

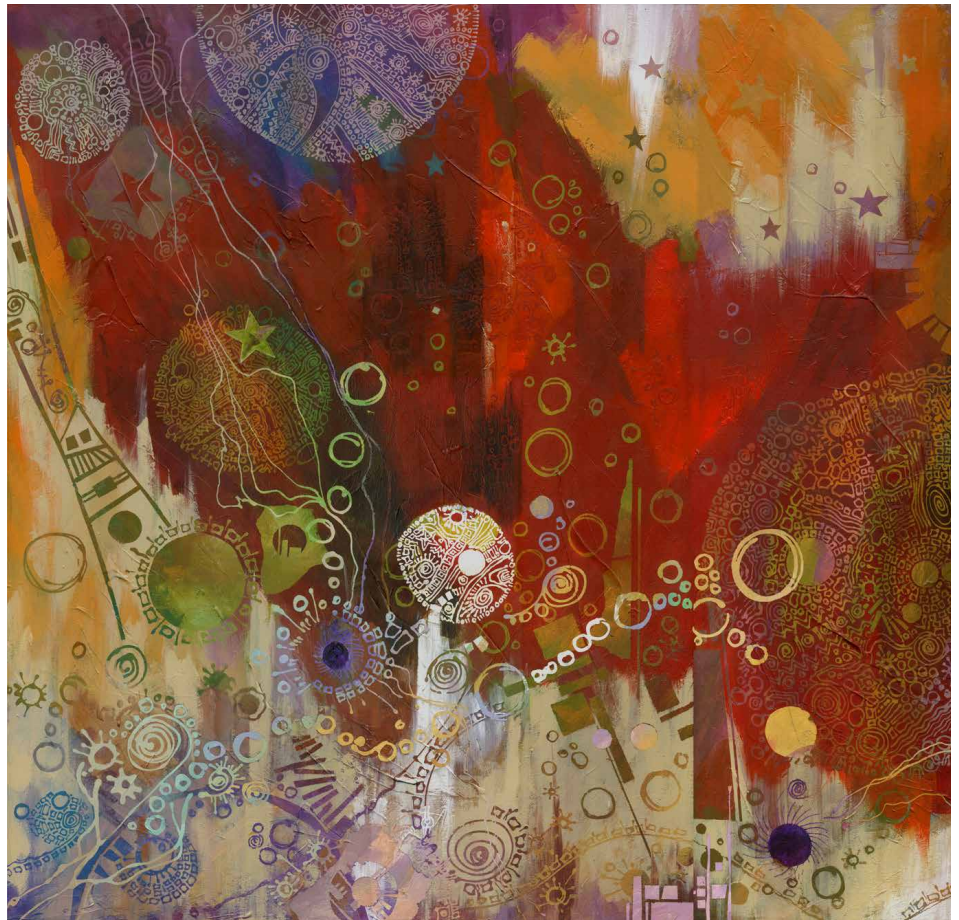
**W**e are in a time where questions of origin are common. Science probes the universe in search of beginnings, while culture critics look afresh at how the creative impulse and imagination shape the values and practices of a society. And the world of the arts has many seeking to discern the mystery of our power to make things – things beautiful, meaningful and inspiring. The human psyche is bent toward an inquiry about where we have come from and why we do what we do and from whence comes the universal inclination to make things. Exploring creativity, what it means and how it works is a challenging undertaking. But the effort to gain some clarity about creativity is much needed now that the term “creativity” is being over employed to apply to an ever widening range of activities. The enterprise of human making is inescapable, it is woven into the fabric of what it means to be human and ultimately – as I see it – draws from the One who has made all things and set them in motion.

