

“Concerning the Art of Spirituality: Forays into and out from the Forest of the Soul”

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Since 1999, I have been making shrines, altars to nature, and landscapes. The latter are drawings—landscape impressions—although they tend to be multimedia in execution (pastel, pencil, watercolor and acrylic). The former, by far the majority, are assemblages. They are real objects, recapturing and reinventing real soulful experiences and, in the process, making something both personal and archetypal that I do not hesitate to call sacred.

The landscapes are “spiritual topographies.” Like the assemblages, they are meditations and memory capsules. They restructure memories of what I experienced and felt when I visited a certain place, centering those experiences either conceptually or photographically in a landscape form. By re-presenting and re-centering this form, whether it be a tree, a cave, a grotto, a garden, a mountain or mountain range, or a linear riverscape, I release latent energies and, at least temporarily, taste the peace and exhilaration of what Richard J. Foster calls the interplay of the contemplative and incarnational traditions: “Divine love (which is at the heart of the contemplative life) . . . given visible expression (which is at the heart of the incarnational life)” (40). When these contemplative/incarnational experiences touch upon an archetypal form, such as the cave, tree, sacred well, or paradise garden, I find myself truly transported. An artist quoted by Robert Wuthnow hits it exactly: “I see the energy of God as being a part of my energy, the life force” (127).

The assemblages—shrines and nature altar pieces of diminutive size—enshrine and vivify a thought, a meditation, or a plethora of meditations. They are reinforced through my ongoing studies of spirituality—in my Christian, Protestant tradition, in the Ignatian/Jesuit exercise tradition, in Catholic images and “Mary Gardens,” in archaic and goddess-saturated cultures, and in western art history. My scholarly “label” is modern and contemporary art historian, yet I am powerfully drawn to ancient and medieval art and architecture: to the throne and cult rooms of Minoan palaces, to the Minoan snake goddess, to Byzantine icons of the intercessory Virgin, to Romanesque cavelike pilgrimage churches with their converging forests of radiating chapels, to Gothic Chartres with its labyrinth concealing an ancient spring, to medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and paintings alluding to paradise gardens and Mary shrines, to landscape and devotion, to the sensual overlay of Christian iconicity over pagan mobility.

Soul territories need to be entered, traversed, and recreated to the extent that we identify ourselves with them. Making art along the soul journey is a way of journaling, traveloguing, and mapping it. As Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard states, “Implicit in the work. . . is the notion of the journey—sacred or profane. The restless artist’s preoccupation with travel, navigation, and mapping is often an attempt to address and reconcile the mythic relationship between the daily round and the road to spiritual achievement” (121). The experiences of a crucial time thus retain their freshness; the artist traveler, in recreating them, maintains her susceptibility, vulnerability and malleability. She becomes part of the matrix of life forces.

Foster, Richard J. *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.

Wuthnow, Robert. *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001.