

THE 25th NASH MEMORIAL LECTURE

Topic-IMAGING THE SACRED: THE FRUITFUL ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND ART, or OUTSIDER ART IN AN AGE OF IRONY

March 7, 2002

*The most forbidden taboo in subject matter for contemporary artists is religious belief.*¹

Eric Fischl

Despite Fischl's quite-correct summary of the relationship between contemporary art and faith, imaging the sacred has had a long history. Art that shares some of the revelatory power of religion has actually been around since the first person put burnt stick to stone wall. Since then, people in all ages have imaged and ritualized their encounter with the transcendent and their experiences of being alive. I need not review with you the past fruitfulness of this tradition. Rather, the thoughts and the images I offer you this evening concern this present time. What of the present fruitfulness between faith and art? Is religious art even possible when the name of God is no longer speakable in much of our public discourse? What does it mean to pursue a depiction of the spiritual in an age of disbelief, especially given the amnesia of our culture of entertainment?

Not surprisingly, in such a context, the past symbols of religious passions have been devalued or forgotten, and in general, doubt exists whether these symbols ever did signify any transcendent meaning. Neil Postman has summarized our current culture as "entertaining [itself] to death,"² and ironic disaffection is the prevailing tone of the day. The "trivialization of life is, according to Dorothee Soelle, the strongest antimystical force among us."³ Like the annoying child who keeps crying out "I see through the tricks," every value is seen through and dissolved with irony.

Of course, Paul Ricoeurs' legacy in identifying the masters of suspicion is vitally important, and much in society and culture is sublimated eros, the will to power, or merely materially motivated, and rightly deserves to be "seen through". No one can dismiss this hermeneutical lens. Indeed art which functions as societal critic is well established because there is so much to be criticized. But the argument works both ways. Money, sex, and power can also be "seen through" as masking a need for the divine. The problem with reducing 'the human' to money, sex and power is that it is simply not enough. It does not explain all of human experience. It does not explain mystical experiences, and it is painfully insufficient in times of crisis. In a blistering poem about St Teresa's legendary mystical experience, Susan McCaslin's counters the typical dismissal of the mystical as merely sublimated eros. *I have a few words to say to the Freudians* starts with the words "those bastards. She continues....

There are some ecstasies having little to do with sex,
Although we steal whatever analogies we can,
And sex is sometimes a whisper

Of what I'm talking about.

She concludes by saying, "But you have to try them to know them."⁴ Soelle goes even further when she describes mysticism as "a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality"⁵. After Sept 11th, a *Globe and Mail* headline heralded the end of irony. Faced with the continuation of World War II, Poulenc dispensed with his characteristic musical flippancy and found an ancient musical form to help him develop a more profoundly serious and spiritual style.⁶ If you have no memory, you are defenseless. Reductionist arguments fail in moments of *kairos* when time stops and life seems to have changed in an instant.

It is in these moments of *kairos*, as the theologians call them, that we find a productive intersection between faith and art. By way of contrast, the Greek word *chronos*, is ordinary time, the common, linear, minute-by-minute experience of time. *Kairos* describes the fullness of time, experiences where time seems suspended. Intense moments of joy or fear or pain can be catalysts for such insights. Often a word or new insight is revealed, and thereafter, life seems absolutely different. The mystical traditions within all religions try to understand and provide words for such experiences. If there is any connecting link between the artists presented here tonight, it would be in their bearing witness, in some way, to these transformative moments.

David Goa's Anno Domini: Jesus through the Centuries exhibition, in 2000, brought over 114,000 people to Edmonton's Provincial Museum of Alberta. Curators who brought art pieces from all over Europe were astonished at the forthright consideration of meaning in the exhibition. They wondered at the deep engagement that was evident amongst those who visited the exhibition and they speculated that perhaps this was an alternative to the reduction of such work to history and aesthetics.⁷ Against the odds, it would seem, this work, and the story it contains, still manages to move people. Recent filmmaking has also shown a distinct interest in the spiritual. Films as diverse as Kurosawa's *Ikiru*, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Benton's *Places in the Heart*, and Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*⁸ are only a few. Both Arvo Part and Tavener's haunting music, though difficult and unwaveringly contemporary, is deeply influenced by Gregorian chant, and this music has achieved unprecedented popular and classical acclaim. In all the arts, in fact, these stirrings are found. Despite the dominant cultural context, experiences of the sacred have persisted in being imaged.

