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GOD'S FRIENDS

JOINING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
AND LIFE EXPERIENCE

VISUAL ART AS INCARNATION

THE SHEER PLEASURE OF LOOKING

By Olivia Kuser

VISUAL ARTISTS AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE A CONVERSATION

By Suzanne Fowler Palmer

PRAYER AND THE CREATIVE FLOW

By Paul Fromberg

ARTWORKS BY

*Sandra Bowden, Olivia Kuser,
Gloria Lamson, Michael Mallard,
Michael Markowitz, Christen Mattix*

On the cover: Fire Figure, Southeast Alaska, 1998. By Gloria Lamson. "For four summers I have returned to the same remote island in SE Alaska, uninhabited by humans, to explore art as interaction with nature, time, place, and self. I have engaged with that environment in temporary installations activated by elemental forces."

Below: Seven Last Words, 1990. Collagraph mixed media, 20" x 20".
Below right: By the Word of the Lord Were the Heavens Made, 1980. Collagraph with embossing, 7.75" x 21". Both by Sandra Bowden.

WELCOME, CIVA AND ECVA

Two organizations were invaluable resources in putting this issue together. Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) exists to explore and nurture the relationship between the visual arts and Christianity, providing a variety of resources for its member artists as well as a supportive network. CIVA president Sandra Bowden is one of our contributing artists. We're also grateful to The Episcopal Church and Visual Arts (ECVA), whose chair Mel Ahlborn helped focus the issue. ECVA's mission is to encourage artists, individuals, congregations, and scholars to engage the visual arts in the life of the church. Readers can learn about these groups by visiting www.civa.org and www.ecva.org. Members of both organizations may be reading *God's Friends* for the first time; we hope to welcome you as subscribers.



"All true art is incarnational."

—Madeline L'Engle, in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

For years the art editors of *God's Friends* have been asking for an issue dedicated to the visual arts. And now we've created one! This issue departs from our usual practice of having work by one or two artists that complements the issue's theme. It features no fewer than six artists, whose work ranges from landscape painting to collage, environmental installation to figure drawing. Not surprisingly, the written word is less prominent than usual—in fact, we considered the possibility of no text at all, presenting instead a "picture book" on the intersection of art and spirituality.

But we soon realized that, however eloquently the art spoke for itself, we also wanted to hear the artists speak about what they do and why. So we organized a forum or group interview (see page 4), which begins by asking each artist: what is the relationship of your spiritual life to your work as an artist? Did one grow out of or lead to the other? Is making art a part of your spiritual practice, or are the two one and the same? These folks have allowed themselves to be vulnerable, opening their hearts and minds to a conversation that challenged them to express their deepest selves in a different way than they are accustomed to. Each artist speaks of the spiritual foundation for his or her work with integrity and honesty. Some are Christian; others Buddhist or agnostic. Some find that their work is most informed by solitude; others by community, the Bible, the natural world, the figure, or the imagination. This conversation had to be excerpted for print to give the artworks room to breathe, but a more complete version appears on our website, www.godsfriends.org. There you'll also find links to the individual artists' websites, as well as intriguing side paths to the topic of art as incarnation.

We couldn't totally abandon written narrative, so these pages also include two articles by practicing artists. Paul Fromberg, director of youth and family ministry at St. Gregory's, writes about how painting opened up his prayer life, and about his move into the more "communal" medium of large-scale installation. And landscape artist Olivia Kuser, an emeritus art editor of *God's Friends*, shares her struggles when the work does not come easily, or at all, and finds saving grace in just seeing.

All these artists offer us gifts of imagery that engages our imaginations, our emotions, and our intellects in ways that words simply cannot. They present the notion of "radical hospitality," of the doors being flung open and an invitation extended to come inside and join the conversation about art and the sacred, creativity and inspiration. We welcome you to the table!

—Suzanne Fowler Palmer, Issue Editor





THE SHEER PLEASURE OF LOOKING

By Olivia Kuser

Almost three years ago I stopped painting.

I had gotten work ready for a show in just six months, half the time I usually spend preparing for a show. Although I was exhausted, I felt it was the best work I had ever done. The work itself directed the flow, the most recently completed painting telling me what the next painting should be about. For the first time in my career, I was not ashamed of my work as the show was hung. I even enjoyed the opening.

Only three paintings were sold during the month that they were displayed. Both my dealer and I were stunned. I was bitterly disappointed.

There's often a pause in my work after a show, a kind of natural postpartum experience of rest and recovery. But this time I didn't go back into the studio, and when this pause had stretched into two years of not painting, I finally panicked. All the usual methods of coaxing myself to work had failed. The real problem was that I simply had no desire to paint. I have never felt so lost. I no longer recognized myself.

Groping for something to get me painting again, I applied for two artist's residencies. The first residency was at the Djerassi Foundation in Woodside, California—a long shot, I knew, since a residency at Djerassi is much coveted. The other was at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, where I thought I had a better chance. As I waited for the acceptance or rejection letters to arrive, I began a week-long class in painting traditional Russian icons. In the middle of the icon class I found out that I had gotten into the residency in Wyoming.

I was apprehensive about the residency. I was afraid I still wouldn't be able to work. I was afraid I would be bored and lonely because of that.

