

Sacred Precincts: Bounded Chaos
Geraldine Wojno Kiefer and Leslie Betz

“. . . [O]rder out of chaos provides illuminating illustrations of how structures can be formed and maintained when energy is fed into open systems, thus allowing them to swim against the tide of increasing entropy.” John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, p. 61.

Sacred Precinct, Bounded Chaos, a collaborative exhibition and installation, constructs a series of meditative, sequestered precincts within the SAC Gallery's main exhibition gallery. These are the focal point and setting for a solo dance work choreographed by Erica Helm, Dance Division Chair, Shenandoah University, and performed at 7 p.m. on opening night. During regular gallery hours the installation, a series of “chapels” articulating side aisles in the gallery temporarily configured as a worship space or “nave,” will serve as a retreat and key to meditation on the profound depths and restorative powers of nature. Ceramic sculptures mark the rhythm and articulate the bays of this sacred space. Pedestaled shrines become its ex-votos. Altars at the head of each aisle represent its gathered energies: on one side, constructive wholeness (Paradise), and on the other, eruptive dispersion (Chaos).

The term “sacred precincts” refers to both of these channeled and measured volumes. Likewise does the term “bounded chaos.” Although “chaos” is specifically articulated and bounded in its designated aisle, chaotic potentialities and energies are intimated throughout the exhibition space. John Polkinghorne's notion of chaos as, first, a “portfolio of possibility” crackling through the universe and secondly, “active information” creating an “unfolding pattern of dynamical development” (52, 62-63) structures and animates the installation. Likewise, Jean Markale's notion of precincts as “special places supposedly favorable to a privileged relationship. . . between the ‘creator’ and the creature”(31), is imbricated within its boundaries.

Since 1999, Geraldine Kiefer has made assemblages--shrines and altars to nature. Her landscapes—drawings and paintings---date to the late 1970s. The assemblages enshrine and vivify a thought, a meditation, or a plethora of meditations. They are reinforced through Kiefer's ongoing studies of spirituality--in her 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. Her scholarly “label” is modern and contemporary art historian, yet she is powerfully drawn to ancient and medieval art and architecture. These powerful repositories of soul include the throne and cult rooms of Minoan palaces, the Minoan snake goddess, Byzantine icons of the intercessory Virgin, Romanesque cavelike pilgrimage

churches with their converging forests of radiating chapels, and Gothic Chartres with its labyrinth concealing an ancient spring. Kiefer is equally drawn to the sensual overlay of Christian iconicity over pagan mobility in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and paintings alluding to paradise gardens and Mary shrines. These borderspaces ritualize the intersection of landscape and devotion.

Leslie Betz constructs ceramic environments. The sculptures in the exhibition are the newest exploration and evolution of her identity as a ceramic sculptor. The inspiration comes from cathedral spires, in particular those of the Spanish Art Nouveau architect Antonio Gaudí. The pieces are intersecting the artist's life during a period of transformation. According to Betz, "I believe the work is flowing from deep within my soul. With the guidance of spirit, the work is created with anticipation and excitement." Betz's sculptures emerge through the intersection of three different "series" or ideas. The first is the "Elements Series": Air, Fire, Water, Earth, and Ether—or Spirit. The second series is "Love." During the past two years the artist has worked through a confusing and painful time through which her heart was opened. "Finding passion for myself, my work and my life has freed me," she states. "I am now able to live in joy and to trust my intuitive heart." The third series is "Flora." Plant forms have been an ongoing theme in Betz's work. The small, hand-built flower forms emerged primarily in a playful way of working and nurturing. During this process Betz realized that the flower symbolized abundance and continuing blossoming. "Plant forms act as vessels, by carrying the seeds to regenerate new life. Watching the transformation of a swelling flower bud into a flower and then into a fleshy fruit or seed pod intrigues me and animates the emergent piece. If you watch closely, you can see the work dance."

Works cited:

Markale, Jean. *The Great Goddess: Reverence of the Divine Feminine from the Paleolithic to the Present*. Trans. Joey Gladding. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1999.

Polkinghorne, John. *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

Geraldine Wojno Kiefer, painter and collagist, a native of Akron, Ohio, has a Ph.D. in art history from Case Western Reserve University and a B.A. in studio art and art history from Kent State University. An assistant professor of art history at Shenandoah University, Kiefer has exhibited her work in traditional solo and joint exhibitions as well as in solo installations in Hawaii and the mainland, including a one-person show in March 2002 at Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia. **Leslie Betz**, ceramist, has an M.F.A. in Ceramics from Ohio University and a B.F.A. from West Virginia University. Her exhibition credits include the North Carolina Clay Exhibition at NC State in 1992. She juried the Piedmont Craftsmen in 1994, and co-founded Carolina

Clay Matters in February of that year. **Erica Helm**, choreographer, is chair of the Dance Division of Shenandoah University. She has choreographed works for the University of Hawaii Dance Theatre, Shenandoah Summer Music Theatre, Opera Americana in Alexandria, Virginia, and for dance companies and madrigal ensembles in Hawaii and Texas. Her choreography has been presented in several Washington, D.C. venues, including the Jack Guidone Theatre, the Austrian Embassy and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The two-part driftwood sculpture, the centerpiece of Helm's dance, "Persephone," is by **Ben Forgey**. "Persephone," performed by Melissa Ichiugi, premiered in this space on January 9, 2004.

A Note on Viewing the Exhibition

The exhibition is conceived as a sanctuary, with a central nave (core of the "sacred precinct") and two side aisles. All three spaces are oriented east-west, the axis of deity; thus they acknowledge directional forces that have prevailed in Western and Eastern sacred art for millennia.

The south aisle is dedicated to "paradise." Its altar celebrates the spirits of gladness and reconciliation, and the altarpiece is a meditation on the Garden of Eden. Depicted within it are the Tree of Good and Evil, the serpent, and the apple of wisdom and revelation. Untouched and undefiled, the garden is a paradise without beginning or end.

The north aisle is dedicated to "chaos." Its altar ruminates on the spirits of fire and eruption, with panels dedicated to Pele, the Fire Goddess of ancient Hawaiian legend. The altarpiece is a "harvest altar," with dried plants, pods, and seedlings scattered to the Four Winds. It is also a chaos altar, dispersing its contents in a whirlwind that seeks resolution while defending its deferral.

Please take a few moments to reside in these spaces. Take a seat on a cushion and journal your reflections or drawings in the notebooks provided. ***Please do not touch the works of art.***

The installation and performance are dedicated to the soul, spirit and abiding sweetness of Penny Hardenbergh. May her spirit be showered onto the Hanalei River valley. Reunited with her father Nelson and with Christ her Savior, may she be eternally enfolded and protected.