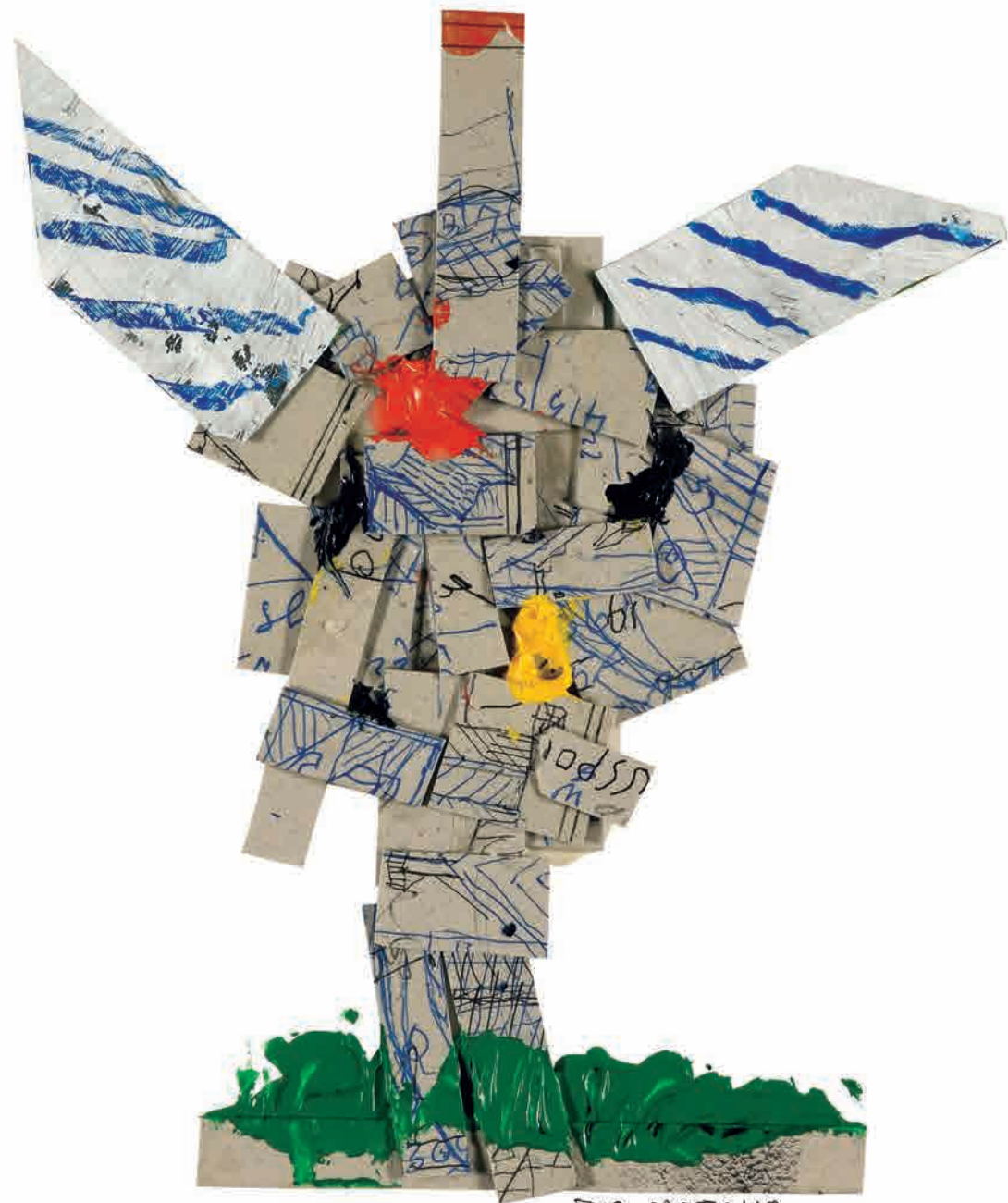


# Eric Carle's Angels

## An Homage to Paul Klee

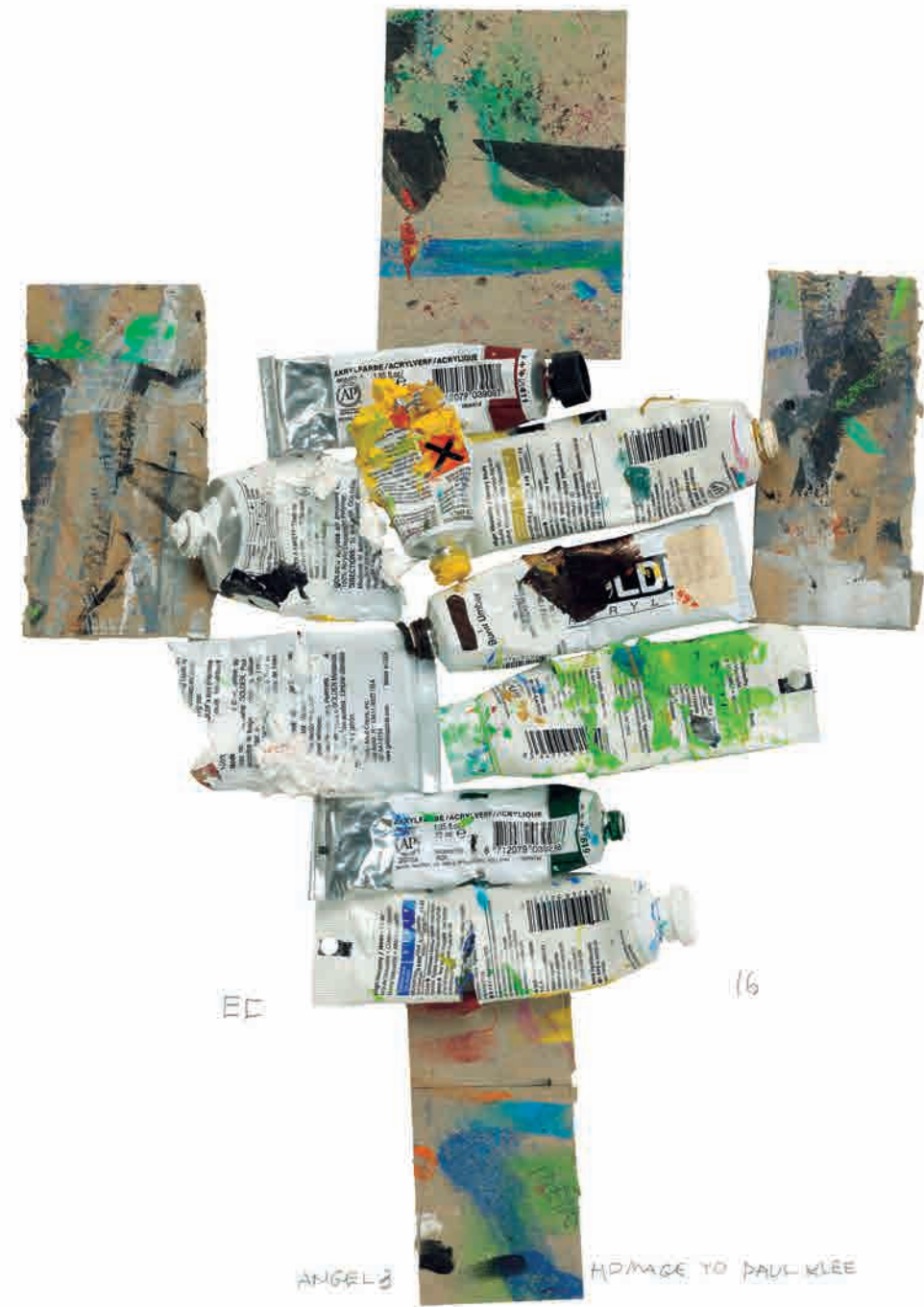
Essay by H. Nichols B. Clark





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ANGELS

HOMAGE TO PAUL KLEE

# The Angels of Carle and Klee

by H. Nichols B. Clark

Founding Director and Chief Curator Emeritus  
The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

While Eric Carle has enjoyed enormous success with his books for young readers, he has also derived unparalleled satisfaction from his independent artwork. This has proven particularly true late in his career when, at the age of 87, he embarked on a series of cardboard and found-object collages depicting angels. Carle dedicated these abstract assemblages to the artist Paul Klee, who created over 70 drawings and paintings of angels during his lifetime. “Klee and his angels have become my strange and mysterious passion,” says Carle. “Several years ago I began to feel the need to honor Klee’s angels in visual form, not in his nor in my style. I have created a series of homages to his angels.”<sup>1</sup>