When my partner, Alfred, dropped me off at the Ucross Foundation (population 25, elevation 4,085 feet, 17 miles from the nearest town), the first thing the director did was show me what would be my studio. My eyes filled with tears when I saw it. It was a low stone building, beautifully made, on a little bluff above Piney Creek. The studio was half again as big as my studio at home, with windows and French doors opening out towards the creek. (You can't see out of my

*Ebb, 1997. By Olivia Kuser.
Etching ink on panel, 30" x 48".*

I am often surprised by the art that does and does not speak to me. I am always looking for the work that will pull me further down my own path, and sometimes it comes from odd places, from work I might have at first thought was very intellectual or only fashionable.

—Olivia Kuser,
from the forum

continued on page 14

page 3

VISUAL ARTISTS AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE: A CONVERSATION

In October 2004, Art Editor Suzanne Fowler Palmer interviewed the six artists whose works are featured in this issue. Since a meeting wasn't possible at the time, Suzanne emailed a series of questions to each artist, asking how art and spirituality intersect in his or her life and work. The following is an edited and abridged version of this conversation. The complete interview, as well as full biographies of the artists, are available online at www.godsfriends.org.

The artists:

Sandra Bowden
Olivia Kuser
Gloria Lamson
Michael Mallard
Michael Markowitz
Christen Mattix



Part, 2004. By Christen Mattix. Oil on canvas, 16" x 24".

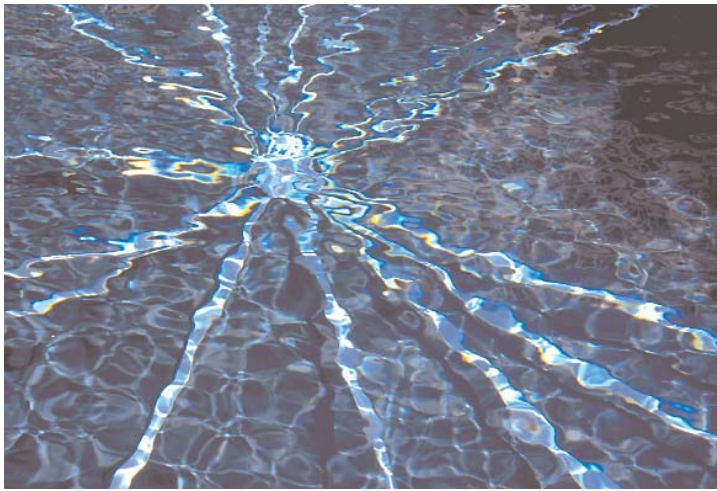


Cradled, 2001. By Christen Mattix. Oil on panel, 48" x 72".

What is the relationship of your spiritual life to your work as an artist?

Markowitz: I've had spiritual feelings since I was a small boy, and I've always had a tendency not to let them get steered towards any kind of organized religion. I don't think that the spiritual is easily reducible to structure and language. I intuitively wound up moving in a direction that's not about the literal but about allowing the form of the image to evolve out of what is powerful enough to push the process through me. I think there is a connection in the "Angels" series [featured in this issue] where the the intuitive and the literal really came together. **Kuser:** My spiritual life—by which I mean my relationship with God in private prayer and corporate worship—is

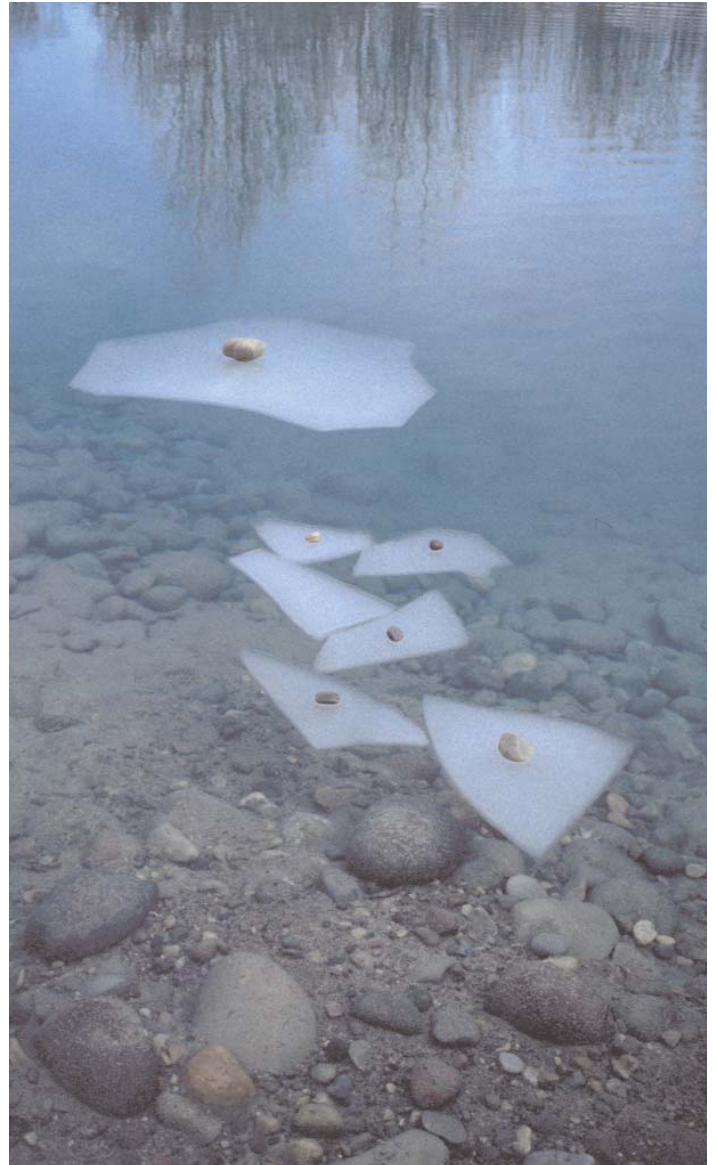
the underpinning of everything I do. It is the source. It is no more and no less important to my art-making than to any other aspect of my life. I don't think of my art-making as a spiritual practice particularly. I do think of it as a response to God's gifts to me, as a working out of my vocation. I do feel called to be an artist. What I've noticed is that the struggles I have in the studio are mirrored in other areas of my life. The same things come up everywhere and in everything. The studio is neither a refuge nor a theater. **Mallard:** When I make art, I am often thinking about what God is teaching me day by day. Some of those thoughts come out in images, marks, methods, metaphor, or otherwise. I guess the aspect of my spiritual journey I make most evident in my work is struggle and knowing



