

AGGIORNAMENTO: OPENING THE WINDOWS

By

Linda K. McCray

Bachelor's in Fine Arts—Cum Laude,
Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, 1981

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Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean
Graduate School

Professor Mary Ann Papanek-Miller, Chair
Department of Art

Dr. H. Rafael Chacón
Department of Art

Dr. Paul Dietrich
Department of Religious Studies

ABSTRACT

My passion in painting is taking my beliefs and translating them into universal spiritual messages that speak to others regardless of their own traditions. My goal for these abstract and symbolic paintings is to make visible forms of invisible grace. These works are intended to bridge viewing with participation and, in doing so, spark a spiritual response. It is important for me to create paintings that inspire others to reflect on their own spirituality.

My art direction is connected to the long tradition of artists who have turned to a world we cannot see except through faith. I could not ask for a richer history to follow. The spirit has motivated art making over time in many cultures. While my paintings have specific religious meaning to me, I hope that they also lend themselves to universal spiritual messages.

It is important for me to translate theology and universal spirituality into a contemporary visual language. One of my favorite examples is St. Patrick's use of the shamrock as the image of the Trinity. He was being faithful to the human need to express an abstract notion concretely. Similarly, some sermons are like a Catechism lesson that leave me feeling uninspired. Others translate scripture into a story relevant to today so that I can get it. It is my goal to translate this age-old theme visually so the viewer can get it. My paintings can be read formally or symbolically. I use abstract elements, process and materials symbolically. For example, light and dark are abstract elements abounding with symbolism.

As G.K. Chesterton, an early twentieth century writer, stated: "In the beginning there was art for God's sake, then in the Renaissance there was art for man's sake. Beginning with Impressionism there was art for art's sake. Now, unfortunately, we have no art for God's sake."

I strive to bring back art for God's sake.



Creation, Linda McCray, 1' x 1', Acrylic, 2006

DEDICATION

To Kevin for his unconditional love and unending support.

To Cara, Shauna and Wes who always inspire me.

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INTRODUCTION

My passion in painting is taking my beliefs and translating them into universal spiritual messages that speak to others regardless of their own traditions. My goal for my abstract paintings is to make visible forms of invisible grace. These are works intended to bridge viewing with participation and, in doing so, spark a spiritual response. It is important for me to create paintings that inspire others to reflect on their own spirituality.

I believe that I am not alone in needing spiritual respite. Many have referred to our times as being in spiritual crisis. Artists have always asked the soul-searching questions about morality, mysteries, and the meaning of life. A number of issues have led to this spiritual crisis including the new millennium and the terrorism of 9/11. I believe that 9/11 has changed the way we view and make art and that there is a growing audience looking for more reflective experiences. As Hilarie Sheets stated in her article entitled “Strange Comfort,” certain works offering either physical respite or spiritual reprieve seem particularly responsive to this moment.¹ Pat Steirs is one of many artists she used as an example. “The real crisis of modernism, as many people have rightly claimed, is the pervasive spiritual crisis of Western civilization: the absence of a system of beliefs that justifies allegiance to any entity beyond the self.”²

There is a common thread through all spirituality underlying the doctrines of individual faiths. While religions come and go, God remains. My view is from the Roman Catholic perspective, but it is my goal to bring universal spirituality to light. I use Catholic language to talk about primary concepts because that is my language. My paintings have specific religious meaning to me. However, I hope that they lend themselves to universal spiritual interpretations. I have found that some images that I view as Catholic also have universal interpretations. For instance, the cup is a symbol used in many traditions; while it is a Catholic Eucharistic symbol, it is also an African Kikombe Cup and the Suit of Cups in Tarot Cards.

INSPIRATIONAL ART

My art direction is connected to the long tradition of artists who have turned to a world we cannot see except through faith. I could not ask for a richer history to follow. The spirit has motivated art-making over time in many cultures. I am inspired by what I read, see and experience.