Though historically Western notions of creativity have been commonly connected with a religious or theological understanding of the world, in a secular culture the

agenda entails that all such connections be severed. So in the absence of religious assumptions, including belief in a Creator – how we understand creativity takes a quite different shape. However it appears that

efforts to recover the link between the human gift of “making” and historic theological themes are becoming more common. If one adopts the view that there is indeed

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*Alliance (2012), acrylic mixed-media on canvas, 90" × 40" (detail shown here)*

## Yisa Akinbolaji

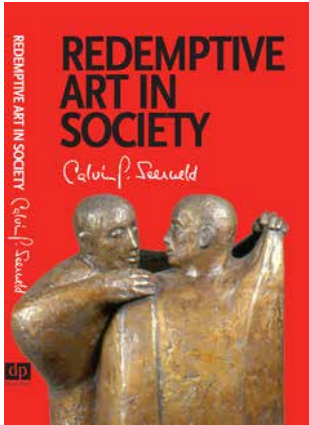
To see the world through Yisa Akinbolaji’s sensibility is to see it particularized through an array of emotions articulated in a play of light, color and form. Each work is realized with restraint, dignity, and not a small amount of visual poetry and visual references to his Nigerian heritage.

What becomes abundantly clear in looking, as a whole, on Yisa Akinbolaji’s artworks, is the artist’s indispensable capacity to attain a certain emotional involvement. These include attempts at defining a sense of history, or memory and of the self. He resists any temptation to sentimentalize his work – and

chooses instead to engage the tensions and provide us with an integrative wholeness that carries with it a sense of order and hope. (adapted from John Austin’s comments in the catalogue for the show *From My Black-Etched Pot* – at New Art Gallery New York.)

One is readily drawn to the boldness of his colours, the intricacy of the design and what seems like never-ending allusions to things that are familiar. This Winnipeg artist notes how his work is shaped by his experiences in partnership with the dance of his imagination. It is work that captures a celebratory note as though it is an expression of thanksgiving, an overflow of joy.





*Redemptive Art in Society*  
Calvin Seerveld, Dort Press 2014

Dort Press is to be commended for undertaking to publish six volumes of the “sundry writings and occasional lectures” of Calvin Seerveld. All six volumes appeared this past spring edited by Jon H. Kok. Seerveld’s contributions to the discussions on art and Christian faith are significant for their wisdom and insight and have been widely influential both within and beyond the commun-

ity of believers. The volumes are not numbered and each addresses a particular theme with essays written over a career of teaching and lecturing. This particular volume consists of essays, nearly all of which were written since 1995 the year the author retired from teaching at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

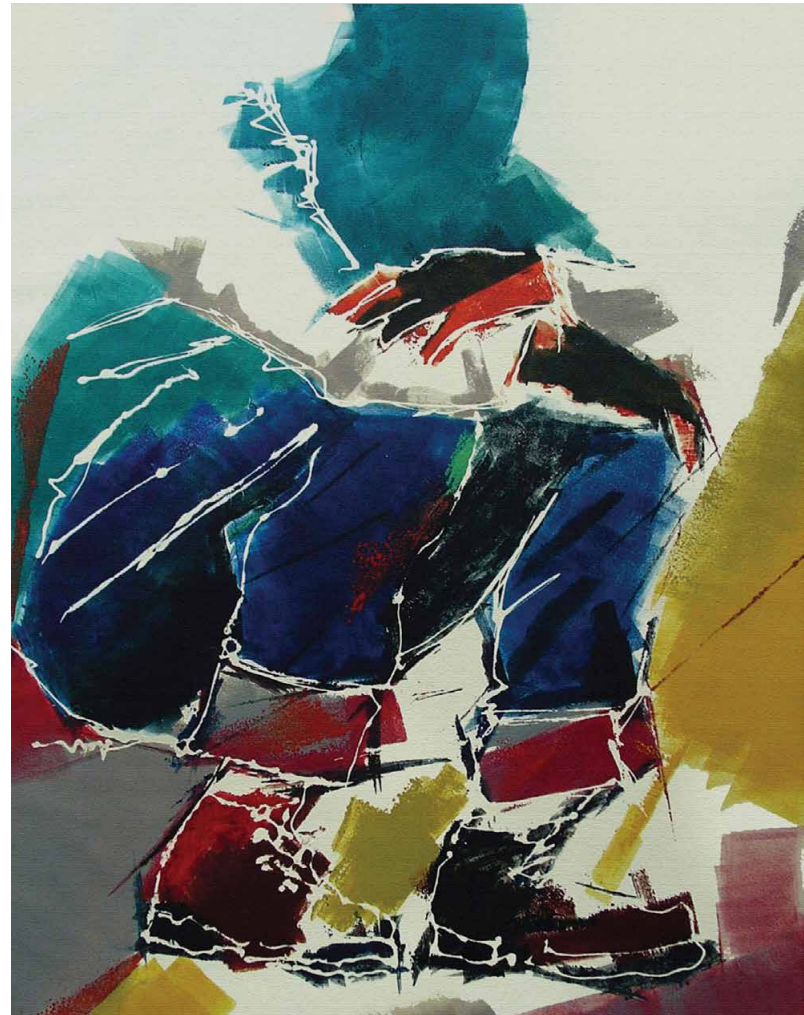
It is a rich and instructive collection for anyone interested in thinking about the arts in a biblically informed way. In the opening essay Seerveld argues for “The Necessity of Christian Public Artistry”. He tackles the problem around employing “Christian” as an adjective for art-making and affirms the value of preserving this description and investing it with deeper meaning than is often allowed. He also contends that when art goes public there is a need to loosen the grip of high – art on our understanding of what art includes. It is a much wider world than what you find in the museums and concert halls. And I think it’s fair to say that art’s power to change a culture is more likely found in the allies, streets and communal outposts of a culture than in its museums. To have a public presence means sharing the realities of the world we inhabit – not least the vulnerability and suffering that is so widely present.