Left: *Time and Tides, 2000*. By Gloria Lamson. Installation series, Hawaii: Elemental interaction, beneath water, survey tape to hole in stone.



The Island Project, 1998. By Gloria Lamson. Installation series, Southeast Alaska: Seaweed hand in scratched doorway.



Interactions in Time and Place, 2000. By Gloria Lamson. Installation series, Wyoming: Elemental interaction, floating stones on broken ice.

the unknown. Some days I pray in my studio, but I don't consider it a ritual. If you can consider procrastination a ritual, I practice it.

Does your art make use of religious imagery or symbolism?

Bowden: Yes, my work uses some religious imagery and symbolism. Sometimes it is more visible than others, but it is infused with Christian and Judaic symbol or content. **Lamson:** I often use universal symbols such as lines, circles, crosses, spirals, squares, and triangles. I am interested in mythical frameworks, metaphoric forms, and spiritual meanings and implications in my work. **Mallard:** Early on in my work (as a teenager), I decided not to let Christian imagery dominate. Though I made reference to it in ways, I didn't want to

make work that appeared to have "a little bit of Jesus smeared on."

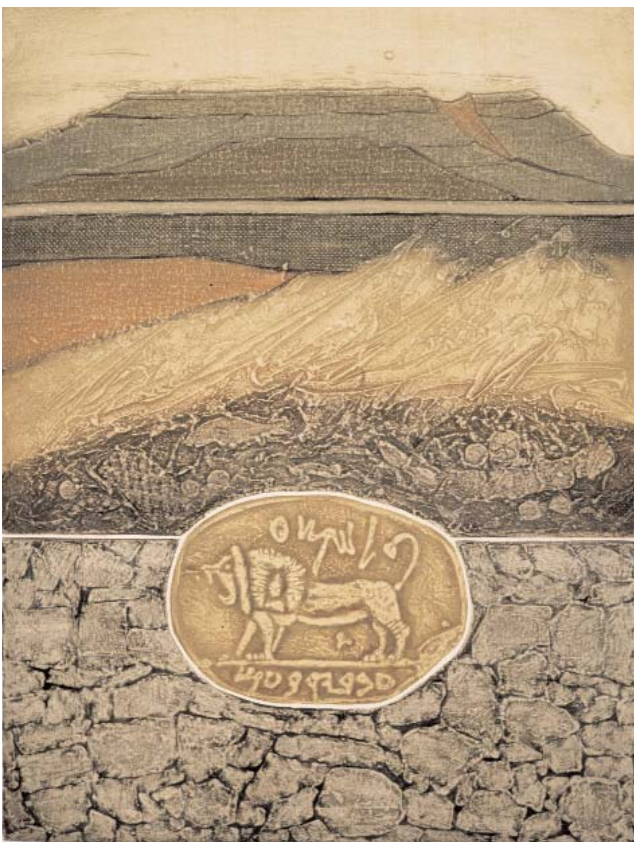
Mattix: It actually irritates me when Christian viewers limit their interpretation of my work by seeing it solely as an illustration of Scripture. Sometimes my imagery references Bible verses, but this is never intentional. For example, with my bird paintings, I did not set out to illustrate the Sermon on the Mount passage about the fallen sparrow. While walking around I found a dead sparrow, a dead robin, and a dead finch, so I painted them.

How does your conception of God or spirit show up in the making of your art, the process itself?

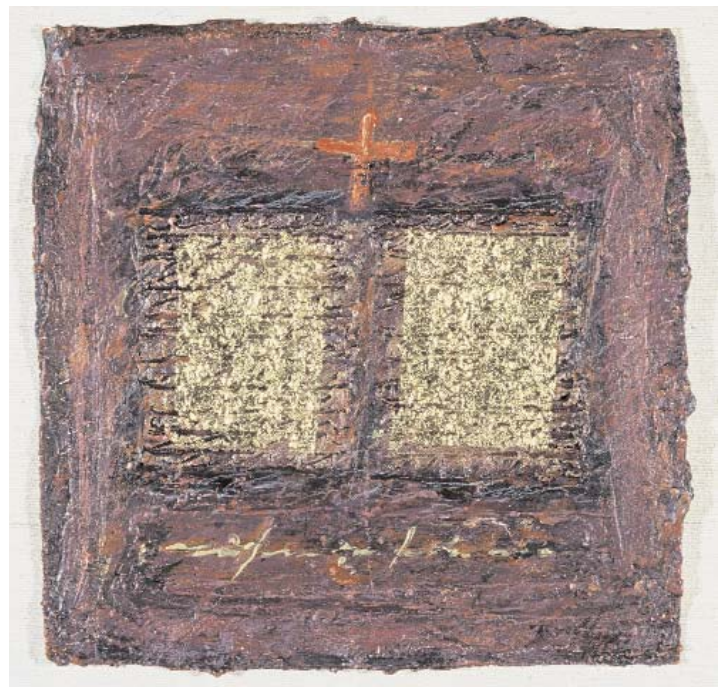
continued on page 6



Do This in Remembrance of Me, 1980. By Sandra Bowden. Collagraph mixed media, 16" x 24". Collection Vatican Museum of Contemporary Religious Art.