I will not be showing you this evening the sentimental nostalgia or utopianism that sometimes passes as spiritual art. Certainly art which enters into mystery has nothing to do with the domesticated production of religious kitsch. Cute angel trinkets or sentimental, light-drenched, pastoral scenes are not, in my opinion, imaging the sacred. On the contrary, when one attempts to image the sacred, safe prettiness or easy goodness will not do. The saccharine banalities of kitsch cannot tell the whole truth.

For beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror we can barely endure, / and we admire it so because it calmly disdains / to destroy us. Every angel is terrible"⁹ Rilke understands the angel's dangerous presence in this poem and it's tone seems more true to biblical accounts of encounters with the sacred. Rather, if one approaches what Rudolf Otto referred to as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,¹⁰ then sentimentality cannot begin to approach the wonder and terror that lies at the heart of such encounters. In his inaugural lecture for the exhibition *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives* at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, Martin

Marty writes, “Profound art does what Rilke sees it doing. Its beauty is at the edge of terror and terror haunts every expression of beauty. Separate the two and the possibility of ‘negotiating rapture’, or the power to transform lives diminishes”.¹¹

Nor am I interested this evening in the manipulation of didactic art. Rather, art which negotiates rapture is intimate with the mystical and with contemplative intuition. It is a lived and experienced embodiment that transcends words, that hints at the indescribable. Like the poetry Emily Dickinson referred to, visual images that deal with the sacred tell the truth but “tell it slant”. Paul Klee famously declared that art should not imitate the visible but should make visible the invisible. Not that the material realm can be denied. The material realm is the visual artist’s alphabet and as such, it is the means through. But you just do not stop there. “This world is a closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through,”¹² as Simone Weil, that lover of paradox, tells us. Susan McCaslin sees parallel tactics in poetry that deals with the spiritual. “The unavoidable and appropriate path lies in descending into [material], rather than in escaping prematurely to a transcendence outside or beyond the world. Yet there is also an insistence that things are both themselves and mean beyond themselves.”¹³ Didactic work always misses the mark because the truth has so much more power if the artist elicits it. Like Jesus’ use of parable, the truth is best hinted at through metaphor and analogy. The moment of revelation occurs in the act of completing the story, in the “Aha” when the listener “gets it”.¹⁴

What I will talk about and show you this evening is work which contains some of this terrible beauty, work which is not sentimental, or didactic, or utopian. It is work which is infused with faith, though it generally asks questions rather than answers them. These pieces tell the truth but tell it slant, and though many contain beauty, it is beauty on the edge of terror.

(slide projector 1, *St. Agatha's Grief*) (slide projector2 *Tennbrae*)



Melissa Weinman, of Tacoma Washington, paints powerful, politically contextualized images of traditional saints and martyrs that are located squarely in our own era. She intentionally uses the traditional linguistic devices of the old masters in her representational art.

According to Melissa she is “battling the velocity with which we are numbing ourselves into an existence in which we respond to our world with little or no feeling, a world in which we are bombarded with a plethora of images of unredeemed pain.” She says “This is a particularly difficult battle for me because I have to make images of things and experiences that move me, and for the last decade or so, my subject has been human suffering”.¹⁵ *St Agatha's Grief* is, indeed, about suffering. In Weinman's image we see two women standing back to back.. On the left half, obscured by shadows, one woman is still, eyes closed. The figure on the right shows the blood-soaked wound where her breast ought to be, head back, mouth open, eyes closed in a trance-like gaze. Randall Kenan responds to this work in the journal *Image*. “The first thing one takes away from Weinman's representation is the absolute lack of sentimentalism so often bound up with female persecution - her emphasis on before and after, the grimness, the actual blood, captures an immediate sense of violation. It resonates uncomfortably with modern associations of breast cancer and women surviving new, modern-day hells.”¹⁶

Tenebrae is a thirteen-by-six foot triptych about grief. It uses a truncated cross format to contain a bleak, unsettling, scene at a construction site. *Tenebrae* means “darkness” or “shadows”, and is used in liturgical contexts to refer to the three hours of darkness that occurred at Christ's death. Weinman's depictions never circumnavigate Good Friday to get to Easter. And despite her unflinching vision, her work contains material beauty and hints at transcendence.

