

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of attending a conference on the theme *Artists as Reconcilers*. The event was put on by International Arts Movement (www.iamny.org). In an age when diversity seems intent on bringing division the gaps are wide and often attended by fear and control. The biblical theme of reconciliation cuts across the grain of cultural realities and offers a hopeful perspective. What role art and the artist can play in fostering reconciliation is worth thinking about. Something of what needs to happen was expressed well in a line from W.H. Auden's *As I Walked out one Evening*. Near the end of that poem he writes: "You must love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart." There is something leveling about this line, like the gospel it invites us to see that crookedness is not just the other person's problem. Art can be put to reconciling work because unlike disposable entertainment it has the power to transform us.

A little time spent with the news will serve to underline the claim that we seem to have lost touch with our full humanity. In addition to the often angry divisions among us there is the onslaught of technology which keeps us at one remove from others in the

human community. I think it was Robert Frost who said that "poetry is a way of remembering what would impoverish us if we forget". Art can and must be engaged to provide just such reminders – signs of hope, threads of order and resources for

meaning – important work in a world where despair, chaos and an undercurrent of nihilism seem to find their way into so much that we do and touch our very identities.

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Barbara Februar, *Jairus' daughter*, 24 x 24, acrylic on canvas
Part of series: *healings and resurrections of Jesus*

Why I paint

In the last few years I have started to accept and appreciate God's gift to me. Painting has become an exercise in letting go and in perseverance, using trial and error, different techniques and a variety of subjects. I love painting! And I love drawing figures. There is something fascinating about drawing or painting figures. A few simple lines suddenly become a person or a crowd of people, who instantly determine the perspective in a painting. To the observer they provide a way to 'enter in', to become one of the figures. It

is an invitation to experience a painting in a new way. I find this especially significant with illustrations of stories from the Bible. One gets drawn into the story and becomes part of it. That way I can be with the people watching Lazarus walk out of the grave or seeing Jairus' daughter come to life again or I can ask myself: how would I feel if the unclean woman would appear in the crowd next to me, desperate for healing? This is why I love painting: it takes me to places I can't go to otherwise.

Barbara Februar, Vancouver, BC.
www.barbarafebruar.com ■

News & Notes

We hear a lot about Mozart these days – well I do – and I expect many of you do as well.

After all this year is the 250th anniversary of his birth. In recognition of this auspicious occasion I returned to a book I had read many years ago. I refer to the little book by theologian Karl Barth on this genius of a composer. It was a daily routine for the great twentieth century theologian to listen to the music of Mozart. What struck Barth about Mozart is the mixture of joy and pain in his music and yet his compositions



were never a matter of the self expression of the composer. "What occurs in Mozart", says Barth, "is ... an upsetting of the balance, a turning in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever present Nay." It makes one think of Easter weekend where in a decisive way the Yea rings louder than the Nay.

Modern Painters magazine

Keeping up on the art scene is a major challenge. I don't pretend to be able to do it – not in the visual arts let alone any other areas like music or dance or drama. For some time now I have made it a habit to pick up a copy of *Modern Painters*. This is a British magazine and it gives the reader a good sense of what is going on in the world of visual arts. As well as keeping me informed it educates my eye to current artistic images. The March 2006 issue carries a self portrait of Peter Doig on the cover done specifically for the magazine. Born in Edinburgh in 1959 Doig grew up in Canada from 1966 to 1978 living just outside Montreal. He returned there in 1997 for a short time but now lives in Trinidad. As well as his geographical

environment influencing his work he acknowledges that imagery from film has been an influence as well; "I have never really been interested in inventing my own figures so they become like a signature element of my work. I'd rather they were somehow grounded in a type of reality that we all know." His works on paper are on show at the Art Gallery of Ontario March 22 to June 18, 2006. In that same issue of *Modern Painters* there is a photographic essay of film director Robert Altman who received a life achievement award at the Academy Awards ceremony on March 6 of this year. The brief article tells us that for the moment Altman has turned his directing skills to the stage – the Old Vic in London to be

exact – and the play is a British premiere of Arthur Miller's *Resurrection Blues* – it plays there until April 22. I don't know this play of the late Arthur Miller but am curious about what it might have to say.

