

# **The Spiritual in Art**

***Gerrit Verstraete***

***the new frontier of contemporary art***

# **the spiritual in art**

by Gerrit V.L.Verstraete AOCA, BFA

**including “the studio”  
an intimate portrait of the artist’s studio**

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***But what to say and when to say it  
can I dismantle my rebellion  
a force from above to show solidarity  
to the point of being willing to die***

***Online extras for yesterday's man  
where are the headlines of hope  
front page lessons for tomorrow  
before the next wave hits***

from *Cerulean Odyssey*,  
epic sketches of a long distance voyager  
by Gerrit Verstraete

## part one: the spiritual in art

### introduction

***“What is a work of art? A word made flesh.”*** Eric Gill (1882-1940)  
English sculptor and engraver, December 1940

For too long I have avoided writing about this thing called “the spiritual in art.” I have written much in my chronicles called “Essays,” beginning in 1997, as kind of an artistic journal. It was during one of my recent edits of all those essays when my heart began to stir about this thing called “the spiritual in art.” When I received word from the Netherlands, my country of birth, that a drawing course I had proposed had been accepted by the *European Academy for Culture and Arts* as part of their arts education program, it put me over the top. I made my decision.

The time had come to write “the spiritual in art.”

In part I was motivated by the fact that in Europe the issue of personal faith and culture is not nearly as divided as in North America. There seems to be much more room for dialogue between artist and educator, collector and public, church and state, and government and private institutions. On this side of the ocean, art and faith have become marginalized, to the point that those with a strong personal faith who choose to live that faith through their art, are social outcasts.

The hypocrisy of this position is clear. While artists who are Christians are marginalized, that is, those who are in the broadest sense of the word simply followers of Christ and not adherents to a particular denomination or religious right and left, the advocates of both realist and modernist worldviews nevertheless proclaim a gospel of their own.

Their gospel is evidenced by an art form that promotes the mystical in academic terms as well as in visual terms. Mysticism is packaged in academic contemporary art criticism, in a revival of native spirituality in art, and as well in a renewal of mannerist expression of fantasy and science fiction. In fact, while the pundits proclaim plurality, they advocate selectiveness as a form of segregation that hails the artist either “in or out” based on their terms of reference, that is, the religious box in which they have placed art. Christians therefore are reluctantly welcomed to create their own sandbox but encouraged not to play in their neighbour’s box. Hence the temptation is very real to create boxes of our own complete with our own lexicon of art definitions, symbolic meaning and canons of artistic discipline. One group even aimed for a theological perspective on art. Brrrr!

I am convinced the time has come for the artist to stand where he or she chooses to stand, right in the middle of the world of fine art, and with a conviction that his or her worldview is as valid as any other worldview and is worth listening to.

I do not advocate a new *ism* if that *ism* is a “look” that is peculiar to Christians, nor a creed or dogma that dictates the boundaries of creativity. Yet, I have chosen to advocate *pneumaism*, but that is the paradox. Pneumaism is not an *ism*. Neither is it a style or technique. It is not a movement. Pneumaism is an expression of the human spirit inspired by the spirit of God, and an expression that finds form in a variety of

media on canvas, on paper, on stage, in film on DVD, or wherever the artistic river flows.

## **pneumaism is a voice.**

Last night I spoke with one of my drawing models. She is an art student at a nearby university. She said, *“All my fellow art students are wondering if there really is anything beyond post modernism. We are aware,”* she continued, *“that modernism has had a good run of some one hundred and fifty years. But what is next? Some of us are trying too hard to invent something new, but it’s all been done before. All that leaves us is a ‘theatre of the absurd,’ and even that is nothing new.”*

I replied and encouraged her to look within and not at outward methods and media or to be too focused on creating something new.

*“What the world of art needs is not a new movement or a new style. Nothing is new under the sun. What the world needs is a new you, and what matters to you, and what encouragement and hope you can bring to others. That is what makes you truly contemporary and unique. To that you give voice in art.”*

I felt somehow I had touched on the real meaning of pneumaism. But the break was over and our Monday night life drawing group was ready for the last two poses of the evening. I settled in for another drawing and the issue did not come up again. I wanted to talk about it more, but when the night is done I have just enough time to catch the last ferry home.

The time has come to let the voice of the artist be heard.

The spiritual in art is my effort to try and put words to the thoughts.