(Slide projector 1, *Pieta*), and (Slide projector 2, *Standing Man and Women*)

In a conversation concerning Stephen DeStaeble's sculptures, eminent art critic Donald Kuspit identifies that it is precisely this concern with suffering that identifies art as religious.¹⁷ Well-known Bay-area artist Stephen DeStaeble often uses the human body in a fragmentary state, incomplete and broken, yet he also bears witness to the transcendent through his use of form. The nimbus or winged flame in *Pieta* lifts both mother and child upwards, countering the downward pull of balance and gravity in the piece. The flame is clearly referencing the earth in its texture and contours. The earth is in fact an important connection to the sacred for De Staebler. A second important theme of this piece is its interest in separateness and fusion signifying respectively positive mysticism (*via positiva*) and negative mysticism (*via negativa*); note how the figure of Mary and the figure of Jesus are simultaneously fused and separate.

Standing Man and Women has been described by Thomas Albright as a “contemporary parable of death and resurrection.”¹⁸ The figures are both dying and being reborn as they interact with the obviously respected cast clay ground—that sacred earth of the *Pieta* piece. Rather than rely on subject matter, DeStaeble uses a language of texture, and form to convey meaning.

(slide projector 1, *Seated Figure with Yellow Flame*), and (slide projector 2, *Seated Woman with Outstretched Hand*)

De Staebler would agree with Richard Rohr when he says the purpose of religion is the transformation of suffering. Like religion, according to De Staebler, “art tries to restructure reality so that we can live with the suffering. He wants to create a modern religious art,

utilizing archaic forms for an 'archaic' purpose: the articulation and remediation of suffering.”¹⁹ Because of this, De Staebler avoids an idealization of the human body. To idealize the body would feed into the cult of beauty and youth, for which the state of California, where DeStaebler lives, is famous. “I think everyone feels inadequacies, incompleteness, and of course the worst of society is trying to pretend you do not have these limitations, violating, possibly irreparably, your own uniqueness.”²⁰ His emphasis on fragmentation and fragile balance expresses the body's brokenness without horror, or embarrassment, or denial, but with respect. It is precisely in the body's brokenness that DeStaebler finds a mirror of our true condition.

(slide projector 1 *Day to Day*) and (slide projector 2 *Day to Day* detail)

Chicago-based artist Tim Lowly would likely agree with De Staebler's observations on North America's obsession with superficial beauty. Lowly also creates powerful images of brokenness which image the value of being and question what type of body deserves to be depicted. The subject of much of Lowly's work is his daughter Temma, multiply impaired after her heart and breathing stopped for a critical time shortly after birth; she has limited mobility and cannot see or speak. Tim's meticulously built-up layers of transparent egg tempera and graphite drawings depict the fragile marginalized community of disabled children with whom Temma spends time.

(slide projector 1 *Temma on Earth*)(slide projector 2)

This work is disturbing to an audience used to the objectifying vision of media. The prevailing cult of beauty and desire for physical perfection makes these images startling to look at and masks society's underlying fear of death and denial of pain. The stillness and attentiveness of Lowly's gaze show us a deeper reality. Lowly's interest is in imaging “the value of being, quite apart from the capability of doing something.”²¹ Both Lowly's and De Staebler's works invite the viewer to transcend a preoccupation with self and evoke empathy. Further, each encourages reflection on the nature of reality and how we define humanity. The questions these images raise are timely, given the moral threshold on which current developments in genetic engineering have placed us.

(slide projector 1 *The Crossing*)(slide projector 2 *The Crossing*)

New media artist Bill Viola is also captivated by issues of being. Using video and installations which surround the viewer and occupy real time, Bill Viola's images are at once metaphorically rich and unsettling. They displace conventional assumptions about bodily existence via scale and sound, as if he wants to decalcify the viewer's self understanding. Obviously slides will only give a fragmentary view on such multifaceted, experiential work. The 1996 installation *The Crossing* shows two images of a man walking towards the other on a two-sided twelve-foot screen. The images start as Rothko-like shimmering fields of light on which we see the man at a distance walking towards the screen. Once he is a few feet from the picture plane, a flicker of flame appears and immolates the figure. On the other side, a few drops of water become a torrent until this man too disappears. The elements subside, leaving a scene empty of both man and elements.