Klee, who died in 1940 when Carle was just 11 years old, was one of more than a hundred artists who Adolf Hitler deemed “degenerate” and included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition mounted in Munich in 1937. When Carle was in high school, his art teacher Friedrich Krauss secretly showed him pictures by these modern masters,



Eric Carle, Childhood drawing of barn, n.d.

However, Carle knows that he was already familiar with Klee’s art when he was working for a fashion magazine in Stuttgart after graduating from the Academy of Applied Art.<sup>2</sup> While at the magazine he met an older colleague who had served as Klee’s assistant at the Bauhaus and who provided Carle with insights about the artist. Intriguingly, Klee had applied for a teaching position at the Academy in Stuttgart in 1919; this didn’t work out and he subsequently taught at the Bauhaus from 1921 to 1931. Carle recalls admiring Klee’s use of line, color

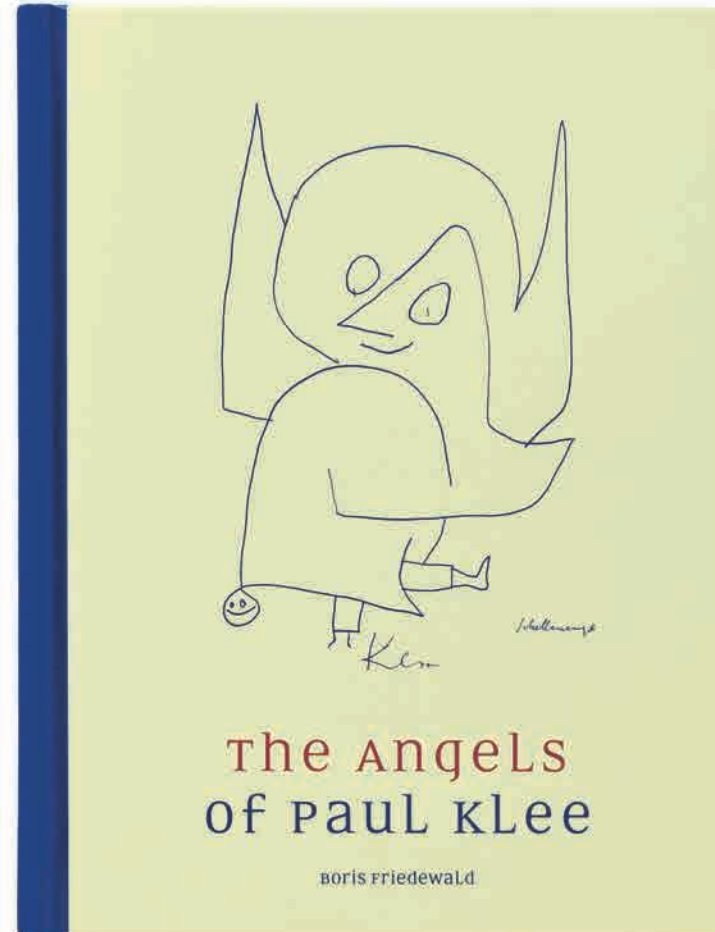


and, equally compelling, his sense of humor.<sup>3</sup> Klee’s whimsical definition of drawing as “a line simply going for a walk,”<sup>4</sup> resonated with the aspiring artist.