Tel Megiddo, 1983. By Sandra Bowden. Collagraph, 30" x 22".



Illuminations III, 1990. By Sandra Bowden. Acrylic mixed media, 10" x 10". "This piece contains allusions to illumination as one of many ways of recording the Word, but it also suggests stone surfaces."

Bowden: My love of theology has certainly impacted my work, and I view God as all-knowing, divine, and, most of all, One who communicates with us. This is why I have been so interested in the Bible and text. The Bible is one of the most important ways of our God communicating with us. Prayer and meditation would be others, but the Bible is the one constant, historically and personally. **Lamson:** The most profound source of spiritual reality surfacing in my work is when I experience what I think of as grace—a kind of simple joy, where my mind has become still and I feel very present, where there is no question, no thought except it is good. When I lose myself in the work, I find myself in this spiritual dimension. I think of art as a doorway through duality into this land of unity, where I can experience “what is” as love and beauty.

What makes a work of visual art authentically spiritual vs. glib, insubstantial, superficial, or sentimental? Is this quality any different from what makes good art, period?

Mallard: I think every creative endeavor bears a mark of God’s grace. I don’t know if I can discern or authenticate spirituality in art. I can look at the work and interpret its “face value” from my point of view. Learning more about the artist’s intentions, processes, and concept can expand my interpretation. **Markowitz:** To me, creativity is about surrendering to something larger than yourself and letting that compel you to do something you wouldn’t do without that interaction. This other thing, which is often confused with art, is really a process

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Sandra Bowden

Sandra Bowden lives in Chatham, Massachusetts, and exhibits throughout the country. She has been president of Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) from its inception, and says, “My life has been dramatically impacted by the example of other Christian artists.” Bowden’s art is a complex meditation on time, incorporating biblical and archaeological references, elements of language and text, inscribed artifacts, pages from antique Bibles, and musical scores and facsimiles. Long fascinated by “word as image,” she finds a source of mystery and personal iconography in the evolution of words and ideas made visible, recorded and presented historically in various ways. The result has been several series exploring and celebrating the gift of word. “This thing we call language has afforded us the opportunity to share the mind of another person across barriers of time and place.” Visit her website, www.sandrabowden.com.

Olivia Kuser

A member of St. Gregory’s, Olivia Kuser makes paintings that are both serene and haunting. She has spent many years painting the marshlands of San Francisco Bay, about which she says, “I often begin by painting small full-color oil studies on site using a portable field easel. I have found that I can gather more memorable visual information if I make a painting rather than take a photograph. As I stand there for several hours, I develop a sense impression of the place, beyond the visual, that is helpful to me when I return to the studio. On site, I begin the process of sifting through the welter of visual data that the landscape contains. The field studies are the first rough cut. Sometimes they are the direct source material for the studio work, and sometimes they support it more generally. They are a source of play and pleasure for me.” Visit Olivia’s website: www.oliviakuser.com.

continued on page 7



Detail of Angel, 2002–2003. By Michael Markowitz. Charcoal, pastel, and pigment on paper, 48" x 52".



Spit, 1994, by Olivia Kuser. Etching on panel, 24" x 30".

of craft and it doesn’t interest me at all. **Bowden:** All the principles of good art apply to any quality work. To add spiritual authenticity to a work is a more vague concept, but a real component of strong art. Good art illuminates, not just illustrates; it points to a truth that others only partially see or only momentarily grasp.

Most artists have a deep need for solitude and or isolation, yet there exists a need for community and audience. How does this apply in your art?

Mallard: I am an active member of a local church. Though my need for solitude is great, I also need community. As an artist I consider myself a “missionary” to non-art-receptive Christians and vice versa

to the art community. I found out about CIVA [Christians in the Visual Arts] in 1983 and have been involved since. Christianity doesn’t have much use for practicing contemporary artists, and the art world is skeptical of any artwork produced by a believer. Because of this, many Christian artists struggle for understanding and community. Connecting through CIVA helps build bridges to both worlds. **Lamson:** I question how much solitude my work and I really need. I know that my work grows out of focused quiet and out of connecting to the worlds within and around me. Perhaps I will be able to do this around other people someday, but right now I need to be alone—particularly to begin new work. **Kuser:** Finding

continued on page 8



the balance between solitude and community is a continual problem. Never solved, always under construction. **Markowitz:** For a good deal of my life I had trouble being alone, but in the last 10 years I've learned to really appreciate my solitude and what can happen there. The drawing studio I run satisfies my need for community. I like the sense of working in a group even if there isn't much talking going on. And I certainly love the interaction of teaching.

How much does religious art of the past influence the work you do now?

Lamson: Not much. I am more influenced by the prehistorical—

ancient sacred art, such as cave paintings, the standing stones, etc.—and contemporary work with a spiritual bent. **Mattix:** It always amazes me how my work tends to cycle through the church calendar—nativity, death, and resurrection are recurring themes. I am also powerfully gripped by artists such as Vermeer, who was not overtly religious but very, very spiritual in his use of light and shadow, the sense of mystery and his attention to the holy ordinary.