I take my stand as an artist and educator to join all other voices and say with confidence, my journey is worth listening too, despite broadcast and print media’s pressure to typecast all of us into some archetype of right-wing evangelical fundamentalist religious zealot bent on only one course of action, to make you see it my way. It’s good for the ratings but a waste of air time. That’s Hollywood and since when has Hollywood become anything but entertainment? I love to be entertained and I love to be disciplined, but the two are not the same. Hollywood may entertain me, but truth educates and disciplines me.

All I ask is that you bear with me as I work this through. In fact, I would rather draw and paint my way through it, but somehow, putting it all into words may make it a bit easier. Yes I am first and foremost an artist. In the distance I hear my fellow artist John Gould say, “he has never known a good artist who could not write.”

I feel encouraged to press on.

Gerrit Verstraete  
Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada  
January 2005

## **the voice of art**

Even though I often resort to a *retrospective* of my creative journey in an attempt to get a clear picture of where I have come from and where I am going, I somehow feel a need to call this a *pro-spective*, that is, to look ahead and see where I may travel. The inherent risk of writing “pro-spectively,” is that no sooner have I somehow established a pattern or vision for this look ahead, and the whole thing changes. Thus I must remain flexible enough to accept change when it occurs.

It is a hot Saturday morning, July 24, 2004 and the day is too hot to work much in my studio. It’s unusual for the coast to be trapped in a heatwave, however, the fact there is little humidity makes the temperature bearable. It has been like this for nearly three months and this week the temperatures have been climbing to the mid-thirties. Too hot for my liking. It fuels memories of when I visited Africa and at the other extreme the Canadian Arctic and my first experience of an Arctic blizzard.

Nevertheless, as I examine my creative journey so far, I am aware of a growing sense of dissatisfaction. That dissatisfaction is rooted in a struggle between representational realism and abstraction. Each seem to want top spot in my repertoire of artwork. Conservative as I may be, I have dodged the issue by doing both. I may work on an academic drawing in one corner of the studio while an abstract painting waits in another corner. I may have succeeded in creating a delicate balance between my styles of work but I seem unable to resolve the conflict between the content of my work. I love figurative work whether realistic or abstract and I have made peace with the fact I am not a landscape artist, despite an ongoing love for Canada’s *Group of Seven*. I think it’s their passion for Canada showing through their work that speaks to me more than mere impressionist technique. I share that passion whenever and wherever I drive to fulfill my “circle tours” and long distance drives in my “sanctuary on wheels,” my van.

## **on the road to abstraction**

But the struggle increased when I began in earnest a journey on the road to abstraction, a form of art I had flirted with for many years and ever since I was a student at the *Ontario College of Art & Design*. The “Concetto Works” and “Concetto Prophecies” come close to aggravating that struggle to the point of downright despair. I believe it has to do with my voice. The “voice” of my realist representational work has consistently been “*the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty*,” especially in a community so filled with disfunction and violence of all kinds, a community I am well acquainted with through my involvement with the Hope Centre and the church. But there is a new “voice” that presses me to speak out. It’s a prophetic voice and it affects my art. It remains a struggle as I continue to create artwork outside the box, and it remains a tension as I wonder whether I travel too far outside the box. The struggle remains one of choices between abstract and modern traditions of colour, shape, “isms,” and technique. The tension remains as a choice of whose voice is it I wish to hear. Is it only my voice or is there another voice? Is it the established tradition of the artist’s voice, or as valid as that is, is there a deeper voice, a *pneumaist* voice inspired by the

Spirit of God? That brings me to a point in time where I am compelled, despite the heatwave, to examine this process “from the ground up.”

My experience in creating works of art has always been one of “building.” Essentially it’s a process of starting with nothing and adding one element at a time until a satisfied result is achieved. It is a process of seeing a drawing or a painting grow before my eyes. Skill and craftsmanship simply ensure I can direct the growth in the way my choices have determined the direction of my work and my choice of subject matter. Therefore, to begin a new work or embark in a new direction, requires a “gathering” of ingredients and raw material with which to begin. Abstractions allow me a spontaneous form of expression that eliminates the gathering of most raw materials and to simply “jump” into the creative process.

So, without any great pomp or pageantry, I think I need to begin with an analytical process of abstract expressionism that begins “in the beginning.”