Religious Art

Art serves as one of the material dimensions of the religious life. While there was a time when art and religion were inseparable in the Western world, today there seems to be a great division between them. As Kathryn McClymond has written in her essay “Religion and the Arts,” “The arts...have had a tangled love-hate relationship with religion over the centuries.”²³ Since the Church was a major patron of the arts and art was integrated into religion. Early Christian monks created illuminated manuscripts to preserve the sacred texts and teach the faith. The Sistine Chapel frescoes by Michelangelo and many other works of art served in much the same way. While I hope that my art moves the spirit in the viewer, I have embedded symbols to offer a deeper meaning to those inclined to read them on a cogni-



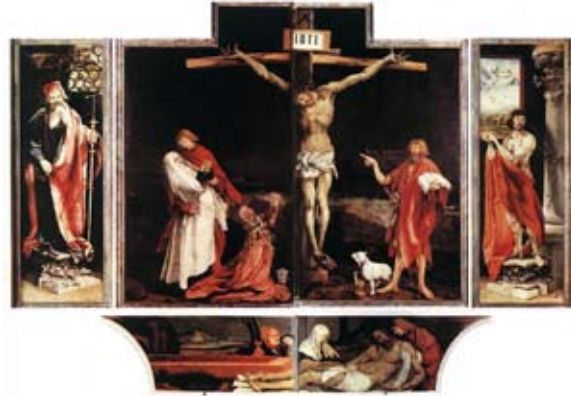
The Creation of Adam, Michelangelo, 1512



Sistine Chapel, 1512

tive level. For example, Byzantine artists use gold in halos as a symbol of divine aura. I use gold to symbolize the aura of divinity in people of faith by placing gold where light hits, where I believe God lives within His people. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” John 1:9⁴

The way Matthias Grünewald layered the *Isenheim Altarpiece* with symbolism has been a great source of inspiration to me. While the outside panels show a horrific depiction of Crucifixion, the altar opens to reveal a very different mood, the Annunciation and Resurrection. Installed in a hospital, the piece’s goal was to provide patients with solace knowing that Christ suffered at least as much as they. As noted, this altarpiece is rich with symbolism. For example, the five wounds of Christ, often represented with jewels, are symbolized by rubies, a symbol of the blood of Christ. Other jewels also have particular significance. According to Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, “In the Western world in recent decades, there has been a revival of recognizable



Isenheim Altarpiece, Matthias Grünewald, 1515



Chapel of the Rosary, Henri Matisse, 1951

religious symbols, icons, and stories in art, particularly ones that borrow from the Christian tradition.”⁵

The symbolism of light is a major theme in my art. Architects and artists for centuries have designed houses of worship and worked with light. Stained glass windows, for example, in addition to their practical function, also were vital visual aids promoting religious devotion. In 1951, Henri Matisse prepared architectural plans, stained glass window designs, and symbolic and narrative drawings for transfer to large ceramic panels, a bronze altar Crucifix and liturgical vestments for the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France. I find his writing about this project inspirational. He said, “I want...visitors to experience a

lightening of the spirit, so that even without being believers, they sense a milieu of spiritual elevation, where thought is clarified, where feeling itself is lightening...”⁶ Another of my favorite quotes by Matisse is “...simple colors can act upon the inner feelings with more force, the simpler they are.”⁷ I mix simple colors in areas where I am expressing the purity of the Holy Spirit.

Contemporary artists continue to work in this area. Dana Boussard’s *The Creation*, for example, is a series of stained glass windows she created in memory of her father. They are abstract and symbolic interpretations inspired by the First Story of Creation, Genesis 1. Many great works of art follow in this rich religious history. I will highlight



The Creation, Dana Boussard, 1986

a few others who have inspired my work directly. Gianloranzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* is about the conversion of a nun who experienced visions, heard voices, and felt a persistent pain in her side. I am taken by the way the Baroque drama and simplified rays of gilded bronze represent heavenly light. They seem to pierce her while gracing her with the message. George Hillyard Swinstead's symbolic use of gold to represent divine light, in his painting *The Angel's Message*, inspired me to use gold in a similar way. I use gold to symbolize "inner light," a Quaker term meaning the divine presence in man. Hildegard von Bingen, Emile Nolde, and Georges Rouault inspired me in their expressions of faith in paint.