Conferences

Signs are afoot that "Beauty" is back. This is a slippery notion and one that calls for careful attention. Wheaton College will host a conference on the subject of *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, April 6 to 8, – a project of the Theology department. There are many recent titles dealing with beauty. For example, the famed Italian author Umberto Eco published a book some years ago titled *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, but has just recently published a more comprehensive and richly illustrated work *History of Beauty*, Rizzoli: New York 2005.

Trinity Western University will host its first Verge Series Arts Conference May 4–7 2006. The theme for this conference is *(Be)longing: Art and Identity in an Age of Anxiety*. The conference intends to generate discussion which links art with important movements in culture such as globalization, issues around difference, whether racial, social or religious and the social consequences of these deep social changes. These changes have again attuned us to the reality that our identity is not found introspectively through "knowing yourself" but is found through our being in the world. Have a look at the website: verge.the-outpost.ca

Canadian Art magazine

Canada's premier art magazine has in its most recent issues profiled two cities where art is getting a lot of attention. The winter 2005 issue gave us a glimpse into the visual arts in Calgary. Where the Stampede looms large there is still a place for contemporary visual art. Alberta has its own Biennial and the Alberta College of Art and Design is flourishing. The positive economic climate in Alberta is a key factor in strengthening the presence and influence of art in Calgary. Though not noted in the magazine Corps Bara Dance Theatre (an Imago project) contributes to Calgary's culture scene as does Fire Exit Theatre. The other city profiled in the spring 2006 issue of *Canadian Art* is Berlin. Dubbed the New York of Europe Berlin has become home for a number of Canadian artists some of whom are the focus of articles in this issue. These cities represent a sign of the times – a burgeoning interest in the arts and increasing numbers of energetic "creators" who are making a difference in their urban settings.

John Terpstra

In the last issue of this newsletter we noted John Terpstra's new work *The Boys: Or Waiting for the Electrician's Daughter*. The book was short-listed for the Charles Taylor prize for non-fiction. Though the book did not win the prize it received high praise for its elegant style and compelling story. Terpstra is busy reading here and there across the country and may soon be coming to your town or city. His book deals with the perennial problem of human suffering and retells a story in which grace loomed large.

New Course

Imago's Executive Director will be teaching a course titled *Theology and the Arts* in the Summer School at Emmanuel College – Toronto School of Theology – July 3 to 13, 2006. The course will explore the links between theology and the arts, review current literature on theology aesthetics and discuss the place of the arts in the faith community. www.vicu.utoronto.ca/English/Emmanuel-College.html

Blue Like Jazz Live

Imago project *Blue Like Jazz Live* received a grant this past year from the Bridgeway Foundation. From the many projects that receive grants from Bridgeway ten have been nominated for an award for Non-Profit Innovation. *Blue Like Jazz Live* is one of the 10 nominees and we congratulate them on this distinguished recognition. The awards ceremony will take place in mid-April. ■

Errata

The website address for visual artist Maria Gabankova should have read www.paintinggalleries.net



Drama Teams

Recently I had a conversation with Val Lieske Co-founder and Artistic Director of *Fire Exit Theatre* in Calgary. What came up in our discussion was the good and

efficient way that drama (art) can address issues that are common to persons whose lives and beliefs are very different. The example we talked about was a dramatic piece on the subject of divine absence. The performance was called *Absence* and included perspectives of both a theist and a non-theist each of whom in different ways knew something of the experience of divine absence.