## **in the beginning**

The purest form of artistic expression is the line. It is the most basic of creative forms. From the line grows shape, mass, and form, and to the line the artist adds colour, tone, texture, size, and technique. It remains then a personal choice in what medium to begin the line. The line becomes the first creative act with which I separate light from dark as a first and foremost act of creation. I can stare for hours and days at a blank canvas, a piece of paper, or for those who choose marble or wood, metal or another medium, but ultimately it comes down to that first step. It is a daring move to separate darkness from light. With one stroke light is separated by a dark line in whatever colour or tone or hue. It’s a moment of spiritual truth. My hands have been trained to discipline the line to conform to a language of form and mass, gesture and shape, which I have developed over a professional artistic life of over forty years. Realism and representationalism discipline the line to conform to images and knowledge of the human form from a lexicon of impressions in my mind and from live models, be they nude in the studio, or real people in real time such as my “coffeeshop people” sketches. My lexicon or language is a rich reservoir of creative inspiration that enjoys creating “in the footsteps of master” as a personal quest for excellence in draughtsmanship and virtuosity in execution. The quest remains a very satisfying “work-in-progress,” with the prospect of “arriving” always a motive to embark on a move to discover new footsteps or deepen the experience of existing footsteps.

But, it is the abstract work that challenges me even more. It is a temptation to run a parallel course of discovery with the realist work and fill my head with a lexicon of other abstract images in order to develop a language of my own. However, imitation, remains the lure of compromise if all I want to do is conform to contemporary pressures to be modern or post-modern. Yet, the validity of *minimalism* is its reductionist ability to bring creativity to its humblest of beginnings. Therefore, to that minimalist way I must turn and examine the line as the primal form of creative expression, with the hope that it will lead to drawing and painting the voice that speaks within. I don’t know if that is to begin in just a sketchbook or do I jump right onto a canvas. Perhaps both.

But the question that burns deepest is: can a longing for abstract work, whose primary roots date back to my advertising agency years of the nineteen sixties and seventies, when I had great admiration for the simplicity of graphic design to create abstract works for commercial purposes together with a passion for realism. I am equally moved by a flat field of maroon, grey and ultramarine blue, as I am by a classical drawing or a more interpretative drawing.

Sometimes I fear that one day my abstract journey will come to an end and I will have wasted years of pursuit down a road that was not to be. What if I found myself in a place and environment of contemporaries where drawing had indeed gained rightful prominence and recognition alongside its siblings of painting and sculpture? Would I abandon abstract art? Perhaps, but I am not moved by fear.

Such is the case of my current works in the studio. In one corner of the studio I have nearly finished a large four panel abstract expressionist painting resembling a freeflow drawing, like a giant gestural work based loosely on the idea of the “four horseman of the apocalypse.” In the other corner I’ve laid down the outline for a new academy drawing. Somewhere in between lie ideas for the next silverpoint drawing and a host of life drawings, coffeeshop people and *en plein air* work. There are lingering thoughts that some day I must do a photographic essay of some aesthetic, such as that elusive experience of relationship between beauty and form found in nature, inspired by the vast panorama of our Pacific west coast, where I live.

## **a portfolio of many clients**

I cannot help but think this is still residue of my ad agency years when my creative output was determined by a portfolio of many clients whose demands ranged from realism to abstraction and from black and white to colour, in a variety of media including pen and ink ( newspaper furniture illustrations ), colour markers ( cartoons for audio/visual presentations ), pencil and marker ( endless storyboards for television and film ), photography ( for product and editorial representation ), illustrations ( for books and magazines ), and pure graphic design for layouts, finished art, packaging and corporate design. In addition to creating artwork in all of the above, I supervised their final production and I remained overall creative director for all projects and campaigns. Not once did I ever think, nor did anyone ever tell me that all that work constituted a legitimate body of artwork and thus validate a need to save as much of it as possible. Most of my commercial work is gone.

However, has this legacy of “multi-tasking” become a burden for me in my present fine arts journey? I may make claims about the true nature of a renaissance artist, that is, able to work in any number of media and in a variety of artforms, but is that also the heart of my struggle and tensions? Yet, I cannot escape the driving passion of knowing I will create abstractly again while I am working on a realist drawing and knowing while I paint in the vigour and excitement of abstract painting, such as the “Concetto Prophecies,” I long again and again for the peace and tranquility of fine art drawing, especially figurative work.

I am reminded of a similar tension, one that has shaped by personal faith for over twenty years. It is the tension of being *in* the world but not *of* it, a tension whose roots

lie in the Kingdom of God and my continuing search for “the city of God,” as it applies to my life, my art, my relationships, my calling, and their collective juxtaposition to the world community around me.

