


# Traversing The Orient

DECEMBER 2009

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IN  
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ANGELS**

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Christmas  
Swapping snow for sand  
on the beaches of Thailand

**EXCLUSIVE  
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ISSN 1905-9076  
771905 907008  
TRAVERSING THE ORIENT

# The Angels in Ourselves

**Sunshine Lichauco de Leon** takes a look at the work of critically acclaimed Filipino photographer **Emmanuel Santos**.

*His latest body of work, fittingly for this festive season, sets Biblical images against a modern backdrop*



In a world where it's easy to focus on the things that divide and separate us, photographer Emmanuel Santos has tried to emphasize some of what we can share in common. The Angels revealed in his collection of photos inspire thought, feeling, imagination and make you want to believe in things you can't see.

**E**mmanuel Santos's latest work, *THE PASSING OF LIGHT- Book of Illuminations*, consists of photos of the 72 angels that represent the 72 different names of God, as mentioned in the Book of Exodus of the Old Testament. Shot in 21 countries on all seven continents, ranging from biblical locations such as Israel, Jordan and Turkey to contemporary cities such as Paris, San Paolo and Buenos Aires, the photos each have a biblical overtone, yet are set against a modern backdrop. Locations were chosen based on intuition and "an interaction within the space" and the angels reveal their stories against backdrops ranging from farmland, rural landscapes and urban scenes, to the desert and city train stations.



The exhibit highlights the fact that with Abraham as a shared origin, the same angels exist in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Santos explains. "Abraham fathered the two main characters of the biblical world. Ismael (Islam) and Isaac (Judaism) and Christianity which was inspired by a young Jewish Rabbi named Jesus."

These angels became the messengers of God because God couldn't come himself amongst humanity and deliver the message so he delivered the angels instead. Each of the angels, whether Gabriel, Michael or Rafael, symbolizes something or has a particular message to deliver- Azazel for example, is the strength of God and Emmanuel means God is with us.

In *The Passing of Light*, the light is just a symbolic word for the messengers. "Angelos" in the Greek language, means messengers and in Hebrew, "malachim" means angels. Since angels were messages from the higher universe who somehow transcended on earth as light, Santos decided to name his project the passing of light, instead of the passing of angels.

This project was inspired by Santos' studies of sacred books and manuscripts, specifically *The Book of Illumination* (Sefer Ha-Bahir), the mystical text which forms the base of the Kabbalistic faith. The images were chosen to help him illustrate the insights of the Kabbalah, and these photos are the manifestations of the emotions on which the teachings of the Kabbalah are based.





The religious scenarios, often depicted in the Renaissance art he would see in the museums of Europe served as a great inspiration. He says, "I wondered about now. If Michelangelo was given a camera instead of a brush and a canvas how would he depict all the paintings and convey the same feelings?"

The question of where Michelangelo would journey to represent these scenes also crossed his mind. He says, "A painter has a canvas and you can imagine a vessel for your painting. If you're a photographer, you have to find something that is realistic, and you create a scene from it."

Santos' approach to finding and choosing his subjects was based on intuitive decisions that were "random and spontaneous but with sensitivity to the presence of an enigmatic energy." Accompanied by a pair of angel wings he kept on three continents, Europe, South America and



Australia, he would observe people until he found someone whose aura emanated the message of one of his 72 angels. He explains, "If I saw somebody on the street and found myself saying, 'Ok that is almost like the notes, the spirit, the soul, the essence of the angel of dawn, or Aftiel the angel of twilight,' I would approach them. Your angel switch starts to turn on and you'd be amazed with how you start connecting with people." Asking them, "would you like to be my angel" and showing samples of his work almost always led to a yes.

Choosing the stage on which to illustrate the story of each angel was again done with a combination of careful study and great spontaneity. When Santos finished his work for the Jewish community, he would spend more time in whatever place the project had led him to, and "hang out and just understand the essence of the place: "Sometimes I would wander around and see a fantastic,

beautiful light and I'd photograph it with a very old camera. And sometimes I would go back to the place, at a different time because I have to study the light.

In some photos, the model is already wearing the wings, in others he would take more than one shot and later sandwich his model and an image in the darkroom." With work that appears somewhere between mystical and spiritual, he says, "I tried to recreate the renaissance masters works by applying the subdued light and incorporating a timeless mood on my images."

Although the photos leave a lasting impression at first glance, gaining a deeper understanding of the mysteries of these angels helps to better appreciate this body of work. Aside from introducing the different emotions of humanity, the angels also represent life changing events that happen in our lives.