The theme of this volume is “redemptive art” exploring how we might give expression to this theme in a society that has lost touch with its heritage and is grasping at false alternatives in an effort discover a redemptive presence. Seerveld ties his own thought closely to that of Abraham Kuyper when he writes that Kuyper’s “vision that all societal life needs to be restored to the gentle Rule of Christ orients my focus upon art.” (p. 133) The book is replete with black and white images all referred to in the essays. But Seerveld is not limited to visual arts as the volume includes a short piece on literature and one on poetry as well as two fine essays on theatre – a genre that Seerveld finds both compelling and deeply moving.

In these two essays he advocates for a strong Christian presence in the world of theater. But it is a presence unhampered by cliché, undue sentimentality and the inclination to mere entertainment. He draws effectively from the story of the Babylon captivity and invites the Christian to “work hard for the shalom of the city”. He goes on to say the “if you decide to follow Jesus in matters theatrical, then realize we sinful saints-in-the-making are called by the Lord .... to concoct skilled theatre events consecrated to proffer enriching insight, honest-to-God down-to-earth wisdom, and a startling tinge of repentant hope to the Babylonians, because our measure of shalom depends, says God, upon the healing peace we spread abroad in the idol-crazed urban culture that hold us captive.” (p.107)

Another chapter offer a call to “turn human dignity upside down” sending a firm and articulate Psalm 8 corrective to pervasive western notions of what human dignity means. And he notes the need for reflective pause. And there is a chapter that sets out a “...Challenge to be Imaginative Salt as Artists in God’s World. Seerveld writes: Artwork by the salt of the earth, when it is right, will be artwork that presents nuanced sorrow or joy with the imaginative relish of an understanding buoyed by hope.” (p.227)

The various essays in this work speak of particular art forms but do so in the context of measured biblical and theological reflection. There is plenty here to discover and to help shape the reader’s language and deepen their understanding of the arts and their role in the life of faith. These are essays packed with a wealth of insight and experience that that author brings to the subject as well as the pithy, imaginative language that is a trademark of Seerveld’s writing.