Spiritual Art

Since the Protestant Reformation, there has been a split in the way Catholics in the south and the Protestants in the north have expressed their faith through art. The Catholics translated their faith by painting modern images of holy personages and divinity. In the 19th century some



The Ecstasy of St. Teresa, Gianloranzo Bernini, 1647-52



The Angel's Message, George Hillyard Swinstead, late 19th century

Northern painters such as Joseph Mallord William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich, chose landscapes to offer viewers the experience of God-given mysteries outside of religious orthodoxy. These Northern Romantic painters responded to the religious crisis of their day, the increasing secularization of modern life, by attempting to create their own religious systems which they hoped might usher in the dawn of a more pious and spiritual era. Their ideas influenced many modern artists. I'm attracted to the way Turner infused landscape paintings with the sense of divinity. I view his work as being filled with the Spirit and proclaiming, "There is a God." Turner has been the single most influential source for my work.



Morning After the Deluge, J. M. W. Turner, 1843



Monk by the Sea, Caspar David Friedrich, 1809

In contrast, I view Caspar David Friedrich's work as asking, "Is there a God?" *Monk by the Sea* by Friedrich depicts a great void that hopefully leads the viewer to spirituality beyond. I have been moved by his recommendation that artists paint with their spirit, not their bodily eye.⁸ He spoke about how artists should close their eyes in order to see their paintings first with inner, spiritual eyes. I appreciate how Friedrich searched for new symbols to elicit the transcendental. A ship symbolizing the passage from death into life is a secular translation of sacred imagery. This passage is one of Christianity's most fundamental beliefs and, by going beyond the confines of traditional Christian iconography, Friedrich touched a broader audience. His paintings, therefore, possess both religious

and secular dimensions. According to Rosenblum, “Friedrich’s search for new symbols to elicit transcendental experience was so intense that it converted almost all earlier categories of secular painting into a new kind of religious painting.”⁹

The void has rich symbolism. For example it is similar to the Buddhist concept of *Sunyata*, emptiness, and the Christian concept of *kenosis*, emptiness preceding grace. Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko painted modern translations of Friedrich’s sense of divinity in boundless voids. Roger Lipsky discusses Rothko’s cloud in his book *Spirit in 20th Century Art*. The God of Israel never appeared directly to people. He appeared rather as a burning fire or veiled by a cloud.

Some see a hint of that divine presence in Leonardo da Vinci’s smoky translations or *sfumato*. I have incorporated the symbolism of the cloud into my work by painting on a surface that has a soft edge.

Many artists have been moved by the spirit and expressed it in a less direct way. For example, Vincent Van Gogh used sunflowers as a symbol of sun, which, in turn, is a symbol of the sacred. The painting of *Starry Night* depicts the night sky, a passionate metaphor of the mysteries of the universe. He also created numerous depictions of *The Sower*, which is a traditional parable found in Matthew 13. Van Gogh began his career as a lay preacher and rechanneled his evangelical fervor into his art.



Green, Red and Blue, Mark Rothko, 1955



The Sower, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi created a number of sculptures on the theme of ascension. I find his work and the way he talked about it very inspirational. Brancusi said, "I am always working on it. I have not yet found it. It is not a bird, it is the meaning of flight. Bird in Space, It struggles...toward heaven."¹⁰ I believe that everyone is gifted and called. Brancusi described his calling, "What I am doing was given to me to do. I came to this world with a mission."¹¹



Bird in Space, Constantin Brancusi, 1932-40

Contemporary Art

It is important to me to translate theology and universal spirituality into a current visual language. One of my favorite examples is St. Patrick's use of the shamrock as the image of the Trinity. He was being faithful to the human need to express an abstract notion concretely. Similarly, some sermons are like a Catechism lesson and leave me feeling uninspired. Others translate scripture into a story relevant today so that I can get it. It is my goal to translate this age-old theme visually so the viewer will also get



San Francisco Waterfall II, Pat Steir, 1991-2003

it. I use abstraction and symbolism for my translation. For example, light and dark are abstract elements abounding with symbolism.