Drama has the capacity to bring the familiar to us in a fresh way. Not long ago I met Alison Siewert who is on staff with InterVarsity in the Toronto office. Though I am not able to tell you all that she does in that role I can tell you that she has a passionate interest in drama and a wealth of experience in the dramatic arts. While music has been the art of choice for the church, drama has in recent years also been welcomed into the sanctuary. Alison has compiled two very useful books on the dramatic arts and the church. *Drama Team Handbook* provides a wealth of practical information on such topics as writing scripts, acting and directing. The material in this work is instructive and insightful. The pieces are short and to the point. Actress Nina Thiel along with well known actor Bruce Kuhn (artist in residence at Regent College this year) collaborate on a short essay titled *Bringing the Word to Life*. What contributors to this volume are clear about is that they are not advocates of drama that is “preachy” or mere “propaganda” Art is not meant to manipulate the audience rather it serves to awaken us,



make us curious, reveal our inner lives remind us of our foolishness – our humanity – and ultimately to change us. In addition to all this the book includes scripts for 14 performance pieces. The other book *Drama Team Sketchbook* contains twelve different scripts each based on a biblical text but not immediately recognizable as such. This is a book that offers some good models for script writing and fine illustrations of how to adapt a text for a contemporary audience.

Alison Siewert is also involved in a theatre performance of Mark’s Gospel. To find out more: www.ransomthedonkey.com ■

Sanctuary Ministries

Sanctuary Ministries, located at 25 Charles Street East, in the heart of downtown Toronto, is a Christian charitable organization that seeks to establish and develop holistic, inclusive and healthy community. We welcome people, many of whom are or have been homeless, who have known much rejection and abuse. In addition to offering the basic needs of food, shelter and health care, Sanctuary seeks to minister to the whole person by providing a variety of programming including music, drama and visual arts.

Recently, we have undertaken to set up a working arts studio. This will be an apprenticeship/mentorship program aimed at redefining identity through the creative process. Some of our objectives for this program include:

- The opportunity to choose creativity over destruction
- Skills training
- Showing/ selling individuals work
- Giving/finding voice through art
- Awareness of self, others and environment through art
- Establishing a cooperative studio

We are looking for individuals or groups to donate funds or sponsor equipment for our new space. Some specific items we are looking to purchase include:

- A new or slightly used wet/dry belt sander
- A Diamond Max Deluxe glass grinder with router and flat disk
- A new or slightly used screen printing exposure table

These are just a few of the items we would like to have as integral components of a carefully thought out multi disciplinary visual arts training program including pottery, glass work, painting and printmaking.

Sharon Tiessen
sharont@sanctuaryministries.on.ca ■

Art and Plumbing

“The Christian’s art must be Christian in a deep sense, showing the fruits of the Spirit in a positive mentality and excitement for the greatness of the life we were given, but that does not mean the subjects have to be ‘Christian’ in a narrow way. *The Brandenburg Concertos* by Bach are no less Christian than his *St. Matthew Passion* or Rembrandt’s *Jewish Bride* than his biblical subjects. Indeed, to ask the artist to be an evangelist is a total misunderstanding of the meaning of art and, for that matter of other human activities. We are Christians whether we sleep, eat, work very concentratedly on solving a problem; whatever we are doing, we do as God’s children. Our Christianity is not only for pious moments, our religious acts. So to put it into a metaphor, art should not be compared with preaching. The best work of art would still be bad preaching. It

may be compared with teaching, but the teacher often has to speak of mathematics, geography, history, botany and sometimes if rarely, about religion. But the best comparison is possibly with the plumber. Just as plumbing is totally indispensable in our homes while we are rarely aware of it, so art fulfils an important function in our lives, in creating the atmosphere in which we live, in giving us the words to speak, in offering us the framework in which we can see and grasp things, say a landscape, even without noticing it. Art is rarely propaganda, but it has been very influential in shaping the thought-forms of our times, the values people cherish. So the mentality that speaks out in art is important. Its greatest influence may be right there where it is most like plumbing and we are not aware of it.”

Hans Rookmaaker
 – from *Art Needs No Justification* ■



The Risen Lord, by He Qi, China

Artists as Reconcilers

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Art is capable of creating new conversations, conversations that will nudge us along to the restoration of shalom, conversations that will serve to dispel the darkness and replace our fears with a lyric of hope. To be sure art is capable of other things less desirable.

Many contend that modernity holds freedom as its hallmark. The social expression of freedom is commonly found in *transgression*. The assumption is that boundaries hem us in while freedom keeps us from the stifling reality of the boundary – freedom preserves us from the “oppressive” limits that hold us back. If it is right to say that transgressiveness is a modern project then reconciliation is not a modern project, so argued theologian Miroslav Volf in his conference address. Reconciliation requires that we acknowledge boundaries.