Carle’s introduction to the concept of angels was an isolated experience at church as a young boy and, by his own admission, fleeting; Klee’s was not. They both were creating art at an early age, although Carle gravitated to the barnyard (p.4) while Klee demonstrated a childhood infatuation with angels (above). A small volume in Carle’s library of books about Klee is Boris Friedewald’s *The Angels of Paul Klee* (p.6), originally published in Germany in 2011 and issued in an English translation in 2016. Significantly, this is the year Carle began his “Homages” to Klee’s angels. He keeps the book on his coffee table, a ribbon bookmark placed on the page depicting Klee’s *Angelus Novus* of 1920 (p.7), one of Klee’s most iconic angels. (The renowned

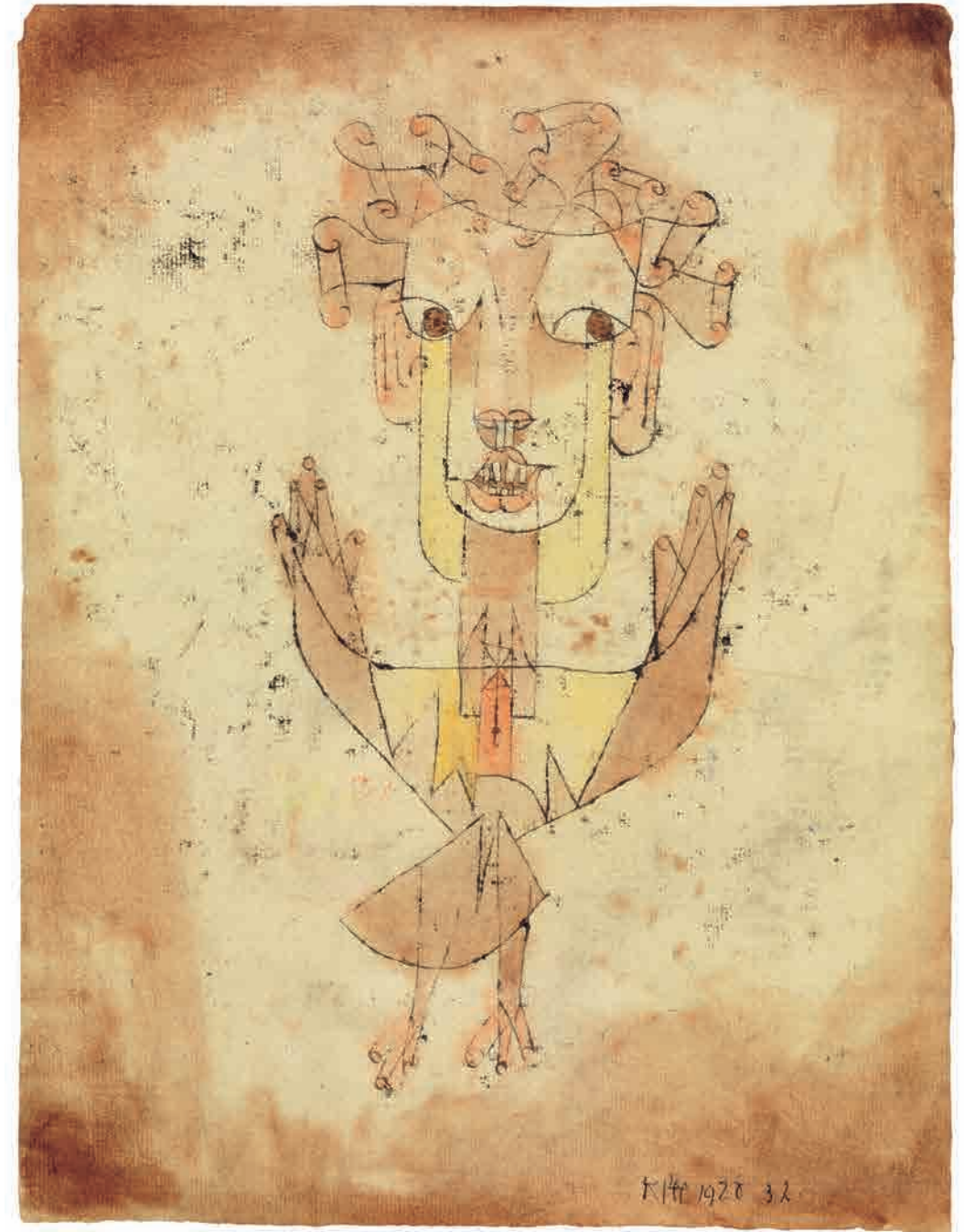
Paul Klee, Childhood drawing of Christmas tree with angel and toy train, 1884





German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin purchased *Angelus Novus* in 1921. Considering it one of his most important possessions, Benjamin cut the work from its frame and hid it before his attempted flight from the Nazis. The work now hangs in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.)<sup>5</sup> Yet Klee's *Angelus Novus* is not what inspires Carle most. "My favorite angels," he says, "are the ones Klee did as a child."<sup>6</sup>

While angels comprise a significant motif in the history of art, they traditionally serve as messengers of God. For Klee, they became embodiments of modernity, not



guardians of the spiritual. His angels span the full range of human emotion, and affirm an early commentary in the American press about Klee's art in general, noting how the charm of his color and the delicacy of his line serve the whimsical and enigmatic.<sup>7</sup> In the final decade of his life, when serious medical issues began to bedevil him, Klee became obsessed with angel imagery—it served as a metaphor for his mortality. Carle took up his series of *Homages to Paul Klee* late in his career, compelled to honor the artist who had played an influential role in his artistic thinking. One must keep in mind, however, that Carle is not monolithic in his admiration of Klee. Other artists important to him are Fernand Léger, René Magritte, Franz Marc, and Henri Matisse, each of whom inspired a story or distinct artistic approach in one of Carle's picture books. Carle is not alone in possessing an extensive visual library that enhances his own creativity, whether in his picture-book designs or his independent art.

To this end, Carle's angels underscore the sense of freedom and creative liberation he enjoys when making what he calls his "art-art." In this realm, he is not bound by the dictates of coordinating text and image into the tight parameters of book design. These collages constitute the "pickings" from the floor, corner, or wastebasket of his studio—discarded tubes of paint, gloves, shipping boxes, the chipboards on which he creates the elegantly controlled images for his picture books—whatever catches his fancy. These collages are about chance, accident, spontaneity, and what Carle calls "der zufall" or "coincidence."<sup>8</sup> Each of the 20 *Homages*—and this series is by far Carle's most extensive—transmits an individual identity that captures the spirit and essence of his artistic hero.

