

Seminary Ridge Review. Spring 2012. See "Dressing Sacred Space" p. 103.

Questions for Linda Witte Henke

SRR: Please share with us something about why you've chosen to work in textiles and mixed media.

LWH: Because the parochial schools I attended did not offer art courses, my artistic inclinations found expression in the media most readily accessible to me at home -- fabrics/textiles. By the time I was a teenager, my artistic pursuits began to shift from garments to liturgical banners. In college, I began creating vestments, paraments, and mixed-media space installations.

While I was pursuing studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, OH, I had the good fortune of visiting an exhibition of work by Nancy Crow (<http://www.nancycrow.com/HTML/imagesofquilts.html>), a leader at that time in the contemporary art quilt movement. The distinctively contemporary sensibilities of Crow's work opened the door for me to consider a new world of possibilities for working with fabrics/textiles -- designs, approaches, colors, techniques, processes, etc. I soon began exploring those possibilities in the creation of vestments for myself and my classmates.

Although my initial gravitation toward fabrics/textiles was situational, my continued work in this media is intentional. I feel a strong sense of kinship with the many generations of women around the globe for whom fabrics/textiles (and, more specifically, liturgical fabrics/textiles) were the only avenue of artistic expression open to them. I am inspired by the colors, textures, finishes, and versatility of the media and empowered by its capacity to engage viewers irrespective of age, gender, social-economic, and ethnic distinctions. I often wish that I could have at least ten lifetimes to explore all the ideas that populate my imagination.

Incorporation of other media in my work -- wood, metal, clay, glass, plastic, paper, etc. -- evolved out of my fascination with such "found objects" as wire, metal hardware, poker chips, plastic tubing, mirrors, chains, paper clips, safety pins, bottle caps, chopsticks, dominoes, dice, etc. I've found that these bits of unexpected whimsy draw viewers into my work and engage their imaginations.

SRR: Please share with us something surprising/interesting you experienced this past year in your studio work or exhibitions.

- A month or so ago, a Jewish artist-friend came to visit. I decided that, in addition to the time we spent working together in the studio, I would take her to view a large exhibition of my spiritually expressive work in a neighboring city. Not wanting to be perceived as imposing my Christian perspective, I intentionally limited my commentary to artistic aspects of the work. My friend asked so many questions that I soon reverted to a more faith-full

narrative, and we ended up spending nearly three hours in conversation about the exhibition. Her ability to recognize themes that transcend the particularities of our respective faith traditions heightened my appreciation for art's capacity for relevance that is both specific and universal and fueled my resolve to be less "apologetic" about my faith perspective.

- My current studio work is focused on creation of a series of three-dimensional, life-scale, figurative sculptures of women referenced in the biblical narrative. As I've researched their stories, labored to capture some essence of their personas, and crafted the reflections that will accompany the works, I've begun to feel a powerful sense of kinship with them. Spending time with them has put me in touch with themes of enduring significance -- grief, longing, oppression, abuse, etc. I am hopeful that viewers of the finished work will experience something of the blessing I am experiencing in working with them.

SRR: Share with us something about your seminary training that has influenced the way you work as an artist.

LWH: Theological perspectives refined over the course of my seminary studies have combined with my service as a parish pastor to become a key influence in my work. Seminary shaped my commitment to mindful integration of the various components of worship -- liturgical seasons, lectionary texts, hymn selections, visual arts, etc. -- and my ongoing experiences of living into that commitment empower my effectiveness in working with individuals and groups who engage my services or commission my work. The seminary's commitment to "collaborative learning" also influenced me to develop a process for working with clients that is intentionally (and very positively) collaborative.

My love of scripture and passion for liturgy, worship, and music were celebrated and deepened throughout my seminary experience; they provide an ongoing reservoir of inspiration for my artistic expression. When people ask whether I miss the opportunity to preach regularly, I remind them that I continue to be engaged in proclamation of the Word -- I just employ a different "language" to communicate the wonder of God's love and grace.

That being said, I did then and do now lament the absence of opportunities for students in ELCA seminaries to experience something of the powerful role that visual arts (and artists) can play in ministry and mission, both within and beyond the congregation's worship. I am envious of the creative opportunities that are surfacing within the seminaries of our ecumenical partners and experience a sense of regret that ELCA seminarians -- future leaders in our denomination -- are not being exposed to similar opportunities.

