something reached in to intervene on your behalf.

I’m sure everyone has at least one moment that they can point to when that occurred in their life. Now in Mexico, there is an art form that addresses such events—ex votos. Ex votos are small paintings, typically on tin and often not much larger than twelve inches either direction. They are depictions of a moment of tragedy, or potential tragedy, that was thwarted by Divine Intervention. Somewhere toward the top of one of these tiny paintings would be the Saint responsible for the miracle. On the bottom is a written description of the miracle with the date and location of the event. This was an art form that really thrived in the 1800s.

For those interested in collecting these little treasures: I have heard it said that Frida purrrrrloined (as Catwoman, or, Mujer de Gato, might say) some of her collection from church walls. Well, I’m not going to recommend that. I have seen some amazing ones that I would die to have, but that would be some seriously bad mojo. That said, original ex votos are increasingly rare and/or expensive. The reason for their rarity has to do with the fact that they are painted on tin, and unlike diamonds, tin is not forever. I remember seeing an ex voto in a Oaxacan gallery for two-thousand pesos (at the time two-hundred bucks) and this thing was literally a crumbling third of its original size, and I’m sure that in a few years even more would crumble away. There are, however, artists who do replicas, and they do paint them on rusty tin, so that they have that authentic feel. Now before you go about poo-poo-ing the replica artists, I must say that they do play an important role. I own a number of replicas that tell quite a vast number of strange and unusual tales of Mexican miracles. Without these artists retelling the stories, these miracles would be lost like the rust that the originals are painted on.
When I approached the concept of creating an ex voto, I initially thought that I would take an instance from my past and re-create it in this format. I then got to looking at my own ex voto collection and thought it might be fun to play the role of replica artist and transform one into a slightly three-dimensional version. Part of the reason for this change in concept had to do with a purchase I made in Mexico.

Obviously, I am always on the prowl for art-making fodder wherever I go; always looking for the good fleamarket or antique store. In Oaxaca there is a small little plaza filled with various artists selling everything from ceramics to paintings to weavings. In this plaza there is a dried-up circular fountain whose stone ledge acts as a showcase for antiques and secondhand goodies. It is manned by an elderly couple, and they always seem to have some great items. A few years back I purchased a beautiful wooden retablo with a little saint inside glass. One day I stopped by and an annoying American (other than me) was shopping . . . or should I say hoarding. I leaned down to look at some of the items on the ledge and he said, “Those are mine. I’m buying those . . . and those over there too.” Knowing perfectly well that he probably wasn’t going to buy everything, I looked to the elderly vending woman and rolled my eyes at the pushy man. She smiled and caught my drift. Next thing I knew, she said something to the American; the only word I recognized was something with the root “comprar”: to buy. Apparently, she wanted him to figure out what he was definitely buying and what he wasn’t. Flustered, he shot me an annoying wince, and gave up two thirds of his original booty. I ended up purchasing quite a few of the recently liberated items—beautiful old Mexican apothecary bottles, old doll parts and some toy airplanes. Meanwhile, el Jerko still vacillated and watched intently as my items were wrapped up. He was annoyed; and that’s okay because he was annoy-ing.

I mention this little exchange because I bought the airplanes because they reminded me of an ex voto in my collection involving a plane crash; fire billows out of the rear of the plane as it heads for the jungle below. Above floats the image of the Virgin of Soledad, my favorite, mostly because of her ensemble: an exaggeratedly triangular black dress with gold designs throughout.

One of the dilemmas I faced when confronting this project was trying to balance the traditional format with that of my style. I knew that I wanted the story written on the bottom, the Saint at the top and the action in the center. There is a storybook quality about this art form—almost childlike. So I thought a toy plane might be an ideal way to bridge this work into the third-dimension. To assist in this, I opted out of using a basic rust rectangle for a base and decided on something with a little more spatial oom-pah-pah—a license plate for a little subconscious reminder of the tactile world. This old license plate had been lying about for an eternity and the fact that I hadn’t found something to do with it was beginning to annoy me, so this worked out well.

I started assembling. First the plane, then the area where I planned on putting the text. I decided instead of writing the story by hand, I would print it out and antique the paper so that it looks like parchment. The easiest way to do this was to burn the edges with a lighter and then use a really watered-down earth-tone wash over it. The best combo for this is the Uszhhh. It is important that the wash is really, really watery, because if it has too much paint it will cover over everything and make the text unreadable. If it needs to be darker, lay a wash down then dry it, then add another layer. Repeat until it is as dark as you need it. It is easier to darken than it is to lighten, so start light. Aside from changing the color, a light wash will also help age the paper by giving that nice water-damaged texture.

In this case, I decided not to do the burnt edges because there is a tendency for the burnt paper to flake off. Instead, I used what I call . . . The Tricky Burnt Paper Routine.
Find a piece of paper you want to look burnt. It can be old, but something brand-spankin’ new will work too. Tear the edges. Make sure they are nice and uneven like fire might create.