*Living by faith* (2007), printmaking (monotype), 17¾" × 24"

Yisa Akinbolaji’s *Living by faith* – “... marks a reflective pause in one’s sojourn, which is typically human. If you are a faith-bound creature trusting what is to come, it is normal to take time out to reflect, to second-guess your steps, to rest a moment...” – C. Seerveld (p.152)



His most recent production is an innovative rendering of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Ivany has written a new English libretto and provided the informal title "Uncle John". This work was performed in August at the Banff Centre for the Arts' – Open Space initiative. Staged in an outdoor setting of Cave and Basin National Historic Site – well actually there is no stage but there is a large reception area where the singers mingle with the

audience. An indoor version of *Uncle John* plays in Toronto December 2014 for five performances.

[www.againstthegraintheatre.com](http://www.againstthegraintheatre.com)

Ivany is busy well beyond his work with Against the Grain Theatre. He has directed work in the USA, Europe and at various centres in Canada. He is scheduled to direct *Carmen* for the Vancouver Opera this season and in the near future he will do the same work for the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto.

We are very proud to have this creative initiative, Against the Grain Theatre, under the auspices of Imago.

## Against the Grain Theatre – Joel Ivany

"The future of opera" Alexander Neef, *General Director, Canadian Opera Company*

It has been four years since Against the Grain Theatre came under the umbrella of Imago. I remember well my first meeting with Joel – a quite spoken, gentle spirited person. But one had the sense that below the surface things were not so quite – the imagination was at work and creativity was in full play. Joel's world is music and particularly opera. In the past four years he and his team have mounted a number of innovative opera events. Their first season provided performances of *La Boheme* set in a downtown Toronto Tranzac Club. Later there was *Figaro's Wedding* set in multiple rooms in the now abandoned sixth floor of Burroughs Department store. Last December he took on a performance of *Messiah* at The Opera House an old – less than elegant venue – where the singers took to acting their parts as well as singing them. The performance was captivating.

This past summer Joel and his work were featured in an article in Opera Canada the premier magazine for opera in this country. It notes that Against the Grain Theatre is one of the leading artist-driven performance companies in Canada. It has received critical acclaim and has an every growing fan base that packs out the performances. Journalist Wayne Gooding goes on to tell us that Ivany was, "on his way to becoming a youth pastor when the experience of seeing *Chicago* and *West Side Story* triggered his interest in music theatre." And that he is now emerging as one of Canada's busiest stage directors.



## Mike Janzen Trio and the Winnipeg Symphony

The lobby was abuzz with anticipation. It was a cold night in November while some 1200 patrons of the Winnipeg Symphony came for a concert called *Reimagining Broadway* led by conductor Julian Pellicano. All the music that evening was arranged by Imago artist Mike Janzen and featured Mike on piano, bassist George Koller and drummer Davide DiRenzo. Most of the arrangements for this first of the three performances were world premieres. A review in the Winnipeg Free Press noted that the opening "Overture" captured "Janzen's brilliant, textural orchestrations that teem with wit and colour".

It was a fine concert with outstanding performances by Mike and his trio backed well by the Winnipeg Symphony. Canadian chanteuse – Sarah Slean brought her unique vocal styling to add another dimension to the concert blending well with trio

and orchestra. These concerts were part of the Pops Series of the Winnipeg Symphony season and allowed for Janzen's excellent artistry and performance skills to be experienced by a whole new audience. The hope is that the good and extensive work that Mike has done to "reimagine" this music may find other settings for performance in the days ahead.

[www.mikejanzen.ca](http://www.mikejanzen.ca)

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## Creativity

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a connection between divine creativity and the human capacity to engage in crafting things one has at least three options as to how to understand the connection.

First we can think of human making as expressing originality something done by an artistic genius. Secondly we can speak of our art as communication, the expression of our thoughts and feelings and thirdly we can hold that our capacity to create serves to impact the world – in a transforming way. We take the ordinary and make it into something exceptional that brings (perhaps surprisingly) significant change. I find myself hovering over these options not sure just where to land. The latter two have more appeal for me yet my inclination is to shape some version of human making that takes all three of these into its meaning and activity. In the first I am drawn to the possibility of the “new”, in the second the prerogative to communicate, and in the third the potential to bring change to the world – as through a redemptive gesture. The resonances with theology and the biblical narrative are evident.