## **the worthier task**

It seems fitting that I commend both my mentors, Michelangelo and Canadian drawing master John Gould, for encouraging me to chronicle my creative journey in writing as well as in visual images. Michelangelo spoke of writing as “the worthier task,” and John Gould said, “he never knew a good artist who couldn’t write.”

As I stretch to expand my drawing into post-minimalism and its inherent simplicity, I struggle to find my own voice, not content to simply mimic the voice of others. I am comforted with the fact I have re-discovered fragments of my minimalist roots dating back my advertising and graphics career. However, if the aesthetic is as simple as making a mark on the surface of paper in that most primary and sacred of creative moments, that “act of creation” when light is separated from dark, have I created something new or have I simply uncovered a *lavare* moment? Have I discovered that “nothing is new under the sun,” and that only my discovery is new, new for me and new for those who see and hear what my *concetto* work is saying?

Reduced, yet set free in its most minimal of process, form and aesthetic, free from representation, subjectivity, objectivity, symbolism and modern dogmatic socio/political iconography, will the line as I know her, that supreme of “first marks,” travel where so many have traveled before and where I have traveled these many years of my artistic journey?

I have traveled the human form in endless miles of line, creating forms and form’s collective, the human soulscape. If that line is set free, where will she go? Where will I go? Classical and contemporary, in colours or black and white, large or small, in form and shape, from gesture to mathematical, the line is the mark and the “mark is the message.” The medium is not the message. Instead, the medium plays a supportive role to the mark of the line. I long to let all my lines speak freely of the need for good medicine for the human spirit, in touch with real people in real time. Yet, today I look back and discover that my present flight of freedom is once again in response to my passion for the human form, a passion for that most frail and vulnerable of minimalist creations, namely men, women, and children. Minimalist in aesthetic wonder, yet maximalist in their complex forms of will, emotions, intellect, needs, hopes, and dreams, they are my everyday canvas. To touch them with love is the greatest contemporary artwork of all. To encourage them with the voice of my art is a never ending challenge.

## **in search of art and spirituality**

***“The principal aim is to make an impression on the soul. Art should move the spectator.”*** Pierre Paul Prud’hon (1758-1823), French painter

What motivated and inspired me to write about the spiritual in art was a growing sense that art is indeed spiritual and that the life of an artist is inseparably tied to the work he or she creates. Art is the shadow of the artist's life. Art is an expression of the artist's beliefs, the credos and dogmas by which he or she lives. Artists have always searched for the connection between spirituality and art.

**Life is spiritual and if art is an expression of life, then somehow, spirituality and art are closely connected.**

Understanding that connection may change the way we create and look at art, and hopefully it will change the way we live as we grow spiritually and artistically. As usual, these two subjects of art and spirituality have fueled many of my long-distance drives as well as times of deep contemplation in my studio. I make no pretense about the difficulties I have encountered in these thoughts, especially when I have attempted over the years to articulate those thoughts in a number of newspaper columns and magazine articles. It has been and remains a challenge and daunting task to write about art and spirituality, a task I do not treat lightly. Yet, I rise to the challenge because words are an artform that more than any other form holds the power to clarify the issues we face.

But first an obvious question.

## **qualifications**

What qualifies me to write about art and spirituality?

Qualification to do anything has always been a contentious issue between traditionalists and modernists, and between religiously institutional people and those who aspire towards a higher road of worship in spirit and truth. My qualification is the experience of life as a higher ground of learning than merely academic knowledge. **Even though the two, experience and knowledge, make excellent working partners, it is experience that comes first.** The teacher may impart truth but the student must apply that truth and work with it in order to gain the valuable experience of truth. Spiritual truth is revealed and not simply acquired. Thus knowledge becomes real as a result of the experience of the revelation's application.

The experiences of having lived many years and having created a body of artwork as well as a body of writings about spirituality, are foremost my qualifiers.

My journey in fine art began as a student when I enrolled in September of 1964, at the *Ontario College of Art & Design* in Toronto. I graduated with honours four years later. From then until now, some forty plus years later, this grand adventure called art has taken me through drawing and painting, executive management and ownership of a national advertising agency, a spiritual rebirth in 1981, over twenty-five years in what is traditionally called *ministry*, including: pastoring, teaching, counseling, writing, performing arts management, and more drawing and painting. In other words, I have learned some things along the way. My current destination has been my island home and *Masterpeace Fine Art Studio* since 1993. It is in my studio where I spend the largest part of each day creating more artwork. The studio is also where I have begun a new adventure along a road to abstraction. It was this new experience of abstraction that prompted me to at least begin thinking about writing "*the spiritual in art,*" as my

thoughts continued to race between abstraction, realism, qualifications, the amount of artwork I have created, and the meaning of it all.