SRR: Please share one thing you'd like to say to parishoners about the value of visual art in sacred spaces ... one thing you'd like to say to church leaders about the value of visual art in sacred spaces.

LWH: I would invite both parishioners and church leaders to be mindful that we are created by God to be sensual beings. Our experiences of God's creation, of God's love and grace, and of one another come to us by way of our senses. Our call to faithfully steward the gifts God entrusts to us includes our senses -- all of them.

Decades of research have consistently demonstrated that people have differing sensory preferences. If we are sincere in our commitment to communicate the gospel to all people, then we need to be intentional about employing stimuli for all of the senses. In particular, in a culture that has become strongly visual, provision of quality visual stimuli is not a luxury; it's a necessity.

With bachelor and master degrees in journalism, "writer" is a central aspect of my identity. My first major artistic work, an 18-piece series marking signposts in Jesus' journey from Passion Sunday to Easter, was created to illustrate a book manuscript of devotional reflections. On something of a whim, I entered the series in "Expressions of the Sacred," a juried, all-media exhibition sponsored by Iliff School of Theology in Denver. Although I was pleased that the work was selected for inclusion in the exhibition, I presumed that, apart from the accompanying narrative reflections, the work could have only minimal impact. Imagine my surprise when I ended up spending the entire opening reception with viewers eager to be in conversation with me about their responses to my work. I came away from that experience with a new respect for and appreciation of art's capacity to engage, to communicate, to evoke, etc. -- one that has since compelled me to invest my gifts to the harnessing of that power and promise in service of the gospel.

I am saddened by the number of faith communities that either dismiss the visual arts as irrelevant or settle for unimaginative offerings that show little promise for engaging viewers or enhancing the worship of the assembly. I confess that I dream about ways to empower people across the Church to more fully explore possibilities for employing the visual arts for joyous praise, effective proclamation, and powerful inspiration.

SRR: Do you have resources to recommend to Seminary Ridge Review readers as a help for visual art in sermon writing or dressing their sacred spaces?

LWH: The possibilities are legion, so I will limit my recommendations to these few:

- The juried, on-line art exhibitions sponsored by *Episcopal Church and Visual Arts* (www.ecva.org) are meaningful and inspiring. This group maintains a registry of member artists (<http://ecva.org/artists/registry.html>) working in many media to create spiritually expressive art, as well as the "Episcopal Cafe" blog (www.episcopalcafe.com), which serves as a forum for integrated reflection on theology and the arts.

- *Christians in the Visual Arts* (www.civa.org) hosts a number of juried, traveling exhibitions expressive of spiritual themes and provides links to the member artists' profiles and galleries (<http://civa-artists.ning.com/profiles/members/>).
- A couple of museums provide sources of interest and inspiration, including *the Museum of Biblical Art* (www.mobia.org/) in New York City and the *Museum of Contemporary Religious Art* (www.mocra.slu.edu/) in Saint Louis, in Kansas City, MO.
- *White Stone Gallery* (<http://whitestonegallery.com/>) sponsors an annual Fine Art and Faith exhibition and is in the process of publishing an Art and Faith Catalog in both print and electronic formats. *EyeKons Gallery* (www.eyekons.com) in Grand Rapids, MI, maintains a Stock Image Bank of biblical art, religious images, and spiritual themes.
- The work of artist, author and ordained minister *Jan L. Richardson* (www.janrichardson.com) never fails to enlighten and inspire me. Her blog (<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/02>) provides weekly reflections on the lectionary texts. Images of her work are available through www.janrichardsonimages.com. Of her numerous books, *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas* is my personal favorite.
- *Behold: Arts for the Church Year* from Logos Productions (www.logosproductions.com) is a devotional arts magazine that presents seasonal collections of images and texts, based on the Revised Common Lectionary.
- *Imagining the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, published by United Church as separate volumes for each of the three lectionary cycles, contains amazing collections of imagery and text linked to the liturgical seasons. Although not currently in print, the volumes often be found through www.amazon.com or other book sellers.