(slide projector1)(slide projector2)

Embodiment is a theme frequented by Viola. Often the body is shown in water, referencing births, baptisms, ritual cleansing and so on. The bodies are always en route; the images are about being within and passing through. The displacement of being in water, weightless, and unfamiliar, yields a bodily estrangement. Through that estrangement, Viola seems to suggest, something new can be revealed.

(slide projector 1 Room for St. John of the Cross)(slide 2 Room for St. John of the Cross)

The experience of both embodiment and suffering is explored in his installation *Room for St. John of the Cross*. A small cubicle patterned after St. John's prison cell is recreated in a darkened gallery room. A shaky video projection of a mountain range disturbs the viewer's equilibrium. Wind howls. The inside of the cell is still, motionless. An audio loop plays the words John wrote while in the cell, plunged into the dark night of the soul, seemingly abandoned by God and tormented by his fellow friars. Within the darkness of this cell, St. John's mystical experiences resulted in his most profound and eloquent writing. John's pain is transformed into meaning. Commenting on Viola's work, David Morgan writes:

"Suffering changes us. Those who have suffered see themselves and the world with new eyes. Viola's installations are eminent examples of an art that seeks to stimulate religious ritual in order to achieve a sense of spiritual transformation. In a note published in 1982, Viola observed that "initiation rites and age-old spiritual training ordeals (fire walking, days of continuous dancing, circumcision rituals) are all controlled, staged, accidents, ancient technologies designed to bring the organism to a life-threatening crisis." They are deliberate accidents because they are created to break into the normal routines of life with disorienting violence. Accidents such as car crashes, Viola notes, seem to happen in slow motion—a retarded time sequence characterized by uncommon clarity."²²

Viola's themes are about disorienting times of *kairos*, where a new meaning is discerned. The goal is to present an opening to the sacred dispensing with a reifying lens through which we often see historical work.

(slide, projector 1 *How Fragile we are*) (slide, projector 2 *Wall of Breath*)

Embodiment has been the theme of my own work for almost 20 years. All we know is mediated through the body, and as such, it is the central site of meaning. Simone Weil used the platonic word *Metaxu* to describe anything which could be a bridge or mediation between us and God. The created order, including the human body, is a barrier and at the same time, it is a way through. "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link."²³ *How Fragile we are* echoes Weil's insistence on our bodily fragility. "Our flesh is fragile;... our soul is vulnerable;...our social personality is exposed to every hazard."²⁴ But it is precisely this intimate fragility that connects us at the core of our being to the cross of Christ. *Wall of Breath* contrasts the intimate act of breathing with a kimono/cross-shaped format. The figure on the left inhales, the figure on the right exhales in a Martha Graham contraction-like exhalation. The figures in each of these images are contrasted with silent planes of steel and gold which heighten the corporeal, fragile, reading of the figure. In recent years, the discovery of material has been exhilarating. Materials carry meaning. Gold, steel, wax, ash, and lead are all ripe with metaphoric meanings ranging from precious to toxic. Weil would see both the human body and these materials as *Metaxu*, bridges between us and God. Hence both the body and materials are potential sites of transcendence.

(slide projector 1 *Memory Traces*) (slide projector 2 *Negotiating Rapture*)

“Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates our soul. Through suffering it penetrates our body. We could no more become friends of God through joy alone than one becomes a ship’s captain by studying books on navigation. The body plays a part in all apprenticeships”²⁵.

Far from being something that indicates divine abandonment, suffering seems to have a purpose. Simone Weil was described by Camus as the only great spirit of our time. T.S. Eliot described her as having the genius akin to that of a saint. Leslie Fiedler has provided the most apt handle on Simone Weil when she described her as the Outsider as Saint in an age of alienation.

(slide projector 1 *Simone’s Affliction*)(slide projector 2 *Remembering to Breathe*)

World War II era teacher, classical scholar, philosopher, social critic and mystic, Weil talks of both affliction and beauty as being the means of God’s direct access to our souls. “There are only two things piercing enough to penetrate our souls in this way: they are affliction and beauty”.²⁶ In *Simone’s Affliction* I used cigar box nails embedded into the wax surface, referencing the notion of affliction. The human body is the signifier of beauty. She connects affliction to a participation in the Cross of Christ, which, when consented to and loved, affects a kind of transformation, akin to a baptism. Suffering too, it would seem, can be *metaxu* between us and God.