Angels, like human beings, have different dimensions and their own inherent duality. Santos says that they are not just guardian angels that whisper to you and guide you in your everyday life. Since there are bright angels and there are dark angels, they can be the ones to create a certain level of tranquility or a level of confusion.

The Kabbala's Book of Illumination begins by saying, "Let there be light, and there was light". Santos explains the base idea behind the creation of his book is that there are two kinds of light: "One that was hidden was first to exist – it was so awesome that it has to be hidden. Then there was the light that illuminated the world so we can see. The one that is hidden represents the individual as they grow and evolve into their own kind of life's discovery."

This hidden and revealed light serves as the perfect analogy for photography, because photography is light, understanding the light and what you reveal and what you conceal, with the use of shadows and bright lights.

Santos grew up in Baguio, Philippines and says the Cordillera tribal traditions have been a constant reference for his work. Although eventually migrating to Australia ended up being a wonderful catalyst for his career, the early days were quite lonely. He missed the mountains and being among the Igorot tribes of the mountain province he grew up in.





Living in the Jewish ghetto in Melbourne, his longing for tribal tradition led him to seek out the 'tribal chief of the guys who, all wearing black, looked like members of a tribe.' He recalls his first conversation with the rabbi, "I want to learn about your tribe, and the only way I can tell you how much I learned is through my photographs because I'm a photographer". After hours of discussion, he allowed me into the synagogue and the school and once they saw my photos, they said, "Now we don't have to teach you anything because you understand so why don't you go to Poland, Israel..."



Santos spent much of the following 25 years photographing the Diaspora of Hasidic Jewish communities around the world. These photo essays depict the rituals of daily life from birth to death, and allowed him to travel to the locations of the Diaspora, many of which have biblical reference.

The roots of the PASSING OF LIGHT were planted during the time Santos spent among the Hasidic Jews. Not only was telling the stories of angels a natural segue way from these journeys but learning to understand a community who studies the religious and spiritual aspect of their lives served as the catalyst to his own understanding of the expanded world we live in. He says, "It was the defining line to a lot of the answers to questions that had been left unanswered as I was growing up. This has been a journey

within myself in order to understand my perceptions of the world." Santos truly hopes that using images to share what he has learned on this journey will trigger the audience to search for the same kind of experiences

As his Angels move around the world, Santos continues to stretch his own wings. A recent exhibition in Milan launched a coffee table book whose focus was the Holy land of Israel, the land, the people and their dreams. This seven year project commissioned by the Jewish national fund in Israel and Australia, reflects the biblical land, the modern land and the people, with Israel being a vessel for about 137 different cultures in the world. Each person photographed has been asked the question, "what is your dream" and their answers become the portal to further reveal what their portraits convey.





Santos views his current project, focused on Greek mythology set in contemporary cities around the globe starting in Africa, as both linked to his angels and a continuation of the kabalistic texts. He says, "Since this mythology had been derived from the myth of gods and goddesses, they somehow send a certain metaphor about the same messages of emotions and life changing moments that govern our daily lives." These teachings are a 'mythology of humanity', there to guide us and help us recognize the important "whispers from somewhere else", i.e. a word channeled through a certain person, a movie or painting or book that triggers the viewed into a life changing course.

**THE PASSING OF LIGHT** has traveled the world, from Australia, HK, Singapore, Beijing and Manila to Milan, Basel and the Prague Biennale. With photos that cater to individual emotions and feelings, Santos offers insights about why his work has been accepted across culture, country and religion. Believing in the existence of two kinds of worlds - the temporal and the eternal, he feels that the modern world

has become so intertwined into the material world that there exists within people a longing for something that nourishes their hunger for spirituality.

He muses, "It's a nourishment that has no use by day and something that often happens when you sleep. Perhaps my work in some way answers this longing." Santos continues, "There is a common thread that caters to all - the simple fact that we live our lives with hope and despair, joy and happiness, chaos and order, all feelings and eventualities that makes us evolve and revolve."

Santos believes that we are all angels and that our words and actions have the power to allow our light or our darkness to influence others: "I want the images to inspire people to understand their own humanity - that there is a heart that can be either malevolent or benevolent and it's our choice on how to use that heart." Whether or not you believe in these ethereal beings, the dreamlike images in the **PASSING OF LIGHT** serve as a portal through which you can discover that angel which lies within yourself.



silverlens gallery



EMMANUEL SANTOS  
**THE PASSING OF LIGHT II**

*Book of Illumination*

FEBRUARY 12 - MARCH 14, 2009