Is it a challenge for you professionally to identify yourself as a spiritual person or artist? Does it narrow the way your work is perceived by secular audiences?



Left: *Brainstorm, Imagination Incarnate/Incarnate Imagination, 1998*. By Michael Mallard. Acrylic and collage. 96" x 120".

The painting considers Christ's imagination; the underlying words are "A gift vivid and knowing, deep and lively—who can know it?" Made with a grant from the Pew Foundation. Above: *Detail of Holy Family, 1993*. By Michael Mallard. Acrylic and collage, 60" x 72".

Gloria Lamson

Washington State artist Gloria Lamson has worked in environmental art and photography in Alaska, Hawaii, Wyoming, Washington, Arizona, and California. Her work has included wrapping rocks and trees in muslin, activating fire to mark paper and stone, using flour to reveal wind movements, floating survey tape on water to register tidal changes, and stringing trees with webs to reveal luminous connections. For Lamson her studio is "a kind of sanctuary dedicated to the sacred purpose of bringing spiritual needs and desires into forms that support and nurture growth of consciousness. It's a place to give form to spiritual intention." Further describing her work: "Art invites and stimulates awareness, connecting the sacred and the mundane. It is a vehicle of exploration, a context and tool I use to link the physical and nonphysical worlds. Using materials found in nature or common manmade substances, I create temporary, time- and site-specific forms in natural or architectural environments, and document them with photographs." To see more work, visit www.artransforms.com and www.greenmuseum.org.

Michael Mallard

Painter Michael Mallard is professor of art and artist-in-residence at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. His works employ paint and collage in contemporary abstract surrealism with underlying commentary, and have been widely exhibited across the U.S. He says, "I approach my work as it represents our lives: layers of meaning developed through time. This compilation yields its quality of excessiveness. I address rather simple ideas that become complex through visual presentation." Mallard uses words as a part of his layering, explaining, "I started using words in my painting as a reaction to being labeled a 'narrative painter' in graduate school." More of Mallard's work can be seen at <http://www.uu.edu/personal/mmallard/> and at www.civa.org, email mmallard@uu.edu.

continued on page 15

Mattix: I don't know if I'm just chicken or if it is right for me to keep my Christian identity private. I want the work to speak for itself. One reason I'm glad to be a painter is that I can communicate the sacred without using words to people who would otherwise have their defenses up. **Bowden:** My art has never allowed me to hide because of its evident inclusion of scripture or reference to the Bible. The work has always included biblical text and in most cases, Hebrew scriptures. I have found ways to share that insight and interest without a sense of "preaching" but with honesty and integrity. **Kuser:** I worked for years before I could even say, "I am an artist." I certainly never say and don't think of myself as a "Christian artist." But I can and do say, "I am an artist and I am a practicing Christian."

How do you experience the public response to your work?

Mattix: Sometimes I worry that my work is appreciated because it's realistic and straightforward—that it lacks difficulty, nuance, and innovation. I think most of my grad school peers find my work a bit conservative. Part of the problem is that I am making emotional and spiritual paintings in a context that lacks the imaginative tools to talk about them. **Kuser:** I hate to exhibit. I feel terribly exposed. But I feel a duty to exhibit, beyond the obvious careerism of it. Art has spoken so powerfully to me in my life that exhibiting feels like a way that I too can enter into that conversation, a conversation that takes place beyond time and space and culture. You hope that what you have to say will one day be interesting to someone.

PRAYER AND THE CREATIVE FLOW

By Paul Fromberg

I discovered that when I painted, I was freed inwardly to be in the presence of God. There was nothing in this space but me and paint and God.

I began college in 1979 at Abilene Christian University. If you've never been to Abilene, Texas, I can describe it simply: it is a pure environment. I'm talking about West Texas pure—vast sky, piercing sunlight, severe vistas. There is also a purity and severity of character in Abilene. When I attended school, there were no liquor stores in the county. Not that it mattered much: A.C.U. is a Church of Christ college, so besides a prohibition on consuming alcohol, there was to be no dancing, no smoking, no sex, no shorts. Purity of life was prescribed for each student.

Yet Abilene was also the place where I learned how to paint. I began college as an art major, and it was through painting that I learned how to survive in a place of severe purity.

I only lasted 18 months in Abilene. Depressed spiritually and physically, I dropped out in the fall of 1980. I might not have made it at all if it had not been for the spiritual discipline of painting. It was in that peculiar process of applying paint to board and canvas that I came to a mature understanding of my relationship to God in prayer. It is not too much of a stretch to say that painting taught me how to pray.

Before I began painting, I'd always had trouble praying. Prayer—at least as I heard people speak of it—was never an easy discipline for me. Something about the empty space required for prayer filled me with a combination of dread and fatigue. It was as if I'd be judged on the quality of my praying even before the substance of my prayer had formed in my mind. It was a frustrating state of affairs.

But then I learned a way of praying that made sense to me. Prayer was in the creative process. I discovered that when I painted, I was freed inwardly to be in the presence of God. There was nothing in this space but me and paint and God. I was at once completely present in the moment and completely unconscious of myself.