(Slide projector 1 *To what do you open*)(slide projector 2 *Brace Yourself*)

Though the source of suffering is never quite as visible as in Melissa’s work, my work also deals with suffering. *To what do you open when you find yourself stranded standing on nothing* asks the question inherent in all moments of crisis whether they be physical, emotional, or spiritual. *Brace Yourself Like a Fighter* is a kind of modern day Job poised at the threshold of her ordeal.

(slide projector 1 *This Present Moment*) (projector 2 *Surface and Sinew*)

*“When an apprentice gets hurt or complains of fatigue, workmen and peasants have this fine expression: ‘It’s the trade getting into his body.’ Whenever we have some pain to endure, we can say to ourselves that it is the universe, the order and beauty of the worlds, and the obedience of creation to God which are entering our body.”²⁷ *This Present Moment* and *Surface and Sinew* both hint at this indwelling.*

(slide projector 1 *Swimming in Existence*) (slide projector 2 *Swimming in Existence*) The *Swimming in Existence* series was painted in response to a trip to New York two summers ago. The existential questions which arose found voice in Soren Kierkegaard’s statement “I can swim in existence but for this mystical soaring I am too heavy.” The figures are mid-flight, after the step of faith and before resolution.

(slide projector 1 *Only say the Word*)

In the end, then, three things unify all of these diverse works, my own and others’. Each utilizes an embodiment which portrays the human body as both beautiful and broken. Suffering is not denied. Nor is suffering portrayed as gratuitous or masochistic, instead these pieces invite the transformation of pain into meaning. By Kuspit’s definition, this identification with suffering marks all these artists, whether they would accept it or not, as religious. The experiences they image are real, too real to be “seen through”. Rather than deconstructing the experience of suffering to reveal shame and waste, these artists persist in a more thoughtful gaze. “For if [s/he] remains constant, what [s/he] will discover buried deep under the sound of [one’s] own lamentations is the pearl of the silence of God.”²⁸ Rather than an ironic deconstructing of the person, exposing a vacant, bankrupt void after

the masters of suspicion have done their confessional work, what is revealed, after all is said and done, is the image, seen through a mirror dimly, of God.

¹ Frederic Tuten, "Fischl's Italian Hours", *Art in America*, Nov. 1996, pp.77-132

² Neil Postman

³ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*.p.13 Fortress Press Minneapolis

⁴ Susan McCaslin, *The Teresa Poems*

⁵ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry, Mysticism and Resistance*. p.89 Fortress Press Minneapolis

⁶ Peter Butterfield, Programme Notes, Vancouver Cantata Singers, *Remembrance, Works composed for reflective occasions in remembrance*.

⁷ David J. Goa, "The Surprise of Remembering", Invited Keynote lecture, CIVA Conference 2001 University of Dallas, Texas

⁸ Ron Austin, "The Spiritual Frontiers of Film", *Image*, number 31

⁹ Rainer Marie Rilke, "Duino Elegy".(cited in *Image*), number 17

¹⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, London. University of Oxford Press, 1977

¹¹ Martin E. Marty, "Beauty and Terror: Rapture in Art and the Sacred", *Image*, number 17

¹² George Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, 1977, McKay, p.363

¹³ Susan McCaslin, *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, p..17 *The Dark Interval*

¹⁴ Melissa Weinman, CIVA Conference Invited Speaker, Dallas Texas, 2001

¹⁵ Randall Kenan, "The Weirdness of Modern Faith, or, Quantum Christianity in the Images of Melissa Weinman", *Image*, number 30

¹⁶ Donald Kuspit, cited by Doug Adams, *Transcendence with the Human Body in Art*, Crossroad, p.50

¹⁷ Thomas Albright, cited by Doug Adams, *Ibid.*, p.84

¹⁸ Donald Kuspit, *Stephen DeStaebler: The Figure*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, Laguna Art Museum and Saddleback College, p.15

¹⁹ Doug Adams, *Transcendence with the Human Body in Art*, Crossroad, p. 55

²⁰ interview with Joyce Kubiski, *Temma on Earth Exhibition Catalogue*, The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, 1999

²¹ David Morgan, "Spirit and Medium", *The Video Art of Bill Viola*. *Image*, number 26 p.36

²² Simone Weil, "Metaxu", ed. George Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, p.363

²³ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction", ed. George Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, McKay p.454

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.450

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.467

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 449, 450

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 468