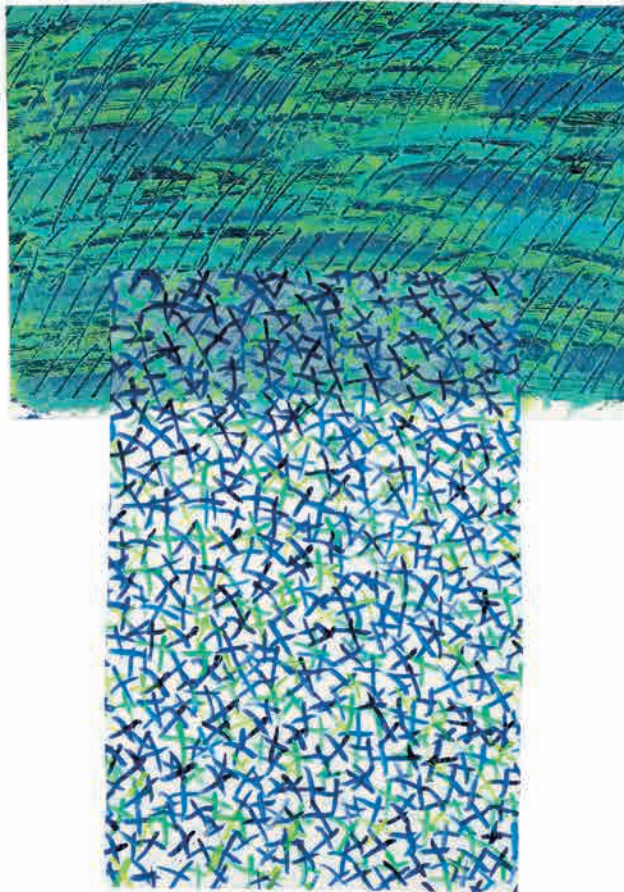
Carle acknowledges that he created his angels spontaneously, playfully, and in a spirit of improvisation. Consequently they defy rigid categorization, but some do fall



into formal or motif-connected categories. *Angel 1* (p. 14) appears the most unresolved. There are ostensibly two heads—one embedded in the central mass of the chipboard body and, possibly, a second in the guise of a white irregular shape with large blotchy eyes and oblong nose floating in the upper right corner. The wings—if that indeed is what they are—comprise two latex gloves obfuscated with paint. Additionally, Carle has insinuated a subtle sense of movement with the slightly curving left leg that recalls the positioning of the male figure at the right in *Blue Green People* created in 2000 (above).

Eric Carle, *Blue Green People*, 2000





*Angels 2, 3, and 5* (pp. 15, 3, 17) represent a formal antithesis to the first angel with their emphasis on rectilinearity; in a way they evoke Carle's *Kimono* series of 2001 (above) with their understated interplay of vertical and horizontal rectangles. *Angel 2*, with its building-blocks format for the body, conveys the epitome of geometric order while the handling of paint within these squares and rectangles emits an expressive, undisciplined spontaneity. *Angel 3* consists of four trimmed fragments of painted chipboard that articulate the extremities, with the flanking wings upraised in a gesture of supplication. Carle constructs the core torso with tubes of paint—many still containing ample amounts of their contents, perhaps to suggest a paradoxical

Eric Carle, *Kimono II*, 2001

corporality. This seemingly random act of retrieval ostensibly equates the angel with one of the key ingredients of an artist—paint. *Angel 5*, too, is profoundly rectilinear and sits on an almost perfectly articulated rectangle (the right edge has two small irregularities). However, the angel itself is slightly off-center as the right wing protrudes slightly over the edge of the background. Intentional or unintentional? This is the artist's prerogative. The wings themselves also carry an element of surprise when close inspection reveals they are crisply folded pieces of cardboard that introduce a more pronounced three-dimensional aspect to the collage technique.

The largest grouping—*Angels 4, 6-10, and 13*—are loosely connected by an interest in a more distinctive rendering of the wings. *Angels 4 and 13* (pp.16, 22) echo the architectonic structure of the previous group, but the prominent use of latex gloves in the former and the perforated strips of plastic in the latter suggest not only Carle's increasing scavenger mentality, but also a greater focus on the wings themselves.

The wings in the remainder of this group are clearly defined despite the idiosyncratic materials that compose them. In *Angels 6 and 9* (cover, p.19), Carle introduces painted metal strips that suggest the feathers of wings. Additionally, both share a sense of imbalance as they seem to teeter on one foot or leg. Carle employs thin cotton gloves as the wings for *Angel 7* (p. 18), and establishes a pronounced three-dimensionality with its torso of thick corrugated cardboard. His use of commercial packing boxes is seen again in *Angels 8 and 10* (back cover, p. 20).

Throughout Carle controls the "accident." The head of *Angel 7* is a fragment of cardboard with the printed letter "V" and number "3." By turning them on their side, they become the eyes and mouth of the angel. *Angels 7 and 10* both surmount plinths that are partially painted white, possibly to suggest the ethereality of clouds. *Angels 8*

and 10 share the choice of cardboard for their wings. In the former it is corrugated—cut and painted with a silvery paint to imbue an immateriality—while the latter reprises the folded rectangular motif of *Angel 5*. And could Carle be engaging in a sense of mischief when he prominently displays a mailing label with “UPS Ground” on the torso of the angel? Is he creating a tension between the terrestrial and celestial that often informed Klee’s angels?

Curiously, beginning sometime in 2017, Carle stopped numbering his angels. One of his recent angels is inscribed “Mostly Black & Grey Angel” (p.23). Compositionally, it possesses the blocky format of *Angels 2, 3, and 5*. In this instance, Carle has employed a limited palette and a restrained use of paint, introducing a plethora of delicately rendered ink drawings and words that are seemingly random. However, close inspection and turning the work upside down reveals an angel—below and to the left of the red circle—and opposite it to the right one discerns an exquisite portrait head that looks suspiciously like Klee (p.13). Thus, the iconography becomes more sophisticated, and this gains added significance since Carle creates the wings from fragments of painted papers he uses in his picture books and for which he is universally recognized. Has he thus deepened the connection between himself and his hero?