Belief in God entails that whatever creative capacity we have as human beings comes to us a ‘gift’. There is however an issue – a glitch if you will, in considering a theology of creativity. It concerns what role we have

### Imago to Host Dialogue on Film and Faith

The powerful influence of film on contemporary life is beyond dispute. Whether in the theatre or by way of Netflix these cultural narratives speak into our lives. What appears to be absent is a forum for conversation connecting film and faith. Believing that film is a fruitful location for theological reflection and the exploration of what it means to be human, Imago plans to host just such a dialogue in 2015. The details of time, location and participants are yet to be worked out. But this will be a public conversation open to all who have an interest in this important cultural expression.

We are grateful to have already received a grant in support of this project and at this time we are working to acquire the additional funding needed.

in the creative process. There is a long tradition in western thought that credits the divine or the muse with inspiring our gestures to craft and make – and what this may mean is that these acts are not ultimately of our own doing – rather we serve merely as channels – and it is the breath/spirit of the muse, or of the divine that flows through us. It is true that one need not understand the

*Poet Robert Frost wrote that poetry may be understood as “a momentary stay against confusion”*

human role to be so passive but instead we might see the process as a “collaborative” effort that includes both a touch of “inspiration” and the gritty hard work of the artist.

When considering the creative process one soon stumbles on the common practice of “waiting”. The process of crafting a work, of bringing it into existence entails waiting. It may be a novel, a painting, a poem, a sonata or a film, the process requires you to wait and part of what you wait for is to discover what will emerge from the process. The work that is made is not simply subject to its maker but has a capacity to take on a “life of its own”. It allows those who experience it to discover something new and does the same for the one who made it. This is the work’s power to communicate. And it yields something new sometimes replacing the old, sometimes “redeeming” it.

The season of Advent invites waiting and brings us to the threshold of something new. To be clear I am not thinking of the New Year. Come January 1st we will be in 2015 – but this is a newness of a shallow sort. It creates the illusion that we are now able to start again – another day, another year but there is nothing transformative lodged in this temporal change. What I am suggesting is that the season of Advent is a time of creative impulse. It’s a call to re-imagine. Our re-imagining may take the form of a reminder or it might be a discovery of what has not been known before. The more deeply we enter the story the greater the opportunity for a work of redemptive transformation to occur.

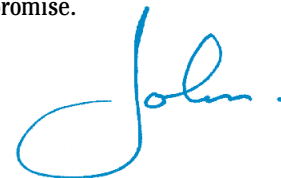
Poet Robert Frost wrote that poetry may be understood as “a momentary stay against confusion”. What we have come to call creativity seems to commonly play just such a role. The buzzing confusion of life in our contemporary world generates a longing for order, an opportunity to experience restoration of the soul beside still artistic waters. There is no illusion here that art can deliver redemption – that’s the sole province of the “babe of Bethlehem” the one who is “full of grace and truth”. However art is able to provide hints of redemptive possibilities as it brings a salt and light presence to its particular cultural context.

The creative impulse continues to be made manifest though the biblical narrative. It’s a call to a “new creation” begun on a memorable Holy Night long ago. The momentum of that Holy Night continues to this day inviting us to newness of heart and soul and mind. Charles Wesley’s words come to mind:

*Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling;  
all thy faithful mercies crown.*

What we celebrate in advent is the “crowning” gesture of God’s activities in history and it’s a gesture with the intent to create or perhaps better re-create. The final verse of Wesley’s hymn begins with a prayerful longing; “Finish then thy new creation”. That’s a work for which we must wait. But then the creative gesture is always attended by waiting – a waiting rooted in a confident hope of a transformative outcome – a discovery of the new.

I want to express my sincere thanks to all who have given their support to the work of Imago. Your interest, presence and financial investment are greatly appreciated and provide significant encouragement. The year past has been filled with blessing and much discovery, the year ahead holds great promise.



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