

“Nature Shrine”

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The works of this series map a landscape of placemaking. Each work is at the same time a dwelling (home), sanctuary (temple), and shrine (portable devotional object) sequestering a host of personal associations, memories and projections. Generated from indwelling, deep recesses or streams of the psyche, they flow into and become permeated with communal, historical, and biblical associations.

Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain (Isa. 4.5-7).

These dwellings, shrines, and sanctuaries adduce a personal and communal history of placemaking that represents each chapter, each place, and each representation of this as holy. Ideally, works such as these would be used in a holy setting—indoors or out—as keys for retreat, ritual, and worship. Inherently delicate and ephemeral, they might at some point be taken apart and the reusable portions or objects could then be re-assembled into new constructions and new representations.

Making vivid constructions along a spiritual journey is a way of journaling;. It is “art writing,” that is, illustrating a spiritual travelogue in three visual dimensions. Each dwelling, shrine, sanctuary, or combination of these places enshrines and vivifies a thought, meditation, or several meditations. In some of the pieces their sources are themselves enshrined, as ex-votos or votive offerings. The experiences thus retain their freshness. The artist traveler, in recreating them at home, maintains her susceptibility, vulnerability, and malleability.

*C.G. Jung has offered the clearest modern metaphor of the house as image of the self and its development within the history of a collective unconscious. In a now famous dream, he explored a house that represented his own psyche as well as a passage back in time—from a “conscious” elegant and “inhabited” living room down to the “unconscious” cavelike cellar where he found the remains of a primitive civilization. Later in life he built himself a “spirit house”. . . centered on a “maternal hearth” where he always experienced an “intense feeling of repose and renewal” (Lucy Lippard, *Overlay*, 1983).*

As Jung and Lippard affirm, surprising revelations--bridging time and space and linking multiple concepts--can occur in the fertile territory of the dwelling. The objects that initiated this series are the small constructions of stones and pebbles that I saw and photographed along rivers and stream beds on a recent vacation in Jasper National Park. They seemed artless—simple assemblages of stones picked randomly out of a plethora of “raw material.” Upon closer

observation, they showed their art: each stone had been selected and placed for its structural, balancing, aesthetic, and spiritual value. What might they symbolize? Why were they made? Why were so many placed there? These questions were balanced by the revelation that they made so much visual, constructive, and sacred sense. Experiencing the place wasn't complete unless it was re-made into an intercession or offering, simply yet artfully, using the materials at hand.

When I began to recapture and possibly recapitulate the processes and works I had seen in Alberta, I turned to materials I had readily at hand. These included stones, pebbles and polished minerals, both found and purchased; baskets and tubs of shells, left over from a generous vacation Bible school donation; miscellaneous "art craft" supplies--potpourri mixes, dried flowers, prepared dried branches, tiles, beads, and ribbons; the "supplies" in my pantry--dried lasagna noodles, soup and coffee beans, nuts in their shells, whole nutmeg and cinnamon sticks, sand-colored powdered ginger, white-powdered Cream of Tartar, crystalline white Margarita salt, and red Hawaiian salt; and, finally, the supplies in my and my daughter's jewelry drawers--unworn, discarded, forgotten, and even special earrings, bracelets, and rings. (These were always used with permission, as were the marbles in my son's room.) I found myself re-making my domestic environment as an offering and intercession.

*There is a French word, bricolage, which means making do with the material at hand: a bricoleur is a kind of jack-of-all trades or handyman who can fix anything. The bricoleur is an artist of limits. . . . Dreams and myths work in the same way; in dream-time we take whatever happened that day, bits and pieces of material and events, and transform them into the deep symbolism of our own personal mythology (Stephen Nachmanovich, *Free Play*, 1990).*

I set up a studio in my laundry room and began to work. Then, the associations began to flow and to coalesce. One was a scholarly project, an illustrated proposal for an art exhibition called "Landscape and Devotion" that I had completed for a graduate course in art history at the Ph.D. level, then presented as a class and public lecture. I had carefully saved the research, essay, and images from that project and it took but a few moments to retrieve them.

In every town there were corner shrines, decked out on holy days for not-so-holy reveries. Throughout the countryside there were wayside shrines. . . . But how much stronger a force that Madonna image becomes when considered in the light of her constant, everyday presence in the shrines that were strewn around the countryside, the place of work and play and informal worship? (Kiefer, "Landscape and Devotion," 1986)

I also recalled a course on Italian Renaissance art and popular devotion that I had taken at the M.A. level in 1973-75. This was by far the best course I took as a graduate student, although in the intervening years I had changed my focus to modern and contemporary art. My scholarly study of Lucy Lippard's *Overlay*:

Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory, had been unrelated to my meditations on Stephen Nachmanovich's *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* and Eugene Peterson's *Leap over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. But the three books came together as sources, reinforcements, and alternative crystallizations of sacred places. Nachmanovitch's notion of "*bricolage*"-- the skillful utilization of what's at one's fingertips to solve problems--metamorphosed for me into "bri-collage," and gave me the word for what I was making. Finally, my favorite biblical books, Isaiah and the Psalms, replete with references to tents, canopies, temples, mountain dwellings, and sanctuaries, became nothing short of visionary.

In *Free Play*, Nachmanovich describes sanctuary as the protected setting or play-space, with "play," or "*lila*," defined as "the taproot from which original art springs; . . . the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all [her] learning and technique. . . . the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy." Sanctuary in this play-space is not so much space as context, not so much bounded field as energy field, not so much studio as experimental laboratory. Here the artist practices her instrument, sharpens her tools, sharpens her skills. But practice is only the beginning. This opens out to "play, exercise, exploration, experiment. . . . all sorts of combinations and permutations of body forms, social forms, thought forms, images, and rules that would not be possible in a world that functions on immediate survival values."