More often than not, I apply paint by other means than the brush. I feel more connected with the painting when I am laying my hands on it. For that reason, I have researched many great painters who have not relied on the brush. Pat Steir created a series of waterfall paintings using drips that I find peaceful and reflective. Because of my fascination with the symbolism of the shroud, I have researched artists who work on unstretched canvas such as Dorothea Rockburne and Sam Gilliam.



Guardian Angel I, Dorothea Rockburne, 1982



Light Depth, Sam Gilliam, 1968

THESIS EXHIBITION

*Art has a unique capacity to take one or another facet of the message
and translate it into colours, shapes and sounds which nourish
the intuition of those who look or listen.¹²*

The title of the exhibition is *Aggiornamento: Opening the Windows*. *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word that entered the English dictionary at the time of the Second Vatican Council. *Aggiornamento* literally means bringing up to date. It is my goal to open the windows of this age-old theme for today's viewers through a contemporary visual language.

Since I paint through the eye of faith, my aesthetic choices are driven by concepts that begin and end in the spirit. They are to be spiritually and symbolically read as bridges from our plane of existence to the world of spirit. As Cubist painter Juan Gris said, "Truth is beyond any realism, and the appearance of things should not be confused with their essence."¹³ I believe that abstraction is the best way for me to express the abstract notion of spirituality because it is a powerful unlimited universal language. Art historian Robert Rosenblum wrote about how the search for the sacred in the modern secular world has motivated most of the abstract art of this century, including that of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian.¹⁴

My paintings can be read formally or symbolically. I use abstract elements, process and materials symbolically. The triptych format has a long-standing tradition of symbolizing the Trinity. The Catholic tradition is rich with color symbolism. Purple is the symbolic color for Lent and red for Pentecost. I paint with pure colors in areas to symbolize purity. I paint glazes, the old masters' way, to create luminosity. I use the process of applying stains of paint to symbolize sin, as the latter are often referred to as stains on the soul. Acrylic paint and its wide array of media offer endless possibilities to a painter. In addition to traditional artist materials, I use plaster to create rough texture as a symbol of

rugged dark times. I use sand from Jerusalem, which has the capacity to transform my paintings into relics.

My affinity for paper and linen has propelled me to search for a durable painting surface with their qualities. I discovered that gently waved wood panels with rough edges emulate the ethereal qualities of deckled paper. I hope these complicated edges slow down the viewer's eyes and invite deeper contemplation. The ragged edges convey a sense that they are a part of something much larger. They also create a cloud-like shape that I find reminiscent of several biblical references to God's appearing in a cloud. According to Dermot A. Lane, "The New Testament abounds with references to principalities and powers, heaven and earth, angels and spirits, stars and clouds, above and below—all of which are symbols of one kind or another reflecting to the cosmic context of the Christ-event."¹⁵

On a very personal level, I devote the beginning of my painting time to meditation and the study of theology. This was inspired by Brancusi's story, "I met icon-makers during my youth in the country. I remember that an icon-maker before starting to carve, would fast for a few weeks in a row."¹⁶ I don't start with a predisposed idea of how the painting will look when it is finished. I begin the creative process by reflecting on spiritual peace and the warmth of divine light. Often these concepts are redirected through meditation and chance. Occasionally my thoughts turn towards favorite Biblical passages. My painting entitled *Bows* was inspired by Genesis 9:14, "I have set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."¹⁷