People who paint or who take on some other physical discipline describe this state as “flow consciousness.” One enters a flow state when one is fully absorbed in an activity during which one loses the sense of time and has a feeling of great satisfaction. When I painted, I became completely involved in the process and found that my ego—the self I display publicly—would fall away. Time flew by. Every action, every brushstroke, every movement of hand and arm and body seemed to follow inevitably from the previous action, and I discovered stillness.

As I found my vocation shifting from the visual arts to the priestly arts, I have continued my creative work. Although less of my time is taken up with painting, I manage to pray this way using other media, namely icon painting and large-scale installation. In moving from the studio to the “pastor's study,” taking time for creative process keeps my praying alive.

On the surface, icon painting and large-scale installation could not be more different. Icon painting is about smallness and perfection of line, more akin to making jewelry than to painting a canvas. Installation art is about largeness and immediacy, more akin to printing a billboard than to painting a canvas. Yet working in both media I experience the same sense of prayerful attention that I learned so long ago in Abilene.

When I am at work on an icon, I am aware of two modes of prayer. The first is the familiar sense of “flow consciousness.” Gilding a halo or floating paint on a face may take an hour of intense concentration, yet time does not seem important. Whether I work for five minutes or five hours, I am aware of being present in a moment that is out of time. Sitting before an evolving holy image, my attention is concentrated, but I do not sense fatigue or restlessness. My hand, my arm, and my body are controlled but not stupefied or dulled.

The second mode is much more subtle. The tradition teaches that when one paints an icon, one is not just objectifying the person; rather, one is in communion with the person being represented. In fact, the icon painter is encouraged to stay in communion with the subject continuously through the creative process. I have found that this communion continues after I leave the image. It is not at all unusual for me to dream of painting while working on an icon.

When I am at work on an installation piece, my prayer is quite different. My first major piece—a 10-by-20-foot banner printed on sheer fabric—was commissioned by the Spirituality Conference of Trinity Institute, an outreach of Trinity Episcopal Church in New York. In 2002 the conference met at Camp Allen, outside Houston, holding services in a huge space that was essentially devoid of large-scale art. Since the purpose of the conference was to learn about spiritual practice in community I chose an image that would serve as both a devotional focus for a large group and a metaphor for the spiritual life of each participant. Later, in the summer of 2003, it was installed at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

I named the piece *Deisis*, after the original image it reproduced a section of a mosaic in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul's vast and ancient Byzantine church. It is a word that points to the intercessory nature of prayer, and the image tells us that we are intercessors with Christ, praying for the well-being of the universe. Although in the banner I used only the central figure from the mosaic, in its original setting two other figures are visible: Mary and St. John the Baptist. Each stands in orientation to the central figure of Christ and is in prayerful dialogue with Christ, who in turn is in dialogue with the viewer and with the Divine Father. Thus the viewer is invited to come with her or his prayers before these saints, who continually pray to God.

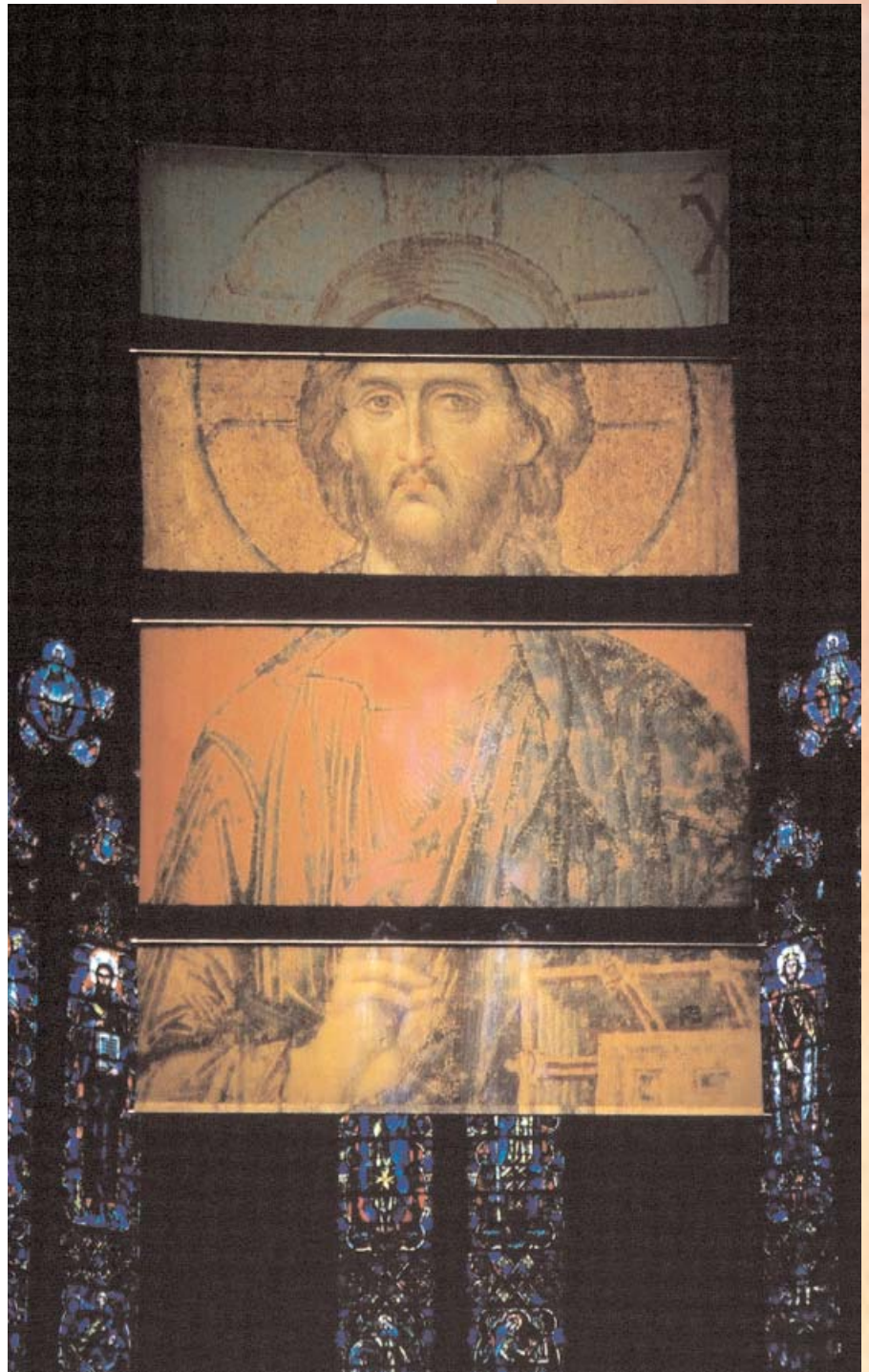
Since I chose to focus on the Christ figure, I used the medium to help convey the metaphor. The sheer fabric allows one to view the piece from either side; light passes through it freely. Just as light passes through the image, so our prayers are presented transparently to God. In addition, my representation of the *Deisis* is divided into four fields of color, reminding us that we all pray to God in our own way. Each of the four panels composing the banner is separated by an 18-inch-wide strip of black netting, giving the impression that each panel floats independently of the others. And although the image is divided into four parts, it is still a unity held together by the image of Christ.

