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by Dorothy Spears

Costume Shop Boy Makes Good

THE scene was frantic -- more or less business as usual at a studio that designs and stitches costumes for big Broadway musicals, top-flight dance productions and the odd movie. Scattered about under a fluorescent glare were sketches, woodblocks, remnants of metallic fabric and assorted spikes while an urgent discussion unfolded about a hat.

Well, actually, a helmet.

"The spike end is flat," said the shop owner, Carolyn Kostopoulos, inspecting one of many metal spikes that workers hoped to attach in a row to the crest of the helmet. "It can't be fitted onto something pointed."

The head milliner, Hugh Hanson, rummaged for a button or medallion to finish off the row of spikes. "Is this solution with the spikes going to be the same for all three hats?" he asked

"Yes," snapped Angelo Filomeno, a scruffy-looking 42-year-old, running his fingers nervously through his fiery red hair. "But if the button is plastic -- I don't want plastic on my stuff."

Contrary to appearances, the costume workers were not rushing toward a deadline for a dress rehearsal uptown or a film shoot in Brooklyn. They were helping Mr. Filomeno, an artist, in the countdown to his first solo show at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea.

The helmet in question was one of three crucial sculptures titled "As the Lilies Among Thorns, So We Fall Like Love," inspired by Dürer's 1503 engraving "Coat of Arms With a Skull." (Dürer's work shows a lusty man embracing a cultured maiden as a winged helmet and a skull-emblazoned shield loom in the foreground.)

"If it's a nice button and it's plastic, that's O.K.," Ms. Kostopoulos interjected thoughtfully, "as long as you can put a screw hole in it. But we can't put a screw hole in it."

Mr. Filomeno muttered a response: "If the plastic button works, then use it. But don't tell me it's plastic. Not after I've spent all this money and time shopping for beautiful citrine and topaz."

Mr. Filomeno worked for the shop, Carelli Costumes on West 26th Street in Chelsea, until three years ago, but he keeps his zigzag sewing machine there. He feels a deep attachment to the shop, since it was there that he found his calling five years ago as an artist. Of his beloved Singer, he said, "I can feel when I sit down if somebody used it even for two seconds."

Today Mr. Filomeno is best known for making "paintings" that are actually stitched with thread, with detailed depictions of insects, birds and skeletons painstakingly embroidered on brightly colored panels of shantung. More recently he has also focused on sculpture, but all of his artworks embrace timeless themes like mortality or pride, making them distant cousins to the memento mori produced by Dürer and his contemporaries.

Mr. Filomeno says he has always loved Dürer, but his obsession with "Coat of Arms With a Skull" began last August, when he discovered the image in a book of engravings. "I fell in love with it at first sight," he said. Research on the Internet showed that a second-state print of the engraving was available through a San Francisco dealer, but he couldn't afford it.

That disappointment prompted the artist to buy four bolts of metallic shantung and countless spools of silver thread. At his sewing machine in the Carelli shop, he began turning the fabric this way and that. "I began to imagine a huge printing plate made of embroidered fabric," he said.

Using a control lever on the machine, he alternated between the thick meshwork of the armor, suggested by thickly interwoven threads, and thin filigree scrolls. With his sewing needle standing in for a burin, or engraving tool, he produced his own silver-on-gray version of the Dürer plate.

In his "Coat of Arms With a Skull (After Dürer's Engraving)," the skull reveals the pointy fangs of a monster, and the two lovers on the left have been obliterated by a cluster of butterflies. Measuring 7 by 10 feet, it took the artist three months, working six hours a day.

Apart from Dürer, Mr. Filomeno's recent work draws on memories from his childhood in the village of Ostuni in southern Italy, where his father, a blacksmith and horseshoe maker, was known for the beautiful quality of his ironworks and his mother, a dressmaker, taught him to sew.

"We were not exactly swimming in money," said Mr. Filomeno, recalling the family home built by his father, which had only two small rooms, and no bathroom. His parents slept in one room, and the other served as kitchen, living room, dining room and the bedroom where Mr. Filomeno and his sister, Marilina, slept on foldout couches.

"My mother would kill chickens in this room," Mr. Filomeno said. "Then she'd hang the chicken from a chandelier to drip the blood. She didn't have a choice. We didn't have a yard, and if you put a chicken outside in the street, the dogs and the cats, they would eat it."

A candelabra sculpture in his show refers directly to his experience of gazing at the chicken on the chandelier, watching blood drip into a bowl on the table below it. Later, the family would gather at the same table for dinner.

When he was 7, his family apprenticed him to a local tailor, for whom he would work for the next six years.

Using a bit of money he inherited upon his mother's death, he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts in Lecce to pursue a degree in oil painting. After finishing his degree he moved to Milan, where he hoped to parlay his early training as a tailor into a career as a fashion designer.

"But of course no one was waiting for me in Milan," he said, "so I had to start in a local tailor shop and build my résumé."

Deciding he needed a major change, he moved to New York in 1992 and took a job at Carelli Costumes the following year. Ms. Kostopoulos, who is half Greek and half Italian, not only sponsored Mr. Filomeno for his work permit but also encouraged him to see his sewing as art.

"I began making drawings for sculptures, bronzes," he said. In the shop, he would build casts for the bronzes, using canvas reinforced with his signature zigzag stitch and wire.

He said, "Carolyn kept telling me: 'Look at all that beautiful zigzag. Leave the canvas as it is -- don't pour the wax' " -- a reference to the final stage of cast-making, when wax is poured over a shape.

Over time, Mr. Filomeno has come to see his jagged stitching as a symbolic act. When it was pointed out that the zigzag on the helmet is maroon rather than silver, he replied, "That's the blood created by my sewing needle."

"Dürer's burin scarred his engraving plate," the artist explained. "My needle was wounding the fabric -- it made the fabric bleed."