I balance my reflections with gifts from chance. I purposely apply paint in manners that afford the least control and then work responsively to deepen the message. As Roger Lipsey wrote, "One of the conditions for great art is a delicate, mobile balance between chance and intention. Intention alone is cold and schematic; chance alone is irresponsible and vacuous. Together, under the eye of the working artist, they are an immense resource."¹⁸

Compositionally, I have borrowed Friedrich's way of losing the middle ground to give a heightened sense of space. He offsets the distance against a shallow foreground, which leads me on a journey that is not accessible by foot. I use rough areas as the foreground and the smoother areas of light as the contemplative view.

Many artists have painted similar concepts over the years. I will use the subject of Pentecost as an example. The Pentecostal narrative is from the Bible, Acts 2:1-13. A few of the artists who have depicted the Pentecost include mannerist El Greco, German Expressionist Emile Nolde, and more recently Alexander Sadoyan and Juanita Yoder. I am most deeply moved by the Easter and Pentecost installation by Juanita Yoder. She ties the liturgical relationship of Easter and Pentecost so dramatically and literally through this progressive installation.



Pentecost, El Greco, 1600



Pentecost, Alexander Sadoyan, 2003



Pentecost, Emile Nolde, 1909



Easter, Juanita Yoder, 2001



Pentecost, Juanita Yoder, 2001

Paintings

In my series *To Form Anew* I hope to convey the universal message of how a small amount of enlightenment can overcome any amount of emotional darkness. In these paintings, hope is signified by light, and darkness represents the struggle of tough times. Since ancient times, light has been a symbol for people of all religions of divine presence, joy, happiness, goodness, purity, life and a spirit of celebration. Darkness has been associated with sin, sadness, evil and death. The theme of light and dark is in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. I am not alone in referencing religious symbolism. According to Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, “In the Western world in recent decades, there has been a revival of recognizable religious symbols, icons, and stories in art, particularly ones that borrow from the Christian tradition.”¹⁹

Dust to Dust is a triptych about the universal spiritual theme of the emptiness that precedes grace. To me it is about Lent, which is a time of creating a void that only the Holy Spirit can fill. It is a time of dying to self, and spiritual renewal through prayer, alms-giving and fasting. Symbols featured in this triptych include the symbolic color for Lent, which is purple, and ashes to remind us to set our eyes on what lasts forever. I have used blue to call viewers into the infinite. As Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky wrote in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, “The inclination of blue to depth is so strong that its inner appeal is stronger when its shade is deeper.”²⁰ In symbolism of dying to self I use black. “The silence of black is the silence of death.”²¹ Kandinsky stated.

The title for this triptych, *Light from Light*, is derived from the Nicene Creed. The First Council of Nicaea, which met in 325, was the first ecumenical conference of Catholic bishops and resulted in the Nicene Creed. It is the most ecumenical creed and is affirmed by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most Protestant churches. Ecumenical is a term that refers to the unity of all faiths, a concept I believe is more relevant today than ever. Light is a symbol that speaks to people of all faiths. The theme of this painting is the journey from death into life. I have incorporated

blessed palms to symbolize resurrection and a ray of light to symbolize grace.

Passion to Pentecost is about Christ's Passion, His Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit for all, which is the foundation of all Christianity. In the Passion panel, I have created five points of departure for drips of red paint in the shape of the cross to symbolize the five wounds of Christ. The drips are set against darkness to reflect the dark event of Crucifixion. Resurrection is depicted by the dripped gold line leading upwards. This panel uses the abstract element of light and dark to talk about the evening of life, a Greek metaphor for transference. Pentecost is a feast in the Christian liturgy that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and the followers of Jesus. The Pentecost panel refers to fiery tongues by the sweeping applications of symbolic red paint and the Holy Spirit by a few brush strokes of white paint. As with many of my themes, this message reaches further than my Christian perspective. For instance, Pentecost is associated with the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which is the -holiday that marks the time when Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai.