My prayer during the creation of this piece was much more frantic than the prayer I experience in icon painting. In painting an icon I am patterning my technique on one perfected centuries ago. I am consulting with an individual and working with naturally sublime materials. With *Deisis* I was inventing the creative process as I went along. I was working with a large group of people, wrestling with computers and inkjet printers and sewing machines.

And yet, even in the frantic, extroverted creation of *Deisis* I found that I was doing what I did not know I could do. Without knowing how to create this work of art, and quite beyond my own perceived abilities, I found resources of energy and insight that guided me in the creative process. And when it was finally installed high above the altar at Grace Cathedral, I understood something about prayer that I had not experienced before. Prayer is about the ability to release anxiety and frenetic energy to the God who is sovereign over both.

My life of prayer and my life in creative process are far from their conclusion. I know that I will continue to learn more about prayer, and about the One to whom my prayer is directed, as I use my gifts of creative ingenuity, power, and skill mindfully and passionately. And no matter where life will take me, I know that I will be able to pray.

Paul Fromberg, B.A., M.Div., C.I.T.S., is director of Youth and Family Ministry at St. Gregory's and has been a friend of the congregation since 1998. He is passionate about leading diverse people in spiritual formation. When he was a kid, Paul wanted to be a chef; later he wanted to be an artist. He finally settled on studying marriage and family therapy and working as a pastor, preacher, and teacher.



Deisis, 2003. By Paul Fromberg. Banner printed on sheer fabric, 10' x 20', installation at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco.

EVERY ANGEL IS TERRIBLE

(Lines from "Second Elegy")

Every angel is terrible.
And still, alas
 knowing all that
I serenade you
 you almost deadly
 birds of the soul.
Where are the days of Tobias
 when one of these
 brightest of creatures
stood
 at the simple front door
 disguised a little
for the trip
 and not so frightening
 (a young man
like the one
 who looked curiously
 out at him).
If the dangerous archangel
 took one step now
 down toward us
from behind the stars
 our heartbeats
 rising like thunder
would kill us.
 Who are you?
Creation's spoiled darlings
 among the first to be perfect...
 pockets of essence
ecstasy shields
 tumultuous storms
 of delightful feelings
then suddenly
 separate
 mirrors
gathering the beauty
 that streamed away from them
 back to their own faces again.

— Rainer Maria Rilke,
translated by David Young
(from *Duino Elegies*, copyright
1978 by W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.)





Michael Markowitz

Originally from New York City, 53-year-old Michael Markowitz has been drawing and teaching since the early 1990s. For the past 12 years he has taught at one of the largest private drawing studios in the San Francisco Bay Area, attended weekly by more than 100 artists. “The essence of what I teach, and the context out of which my work is created,” he says, “focuses on process vs. product. It is about the struggle to engage experience in as pure and intense a way as possible, freed of preconception, formula, habit, and intention.” Markowitz’s drawings shown here depart from his usual style of drawing from the figure. They are inspired by Rilke’s “Second Elegy,” in particular the line “Every angel is terrible.” Markowitz observes, “It seems so odd to say every angel is terrifying—almost like an antispiritual statement—but I think Rilke is talking about the truth embodied in what an angel represents. That kind of spiritual purity manifested in the material is something that does threaten us.” Find more on the artist at users.cn.com/mcm.dnai/.

Opposite: Angel #1, 2002. Charcoal, pastel, and pigment on paper. Left: Angel, 2002–2003. Charcoal, pastel, and pigment on paper. Below: Detail of Angel, 2002–2003. Charcoal, pastel, and pigment on paper. All originals 48" x 52". All, by Michael Markowitz.



