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I M A G E



Bringing Home the Work

The Artist & the Community

Doris Betts • Leslie Leyland Fields • Wayne Forte
Makoto Fujimura • Edward Knippers • Erin McGraw
Charlie Peacock • J.A.C. Redford • Daniel Taylor
Roger Wagner • Dan Wakefield • Lauren F. Winner

Fiction by Deborah Joy Corey

An Interview with Andrew Hudgins

Ben Birnbaum Walks his Dog

Poetry by Bruce Beasley



Christian Artist Finding Community by Wayne Forte

I WENT to graduate school at University of California, Irvine, where conceptual and performance art were the only approaches that were taken seriously. As a painter, I felt ostracized, but this didn't bother me too much. I reasoned that an artist needs to stand apart from his community and culture, the better to objectively see and comment on it. I figured that feeling like an outsider was just part of being a real artist. Alienation was the legacy I'd inherited from my heroes, Van Gogh, Munch, Goya, Rivera, Picasso, and the Abstract Expressionists.

This kind of reasoning, typical of most American university-trained art students, helped me to endure the next decade holed up in a storefront off Western Avenue in the seedy part of Los Angeles. I was painting large, empty views of the L.A. freeway system—a subject which matched my sense of displacement, alienation and rootlessness. I spent whole days languishing on a couch in my studio. In retrospect I can see that I was slowly drifting into depression, though it seemed normal at the time. I felt that my art had no purpose except to reflect my despair, and to me that seemed appropriate enough.

In the depths of this depression, I came to believe in Jesus as the Christ and started studying the scriptures. For the first time I heard about community and its importance to one's emotional and spiritual health.

Twenty-five years later, my wife and I belong to a church with a well-established visual arts ministry, a group of about two dozen who work to facilitate a connection between artists and craftspeople and our church community. We have bi-monthly meetings, quarterly dinners, and collaborative workshops. We've staged two nationally attended arts conferences reaching out to other churches seeking to use the arts in ministry, and we mount several invitational art exhibits each year. Pastors and members purchase the work of church artists, and provide them with friendship and encouragement. But none of this was easily attained, and there's still room for improvement.

The relationship between artists and the church can be fraught with misunderstanding and suspicion. The artist may not understand his or her real need for community, and may therefore be reluctant to insist on it, especially when it involves something as personal and precious as his art. The church doesn't always understand the way the artist's role has changed in the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. The artist suspects that resistance or indifference toward his art means that he is not accepted for who he is, and the church suspects that it might be better off without the artist's rebellious spirit and questioning nature. It takes long-suffering patience and love on both sides to get to a point where the rewards of the relationship are perceivable.

In the early years of our ministry, I was asked to do work-intensive decoration projects that didn't really require a trained artist's point of view or insight, and I felt like my gifts and skills weren't really understood or respected. After some soul-searching I explained my frustration to the pastor and we worked to find other church members-illustrators, decorators, designers, architects, art aficionados, and students, to help with these jobs. At other times, we spent a lot of money to hire skilled artisans, which increased the church's appreciation for hand craftsmanship.

Educating the congregation has been a key ingredient to making our arts ministry fruitful. The average church member needs some groundwork laid before he can be expected to be a sophisticated, or at least sympathetic, viewer of the art. Most believers welcome this opportunity since, doctrinally at least, they are committed to loving the artist and using his gifts. Artists can initiate this dialogue by inviting pastors and church leaders to museum or gallery exhibits, or just by taking them into our studios for private viewings. Just hearing about how it feels to be a Christian artist is a big eye-opener to most pastors.

It also helps to look at resistance to art in the church as an opportunity to educate rather than a roadblock-and the artist should remember that he too might learn from the exchange. I once did a large painting of a rooster with the caption the damn thing woke me up scrawled across the bottom. When my pastor saw it he suggested I change it to ...and Peter wept, which is more subtle and resonant.

Often our visual arts team is called on to explain our choice of imagery on some project. In a painting about the Exodus I once used a jarring, central image of a snake to refer to Christ,

which caused concern among the congregation until I reminded people that Christ likened himself to the serpent that Moses held up in the wilderness. In another painting, a skull at the foot of a cross caused questions until I posted a note explaining that Golgotha meant "place of the skull." I feel that Christian artists need to be willing to find new symbols for our generation as the old ones exhaust themselves-or more often, to go back and resurrect forgotten symbols.

Rather than feeling put out when people in my church question my choice of imagery, I'm flattered that they're looking so closely. In many cases I've spent hundreds of hours composing, resolving, then editing the painting, so I'm happy to have feedback. I want the paintings to cause people to re-examine their presuppositions, so in that sense, if people are asking questions, the painting is working. And I do think it's healthy for an artist to be held accountable to a community. I question the Modernist myth of the artist as Lone Ranger, holed up in his atelier and not accountable to anyone.

The paintings I make for use in our worship services often evolve over time. Since we usually have only a month, and sometimes only a week, to come up with visuals, the painting that goes up in front of the congregation is usually an early draft. While it's up there I can do some revising in my head, and after the series is over I may work on the piece for months to resolve it. I like this open-ended process because it allows for input from the community and God. It allows for my confession and revision and acts as a metaphor for redemption. Picasso said that he never made a masterpiece that wasn't at some point a total disaster that he felt incapable of resolving. I take this to mean that even Picasso relied on the existence of an interceding God.

Today I feel confident in encouraging Christian artists who feel isolated from the art world as well as the community of faith. Speaking from experience, it seems to me that being a Christian artist has distinct advantages over being the secular kind. A Christian artist automatically has something important to paint about, as well as a constituency of people who share his convictions and understand his language, symbols, and narratives [see front cover]. And a Christian artist has a necessary role within the community of the faithful, where his gifts add to the spiritual dimensions of the community and the community makes a difference in his life, too.

The artist's nature is to think big, to dream, to be a perfectionist, and to go out on a limb to achieve his goals. Therefore the artist is more likely to suffer. But the support of the congregation, the spiritual covering from the pastoral staff, and the connection to other like-minded artists can provide a safety net whenever the inevitable falls occur.

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