Put a really, really, really watery wash of “Uszhh” over the paper. You want this wash to be a “cat-pee yellow color less Quinacridone Gold and more black.

Remember, lots of water.

(From Dusty Diablos by Michael deMeng, 2010; Courtesy of www.CreateMixedMedia.com)
Dry the purple. Take pure Quinacridone Gold and do exactly what was done with the purple, right on top of the purple. So, pure Quin Gold on the outside edge and gradiate and dilute it towards the center, just like the purple. In fact, this layer covers over anything that is purple. What will happen is the Quin Gold in combination with the purple layer below will transform into a rich burnt-brown.

Dry the paper, which should buckle in an interesting way from the water. Take pure Dioxazine Purple and paint around the edge of the paper. Dilute it toward the center of the paper, using a watery brush—dark, pure purple on the edge, lightening toward the center. The idea is that you want it to seem as if the purple seamlessly gradiates into the cat-pee yellow. The diluted purple should be almost entirely transparent and clear at about ½” to 1” from the edge.

Dry. It should look like burnt paper. For a bit more darkness, take a brush and apply a tiny amount of undiluted Mars Black around the edge of the paper. It’s best to paint the side of the paper as opposed to the surface. The idea is to add just a tiny bit of darkness without painting over the rich brown wash created in the previous steps.

(From Dusty Diablos by Michael deMeng, 2010; Courtesy of www.CreateMixedMedia.com)
The rest of the work went pretty smoothly; no humongous dilemma. One problem I was faced with, though, was attempting to visually join the plane with the rest of the piece. Physically, connecting it is a no-brainer. I ran a couple of bolts through the back of the license plate, and, after drilling the same size holes in the side of the plane, slipped it into place—oh, and glue; I don’t do anything without a little E–6000 anymore. Simple enough, but the real dilemma came with making different objects feel like they were part of the same thing. This is what I call a “visual bridge.” It’s the same idea of my taking a Barbie Doll and gluing it to a chessboard: initially they look very different and don’t belong together, but if I put them outside for five-hundred years, the layers of time would visually join them. The rain, the mud, the dust storms—all visually break down the differences between the objects because they have physically gone through the same experiences. If you don’t have five hundred years to wait, there are artistic ways of doing this.

Techniques to Age Stuff in Less Than Five Hundred Years

1. A wash with watered-down paint—covering the different objects gives a sense of unity.
2. A painted transitional between the different objects also creates unity. I commonly do this with a verdigris color (though it could be any opaque color). For instance, I would add a little to the airplane and continue that color onto the license plate. This softens the edge between the objects and creates the illusion of their being unified.
3. Design patterns are another trick I use—running my little squiggle through the different objects. The pattern moving through various items gives the impression that the items are part of the same thing.
4. Physical objects placed in the foreground of the disparate objects is another trick. Screen or mesh is a good example of this. By placing something like wire or mesh in the foreground it encapsulates the separate objects but visually holds them together. This could be done with wire, string, rope, basically anything that can be placed in front of the various objects.

In the case of the Ex Voto I used all of the above.

Wash? Check.
Painted transitional? Check.
Design patterns? Check. (For this I painted little smoke designs on the toy plane and then continued them onto the background. This piece is a plethora of my various painting patterns that seem to creep their way into my work.)

Since the ex voto scene is about a plane crashing, I decided to add a storm to the scenario and use my rain pattern detail. Next, I added a bit of vegetation to the scene. Physically I did this with wire rising up to the toy plane, but I also did this with painted vines. A few waves, a few spermy shapes . . . .

Physical objects in the foreground? Check.
(Here I use rebar growing up from the bottom to create vine-like forms that encapsulate the scene.)

When I finished with the piece, I compared my version with that of the original inspiration. What I decided was that my scene seemed a bit more foreboding. That was okay, because that’s what made it interesting. In some ways, it brought to mind the basic difference between folk art and fine art. Folk art is perpetuation of style and tradition that is consistent through time. It is a window into the past because the style, usually, is the same or similar artist to artist, person to person. Fine art is a different approach—it places the individual over the tradition. In fact, it asks that the tradition be reevaluated and reinvented. Neither is better than the other; each is just a different way of approaching art. Personally, however, I doubt I would fair very well if I was raised in a society of folk artists. I like to break too many rules.

(From Dusty Diablos by Michael deMeng, 2010; Courtesy of www.CreateMixedMedia.com)
Burning Flesh Trick

Just for fun, here is one more burning technique, in case you really feel the need to play with fire. Needless to say, this effect is good for other looks besides that of burnt flesh.

1. Apply several layers of tape to your surface—small, ripped pieces.

2. Then torch it and blow it out, repeatedly, until you have the effect you want.

3. This can be done on many different surfaces—flat or dimensional.

Stuff You Need

- object to cover with tape
- masking tape
- crème brûlée torch
- fire-retardant surface

(From Dusty Diablos by Michael deMeng, 2010; Courtesy of www.CreateMixedMedia.com)