It is commonly said that art has nothing to do with religion – in fact this claim finds concrete expression in the art of the late 20th century. Why make such a claim. Well, it is argued, art is transgressive while religion is conservative and so they have no common ground. That art would affirm a transgressive stance and hold to the modern critique of boundary advocating instead freedom is a surprising move. I understand the appeal of freedom – the rugged individualist following personal preferences – but art in its very nature is a boundary sort of discipline. There is no art without line – whether a musical line, a dance line a poetic line or a painterly line.

He Qi, artist

It is a common lament of mine that seminaries in Canada pay little or no attention to the arts. Oh there are some exceptions but by and large art make no appearance in these hallowed halls and classrooms of theological study. So I must note that the two Anglican colleges at Toronto School of Theology, Wycliffe and Trinity partnered in hosting Chinese Christian Artist He Qi.

He Qi is a quiet man with a broad smile and that gentle Chinese demeanor. He is a professor at Nanjing Union Seminary in China and serves as an adjunct professor in the philosophy department of the University. His

Makoto Fujimura the founding director of International Arts Movement told a story of a Zen Master he knew. He asked this Zen Master who his favourite artist was and the surprising reply was Georges Rouault. (Rouault was a deeply religious Catholic painter in the early 20th century). Why Rouault? was the response. The answer came, “His lines carry the weight of life”. There is in this perceptive response an important truth about boundaries. Somehow those lines which modern notions of freedom wants to erase are essential to human social and personal identity. Take them away and the result is an amorphous whole which is more likely to bring anxiety than comfort or hope.

The great challenge to the Christian in our culture including the artist is to articulate boundaries which do not oppress or hem in but serve a liberating purpose and make reconciliation possible. Put another way art which is transgressive tears down – when what is needed is to build up. The creation story in Genesis clearly articulates acts of separation. What we need is a doctrine of creation which celebrates boundaries, boundaries tempered by the grace found in the story of redemption and the hope found in the ongoing work of the Spirit in the world.

John Franklin, *Executive Director*
133 Southvale Drive, Toronto, ON M4G 1G6
416-421-8745 franklin@ultratech.net
www.imago-arts.on.ca

doctoral dissertation compared the presence of Buddhist art and Christian art in Chinese society. He was one of the first scholars to take up the subject of religion and art after the Cultural Revolution in China. This artist is deeply committed to the promotion of Christian art in China. For He Qi it is very important that Christian art and the Christian story be a presence in the Chinese culture.

In a conversation with the artist I noted that all the work that was on display for the Toronto visit and all the work on his website had Christian subject matter and I asked if he did other sorts of work, landscapes or abstract work. His answer was telling, he paused and said “Life is too short, I must do Christian art”. In his lecture in Toronto he noted how traditional Chinese art is without color, it is black and white. Clearly influence by a Christian doctrine of creation He Qi has a very colourful palette. One could say that among other things his paintings are a celebration of colour.

The style of his work is iconic, and seems to fit with what we call folk art. The images are strong but gentle. One can discern the influence of those who have gone before in art history and at the same time see qualities that draw on indigenous Chinese culture. He Qi is very clear about his desire to give his work a Chinese identity. He resists any facile adoption of styles from the past and is a keen advocate of being contemporary. But as an art historian he knows that one cannot and should not ignore the past.

It is interesting to know that in far off Nanjing there is an artist teaching in a Christian Seminary. I learned that students go to seminary right after “middle school”. The first four years provide the foundation for their next three years of theological training. There seems to be a certain wisdom in including art history as a foundation for the study of Christian theology. Art after all is a rich reservoir of cultural and religious history not to say a resource for theological and biblical awareness.

He Qi’s commitment to doing only Christian subject matter is a practice that would find resistance among Christians in some artistic quarters in North America. Cultural differences clearly bear on this matter and it is a subject worth discussing for those in the Christian arts community in the west. Whatever the case He Qi is a man with a deep sense of Christian calling and a very special artistic gift. www.heqiarts.com ■