THE SHEER PLEASURE OF LOOKING *continued from page 3*

What was restored to me was the sheer pleasure of looking—of seeing without greed but with hunger, without thinking, “Can I make a painting out of this?”

studio windows at home since the room was originally a bathroom with windows set up above head height.) The Ucross studio had the most fabulous easel with a crank to raise and lower the painting. (My easel at home is smaller and flimsier, and the paintings are held up by tension; I have wrecked several when big, heavy paintings dropped on the stand while my brush was still touching the surface.)

Clearly, artists had been consulted when the studios were built because everything I needed was there. Track lighting, plus halogen lamps on stands. A sink. Three hollow-core doors with light-weight sawhorses so that the artist could set up tables and move them around easily as she wanted. A rolling taboret for paint and solvents. I have never had *such* a good studio. In fact, I’d never even seen such a good studio. As the first day unfolded and I saw where I would sleep and eat and where I could take walks, I began to trust this place.

Everything I needed was there. Solitude. Silence. Wild animals. Three good meals a day. Companionship at dinner. Beauty. Stars. Things I didn’t know I needed were given to me, such as not ever being interrupted. It was the rule of the place that no one was to knock on your studio door unless you were in immediate physical danger. Lunch was brought in an insulated bag and quietly left outside the door at a certain time so as not to disturb you. With such a sense of being protected and nourished I was able to confront the big fear of not painting.

What was restored to me was the sheer pleasure of looking—of seeing without greed but with hunger, without thinking, “Can I make a painting out of this?”

While walking one afternoon, I startled a great horned owl out of its roost, an owl I’d been glimpsing almost daily, hearing its call at twilight. It didn’t fly very far away. I trained my field glasses on it and watched. Great horned owls are massive birds, and this one came close to filling the circular field of my binoculars. The owl was sitting on the branch of a cottonwood with its back towards me, its head twisted around so that it could look at me. After a few minutes it turned around on the branch to get a better look at me. It yawned, charmingly pink inside the beak. It blinked. It scratched its face with its huge feathered foot. (I saw the sole of its foot.) It groomed its foot with its beak. The “horns” ruffled in the breeze.

After 30 minutes, my shoulders exhausted from holding the glasses up to my face, I spoke aloud to the owl, asking it to please fly away, as I couldn’t stop looking but my shoulders were awfully tired. It dropped from the branch like a stone, spread its wings, and flew soundlessly to a low stump. Even closer.

Great horned owls have feathered eyelids. I know because I saw them as the owl slowly closed its yellow eyes and dozed in front of me. It looked at me and I looked at it for another 50 minutes. The spell was broken only when another resident came careening down the creek-side on a Foundation bicycle. Finally, I could put down the glasses.

For a month time seemed to dilate. I took two walks a day on the ranch’s 22,000 acres. I read nine books. I wrote about 30 letters and wrote in my journal daily. And I made 21 small paintings. Which I didn’t have to show to anyone. The Ucross Foundation, unlike some residencies, doesn’t require the artists to donate a work, give a lecture or a workshop, or prove in any way that they have been productive. The Foundation acts in faith that by

supporting the artist they will support the art-making. That faith and generosity staggered me, soothed me, supported me, restored me.

Two months ago I called my dealer, thanked her for all the work she had done for me over the last 10 years, and told her that I didn’t want to exhibit my work for the near future. It was a terrifying thing to do, but I feel that my work is changing, and it needs privacy. I want to create some of the same conditions that Ucross gave to me when I couldn’t give them to myself—including the freedom to fail and to make paintings that don’t work.

Olivia Kuser is an artist living in San Francisco. At the present time, her work can be seen only at www.oliviakuser.com.

Note: For impressions of Olive’s week in the icon painting class, see our online journal at www.godsfriends.org.



Rain, 1995. By Olivia Kuser. Etching on panel, 30" x 48".

Christen Mattix

Mattix, a painter and MFA student at the San Francisco Art Institute, makes paintings that contemplate what is closest to us: a bird's nest found in the back yard, a mother rat and her young, the part in a woman's hair. She concentrates the viewer's attention on extraordinary images from the "ordinary" world. Her primary concern is to find a still point from which to engage life's flux. That still point gives meaning to chaos, revealing a mysterious beauty in its organic messiness. Mattix wants "to make work that moves my viewers and me without lapsing into sentimental slush or meaningless chaos." About her paintings of dead birds she says, "I thought a long time about how to make a contemporary pietà for a secular audience. I wanted to tap into that deep feeling—compassion and grief—expressed in a traditional pietà but in a way that would move all people, not just Christians." Contact her at rumagoo@yahoo.com.



Detail of Clowning Around the Throne of God, 1991. By Michael Mallard. Acrylic and collage, 5' x 8'.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, a fourth-century bishop, theologian, and patron of St. Gregory's Church, saw life as unending progress towards discovering God at work among humanity, and sin as refusal to keep growing in this discovery. In this journal, which takes its name from his writings, we aim to further Gregory's vision by featuring two kinds of work:

- ⊕ essays on liturgy and church practice, focusing on fresh and ancient approaches to corporate worship that honor human experience as an opening to God;
- ⊕ writing and art by people who are searching for truth in their lives.

We are committed to the sharing of authentic personal experience as opposed to ideas or opinions. We welcome the voices of Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no particular faith.

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This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because we fear punishment, like slaves; not to do good because we expect repayment, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by enforcing some business deal. On the contrary, disregarding all those good things which we do hope for and which God has promised us, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.

GREGORY OF NYSSA



In Weakness, 2001. By Christen Mattix. Oil on panel, 48" x 60".



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