In this series of *Homages to Paul Klee*, Carle exercises the full measure of his creative talents in what can only be described as a collision of chance and calculation. He observes, “The angels do not resemble my picture book illustration collage style or Klee’s style. They are made of materials I find in my studio, as well as paint and cardboard, aluminum and fabric. It has been suggested that Klee and my pictures should be shown together. Would Paul Klee, wherever he is, find them compatible? Would our angels sing together?”<sup>9</sup>



#### Endnotes

- 1 Eric Carle, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich, December 2018.
- 2 Author’s conversation with Eric Carle, Northampton, MA, October 11, 2019.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The original description of this action appeared in Klee’s *Pedagogisches Skizzenbuch* (1925; *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, Introduction and Translation, 1953, by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, pp. 16-17) as, “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk’s sake. The mobility agent, is a point, shifting its position forward.”
- 5 Boris Friedewald, *The Angels of Paul Klee*. London: Arcadia Books Ltd., 2011, pp. 44-45.
- 6 Conversation, October 11, 2019.
- 7 Carolyn Lanchner, “Klee in America,” in *Paul Klee*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, 1987, p. 83.
- 8 Conversation, October 11, 2019.
- 9 Eric Carle, December 2018



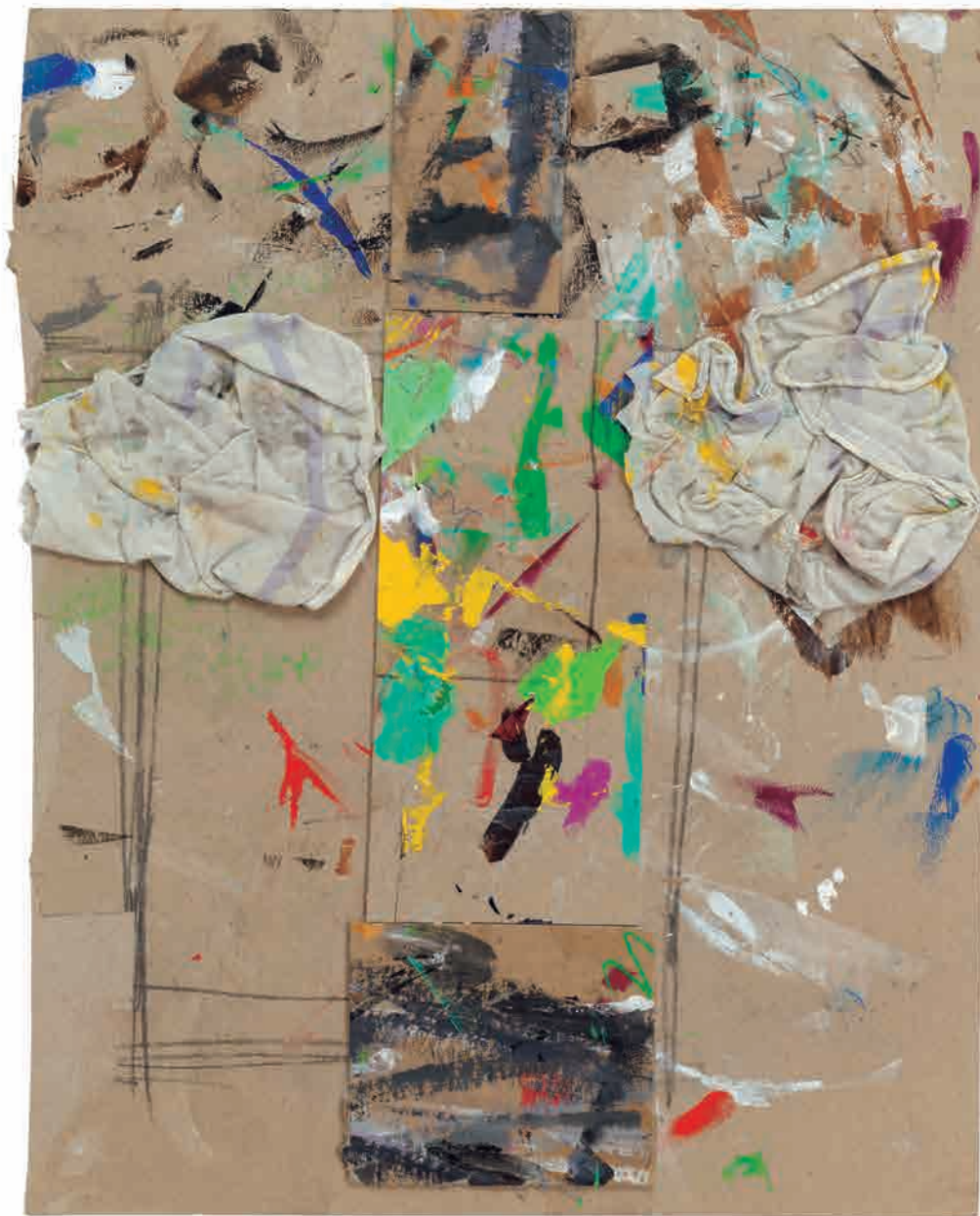


Angel 1 Homage to Paul Klee, 2016



Angel 2 Homage to Paul Klee, 2016



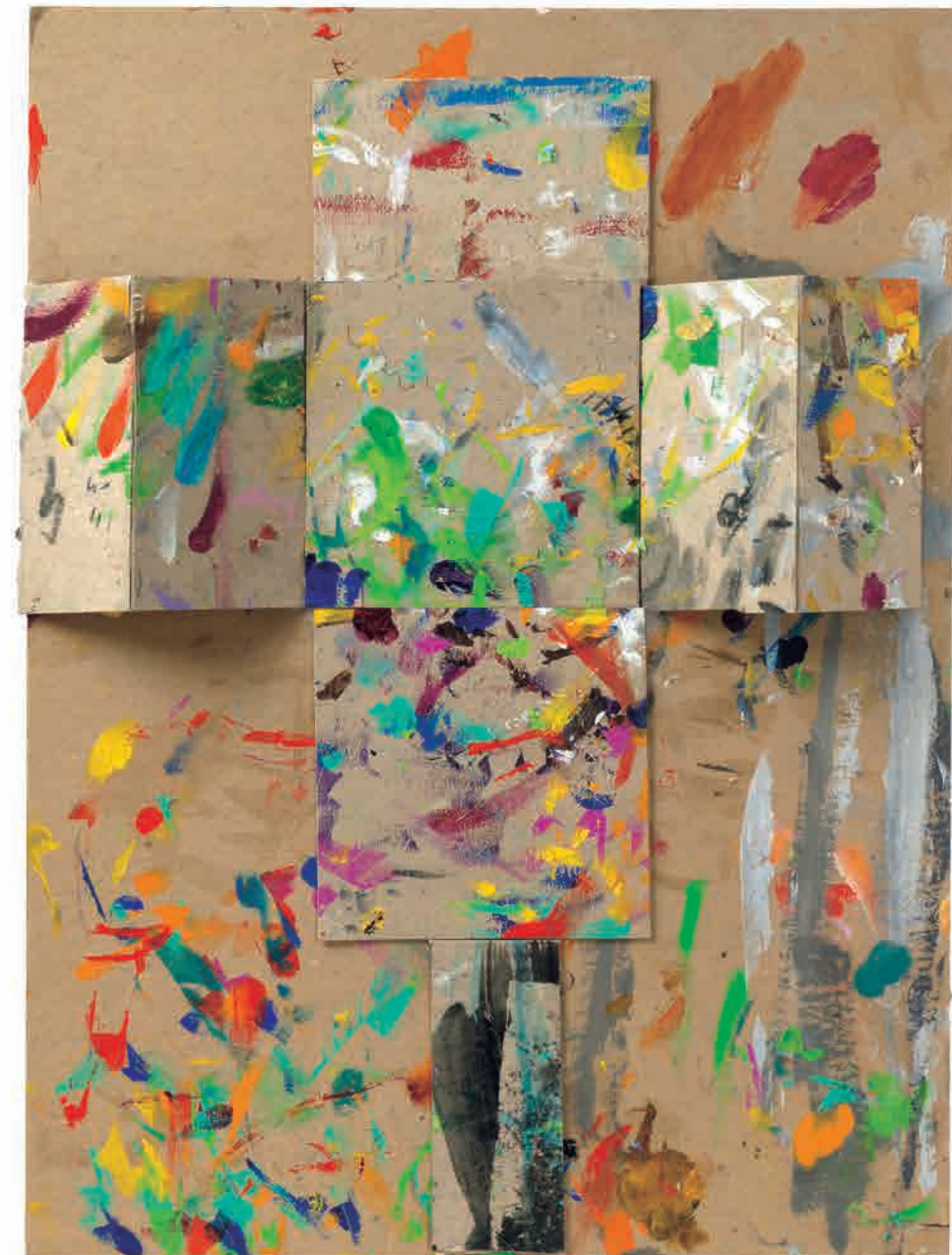


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HOMAGE TO PAUL KLEE - ANGEL 4

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Homage to Paul Klee—Angel 4, 2016



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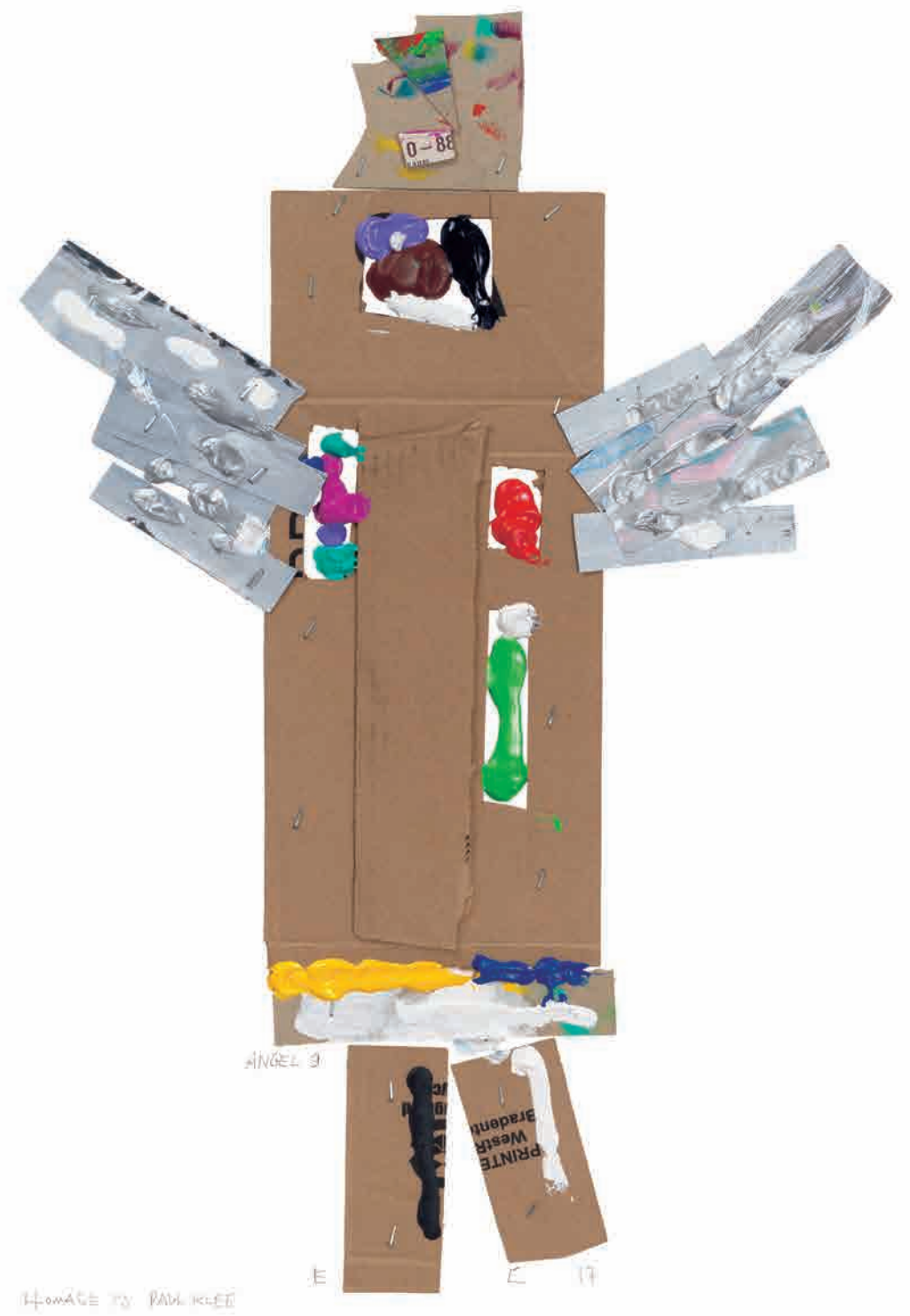
ANGEL 5 HOMAGE TO PAUL KLEE