Arise, Linda McCray, 34.5" x 34.5", Acrylic, 2007



Dust to Dust, Linda McCray, 6' x 9.5', Acrylic, 2007



Light from Light, Linda McCray, 6' x 9.5', Acrylic, 2007



Passion to Pentecost, Linda McCray, 6' x 9.5', Acrylic, 2007



To Form Anew XV, Linda McCray, 2' x 2', Acrylic, 2006



Bows, Linda McCray, 2' x 5', Acrylic, 2006



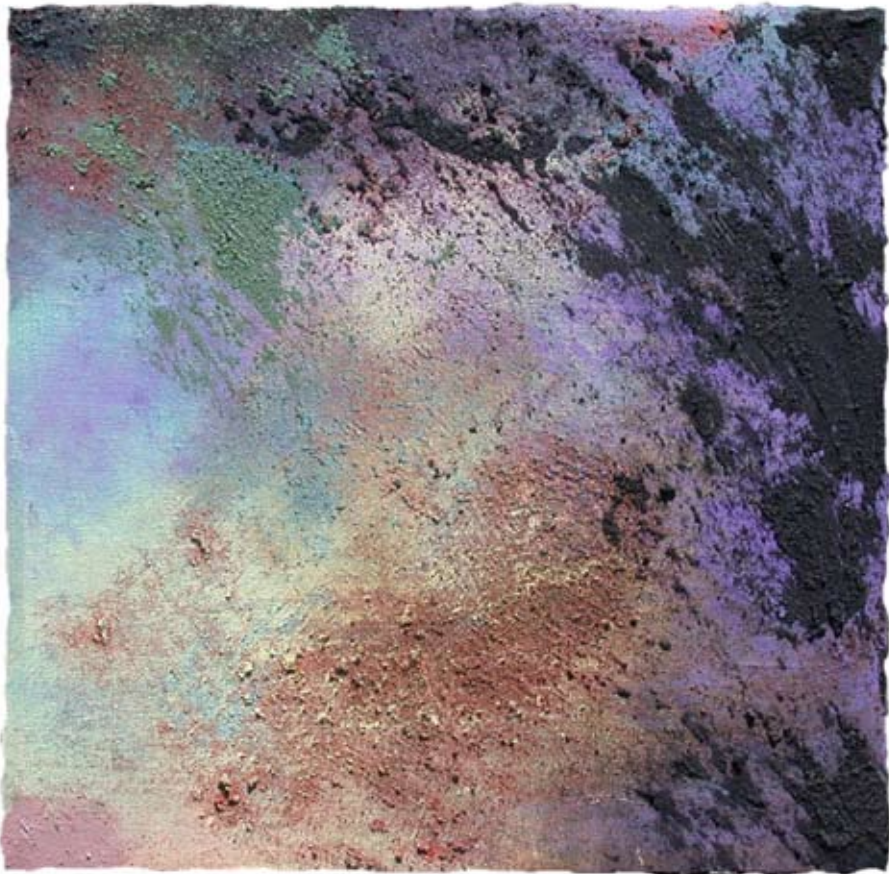
To Form Anew XIV, Linda McCray, 2' x 5', Acrylic, 2006



To Form Anew XXIV, Linda McCray, 2' x 5', Acrylic, 2006



To Form Anew XVIII, Linda McCray, 1' x 1', Acrylic, 2006



To Form Anew IV, Linda McCray, 1' x 1', Acrylic, 2006

CONCLUSION

I will close with a quote that I believe sums up where I hope to fall into the history of the spiritual in art. As G.K. Chesterton, an early twentieth century writer, stated: “In the beginning there was art for God’s sake, then in the Renaissance there was art for man’s sake. Beginning with Impressionism there was art for art’s sake. Now, unfortunately, we have no art for God’s sake.”²²

I strive to bring back art for God’s sake.

ENDNOTES

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