My sanctuaries are the domestic "chancels" that I carefully and artfully tend: the kitchen, herb pantry, living room, bedroom, library, back porch and basement laundry room studios and, of course, the constructions I make there. I have arranged small "altars" in most of these spaces using end tables as altar tables, photographs as reliquaries, framed paintings and drawings as altarpieces, and houseplants as altar screens. The plants are also "house deities" which I tend and serve in my daily ritual of watering and picking out dead lives, and in my weekly ritual of fertilizing.

I agree with Nachmanovich that the sanctuary or play-space is not boundless; it has limits. Just as the resourceful collage artist limits herself to materials that are readily available to her at a moment's notice, where she is, at the spirit's bidding, then "makes do" with what she finds, the artist at play in the play-space makes the best art--improvisatory art--by working within the limits of her medium and evolved technique. The sanctuary or play-space structures those limits and techniques. It is architectural. And as art making is sacred activity, this architectural structure is sacred structure, enclosing sacred space.

As architecture, sanctuary dissolves to vehicle; vehicle dissolves to temple; temple dissolves to home; home, to world. This sequestered world reflects the real world, but unlike the latter, it makes sense; it has meaning. The sanctuary provides a place of sanctity and sanity. It also provides time and space to think about how the "real" world might be resensitized, and to consider how I might contribute to this

process.

For me, then, sanctuary is both physical and metaphorical. It is a physical space for work, prayer, meditation, just being, and for making little sanctuaries, shrines and dwellings. But as I know from personal experience, this can easily lead to an attitude and an art of self-indulgence. Thus, I take sanctuary as a metaphorical springboard for community involvement and action—the retreat leading, vacation Bible schools, and alternative worship settings I have been involved in, and the art and Christian-education projects I hope to undertake. My ideas will undoubtedly be modified and altered as I prepare for a new dimension and a new field of collaboration and service.

Presently, I am employed as a visiting assistant professor of art history at John Carroll University, teaching Introduction to Art History and Baroque Art; and as a part-time assistant professor of art history at Kent State University, teaching History of Art Criticism, 1900-2000. Teaching art history and theory has been my vocation for nearly twenty years. My premise as I write or revise the syllabus for my courses is that I will sensitize at least one student to the deeper, soul-fulfilling and spirit-energizing levels of art. It comes as no surprise that certain works of this series (*Treasury*, *The Queen's Megaron* and *Deep Forest Dwelling [Baroque]*) have been inspired by the Minoan structures, Greek treasuries, Roman open-air sanctuaries, and Italian Baroque forms I am presently reviewing—recalling, at the same time, the vivid images I memorized when I first encountered them.

In presenting these works, I affirm not only my work and my vocation, but my femininity, maternity, and chronology. I am a wife, a mother (proto-empty nester of two), and a woman with a vivid inner child, rapidly approaching the age of fifty. I have gone through many changes and yet, I am rooted. As Madeleine L'Engle writes about this rooted life, the greater sanctuary that I hope these works suggest and promise:

Wisdom, which we desperately need, is feminine, sophia, in Greek. Better yet, hagia sophia, holy wisdom. We need holy wisdom to help balance our misuse of the fruits of the intellect. We must not be afraid of becoming once again in tune with our whole selves, even when becoming whole disturbs the universe. We become whole never by being rigid or unloving or isolating ourselves from the rest of our fellow beings, but by opening ourselves to God's revelation of the unity of the universe.

Amen, and on to the next!

Gerry Kiefer
February 2001

Works in the series ***Shrines, Sanctuaries and "Bri-collages"***

The works are dwellings, sanctuaries, and wayside shrines, with contained landscapes or arrangements symbolizing special places, memories, spiritual themes, images, and objects from the history of Western art. The order of works is substantially the order in which they were made. They map the highway of my journey and, hopefully, illuminate the broader domain of spiritual placemaking and pilgrimage.

All are mixed-media constructions, built up from a base of stretched canvas, a "found object" (box, tin, container, shelf component, cutting board), or a dresser or end-table drawer. Ingredients include paint, wood, metal, glass, tiles, shells, stones, embroidery floss, beads, photo frames, various dried flower mixes, dried grasses and sticks, nuts, beans, dried vegetables, salts and spices, jewelry, photographs taken by the artist and her husband, and other personal and donated artifacts.

2000

- a. The Seed Dispersed \$200.00
- b. Temenos \$100.00
- c. Wilderness Journey: Through the Desert \$200.00
- d. Wilderness Journey: To the Fount of Living Waters \$200.00
- e. Treasury \$100.00
- f. Glade \$100.00

2001

- a. Harvest Grasslands \$300.00
- b. The Garden of Eden \$300.00
- c. Sequestered Island \$150.00
- d. Fairy Forest \$150.00
- e. Earth Vessel 2001 \$100.00
- f. Cave and Precinct \$100.00
- g. Autumn Tributaries (with Ex-Votos) \$90.00
- h. Rising Waters (with Ex-Votos) \$90.00
- i. Folding Grotto \$90.00
- j. Crystal Blue Suasion \$75.00
- k. Creation Chambers, under Grace (with Column) \$100.00
- l. The Queen's Megaron \$175.00
- m. Shrine to the Ohio Rock* \$90.00
- n. Deep Forest Dwelling (Baroque)* \$90.00

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Works Cited

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