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Angel 5 Homage to Paul Klee, 2016



Homage to Paul Klee Angel 7, 2017



Angel 9 Homage to Paul Klee, 2017





Homage to Paul Klee's Angels 10, 2017

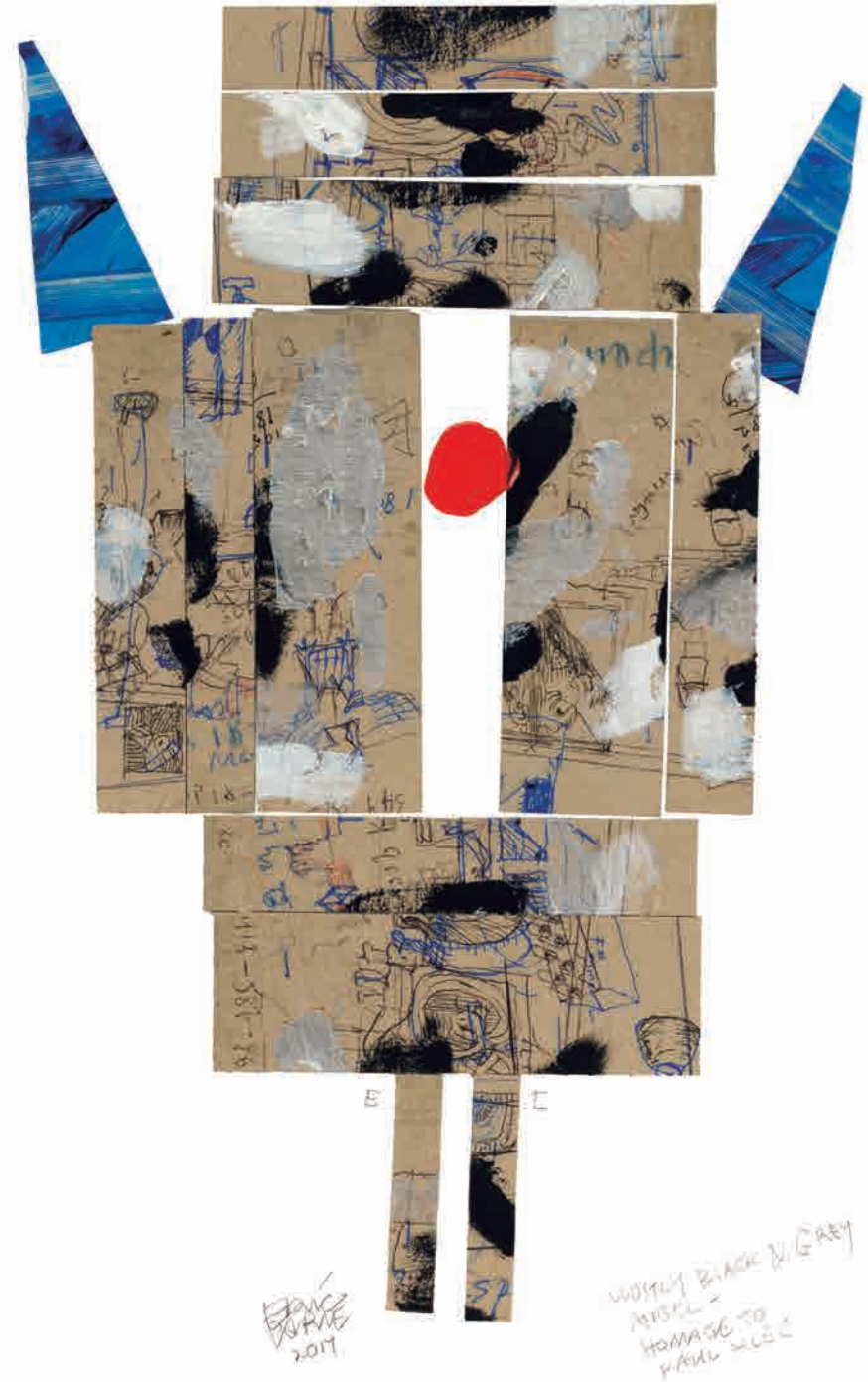


Homage to Paul Klee Angels, 2017



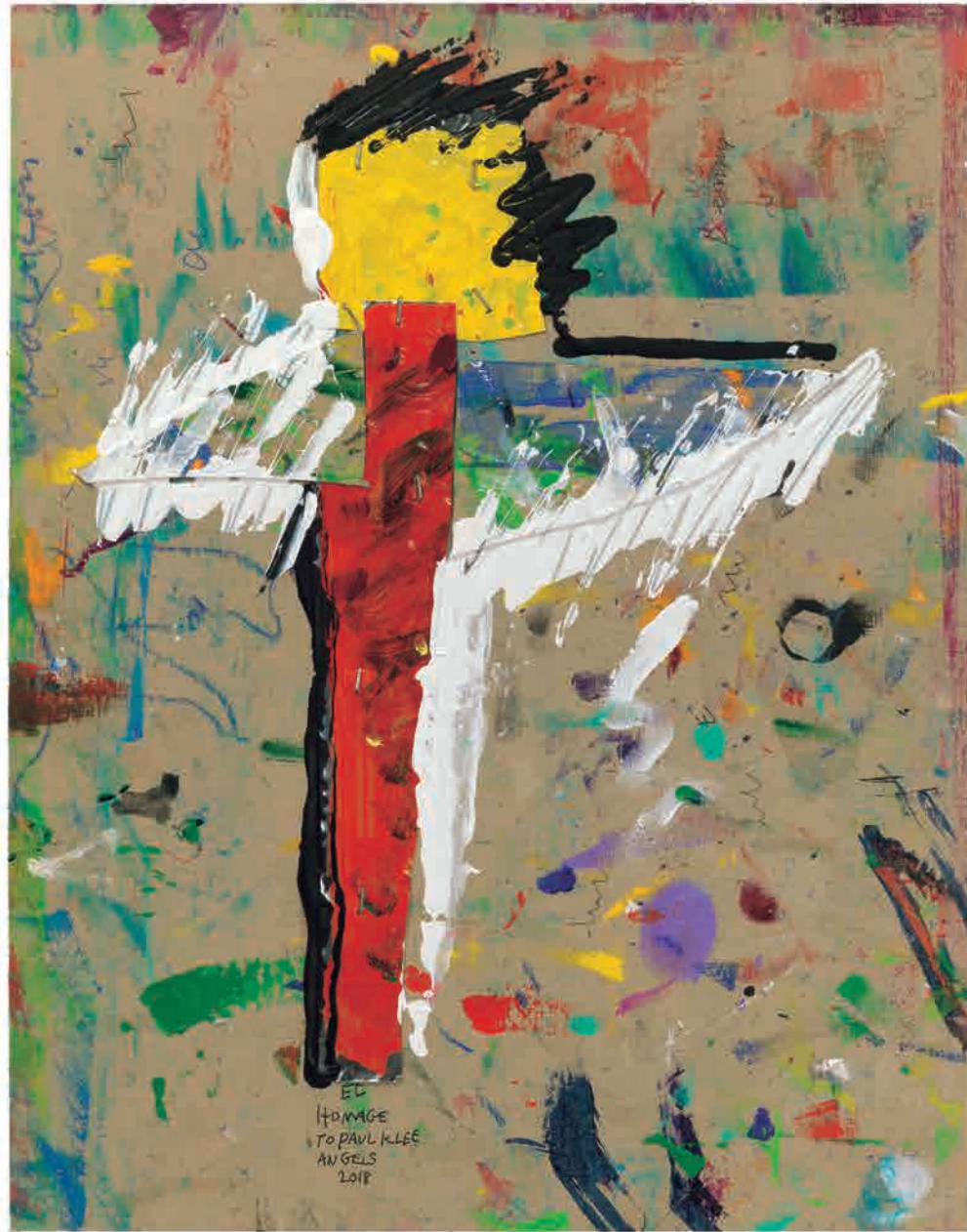


Homage to Paul Klee's Angels #13, 2017



Mostly Black and Grey Angel—Homage to Paul Klee, 2017





Homage to Paul Klee Angels, 2018



Sad Angel Homage to Paul Klee Angels, 2018





Homage to Paul Klee 14, 2018



A Small Homage to Paul Klee's Angels, 2018





*Homage to Paul Klee Angels, 2018*



Eric Carle in his studio, Northampton, MA, 2019

## ILLUSTRATIONS

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Front cover: *Homage to Paul Klee 6*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 20 x 15 inches.

Back cover: *Angel 8, Homage to Paul Klee*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 19 x 15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.

Page 1: *Angel—Homage to Paul Klee*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 12 x 18 inches. Collection of Motoko Inoue.

Page 2: *Another Homage to Paul Klee's Angels*, 2018. Mixed media on illustration board. 13 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Collection of Motoko Inoue.

Page 3: *Angel 3 Homage to Paul Klee*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 24 x 18 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches.

Page 4: Childhood drawing of barn, n.d. Pencil and crayon on paper. Dimensions unknown.

Page 5: Paul Klee, Childhood drawing of Christmas tree with angel and toy train, 1884. Pencil and chalk on paper on cardboard. 5 x 3 inches. Collection of Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern. Copyright © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Page 6: Cover for *The Angels of Paul Klee* by Boris Friedewald, Arcadia Books Ltd, 2011. Copyright © 2011 DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne.

Page 7: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer drawing and watercolor on paper on cardboard. 12 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 9 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Donation John and Paul Herring, Jo Carole and Ronald Lauder, Fania and Gershon Scholem. Copyright © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Page 9: *Blue Green People*, 2000. Collage of acrylic-painted tissue paper on illustration board. 37 x 49 inches.

Page 10: *Kimono II*, 2001. Collage of acrylic-painted tissue paper on illustration board. 60 x 40 inches.

Page 13: Paul Klee in Possenhofen, Germany, 1921. Copyright © 2013 Culture Club/Getty Images.

Page 14: *Angel 1 Homage to Paul Klee*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 34 x 24 inches.

Page 15: *Angel 2 Homage to Paul Klee*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 34 x 24 inches.

Page 16: *Homage to Paul Klee—Angel 4*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 27 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 23 inches.

Page 17: *Angel 5 Homage to Paul Klee*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 26 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 21 inches.

Page 18: *Homage to Paul Klee Angel 7*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 20 x 15 inches.

Page 19: *Homage to Paul Klee Angel 9*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 23 inches.

Page 20: *Homage to Paul Klee's Angel 10*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 20 x 15 inches.

Page 21: *Homage to Paul Klee Angels*, 2017. Mixed media on matboard. 20 x 15 inches. Collection of Beth Kaminstein.

Page 22: *Homage to Paul Klee's Angels #13*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 23 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.

Page 23: *Mostly Black and Grey Angel—Homage to Paul Klee*, 2017. Mixed media on illustration board. 23 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.

Page 24: *Homage to Paul Klee Angels*, 2018. Mixed media on illustration board. 24 x 19 inches.

Page 25: *Sad Angel Homage to Paul Klee Angels*, 2018. Mixed media on illustration board. 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 18 inches.

Page 26: *Homage to Paul Klee 14*, 2018. Mixed media on butcher paper. 29 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 20 inches.

Page 27: *A Small Homage to Paul Klee's Angels*, 2018. Mixed media on illustration board. 15 x 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Collection of Beth Kaminstein.

Page 28: *Homage to Paul Klee Angels*, 2018. Mixed media on illustration board. 24 x 20 inches.

Page 29: Eric Carle in his studio, Northampton, Massachusetts, 2019. Copyright © 2019 The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

Page 32: *Homage to Paul Klee 6*, 2016. Mixed media on illustration board. 20 x 15 inches.





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