To qualify my creative experiences, as an honours graduate of Canada's oldest and most reputable art college where I earned an AOCA, Associate of the Ontario College of Art degree, I have also completed a Bachelor of Fine Art degree with the *British Columbia Open University*. I am founder of the *Drawing Society of Canada* and featured in the society's online educational "*Gallery of Canadian Drawing Masters*," and I have been part of the consulting faculty of the *European Academy for Culture and Arts*. In 2003, seven of my peers and each a respected Canadian artist, nominated me for election into the *Royal Canadian Academy of Arts*. To qualify my spiritual experiences, I have completed six years of formal study and three years of independent and interdisciplinary studies. All this study led to a great discovery.

**That discovery was the fact that my entire spiritual journey, whether in art, in relationships, in marriage, in my family, among friends, in the community, or life in general, revolved around two most profound directions and influences for life. One was the kingdom of God, the other was to be truly led by the Spirit of God.**

Whether I speak about art or spirituality, both are extremely personal, and both conjure up a myriad of reactions, some for and some against. But that is a risk I must take if I am to remain true to my own journey of creativity. Nevertheless, this is about a very personal view of my world of art and faith. You can take it or leave it. For those who take it, I am confident you will be challenged to look deep into your own private world. For those who reject my views, I thank you for at least having listened.

However, my agenda is not to proselytize nor persuade you to accept a doctrine or dogma belonging to a religious order called Christianity. Neither is my intent to solicit members for a church or denomination. This is not an art of gentle persuasion or an evangelism and conversion program. Nevertheless, I am compelled to share a journey of art that in its search for the meaning of art and the meaning of spirituality in art, remains undoubtedly tied to what I believe to be the meaning of life. I espouse no one's doctrine nor follow the teachings of any one man or woman, whether dead or alive. I herald no great human prophet and I hate a religious work ethic. I have come to know and taste the goodness of true freedom, a freedom beyond political pressure, beyond the stranglehold of consumerism, beyond the religious *isms* of the artworld, and beyond fear of failure. My roots continue to grow deep in the life I have been given and remain anchored in the kingdom of God. That is where I have chosen to eat the bread of life to sustain me through being a husband, a father, a man, a citizen, and an artist. That is the view from which I live and speak, and from which I create my art as I explore this often mysterious thing called spirituality and art.

## **clarifying a choice of words**

To continue, I must clarify my use of words by writing a clear definition of two words. They are art and spirituality.

Although I make no attempt to write *the* definitive academic description of each word, as an artist I will confine definitions to my practise of *art* and *spirituality* in daily

life. Words can clarify many thoughts but words can also confuse. Take the family dog for example. The word *dog* conjures up images of big ones, little ones, black ones and furry ones. Whatever the size and shape of your dog or your neighbour's dog, it creates a picture attached to the word *dog*. Words such as *art* and *spirituality* are no exception. Therefore I must clarify what I understand these two words to mean. Only then can we continue this discussion and hopefully learn something *en route*. To the best of my knowledge, my search for meaning of *art* and *spirituality* has been thorough, although by no means complete.

## **art**

### **First there is the word *art*.**

Art has its roots in the Greek word "*techne*". From this root came art's traditional definition of *technique*. The Harper Collins *Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* ( Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1969, Second edition 1991 ) has no inclusive definition for the word *art*. It simply defines *art* by its descriptive adjectives such as *modern art*, *abstract art*, *expressionist art* and *representational art*, to name a few. In each case the adjective describes a style or content often peculiar to a period in the history of art. The word *art* simply remains a word to encompass all forms of creative expression. We know the *art of writing* and *photographic arts*. Theatre belongs to the *performing arts*. *Visual arts* includes all forms of drawing and painting and sculpture. *Media arts* and *installation art* are relatively new forms of expression.

My antique edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* ( by Noah Webster, The Werner Company, New York, 1899 ) defines art as "*a system of rules, serving to facilitate the performance of certain actions ..... the liberal or polite arts are those in which the mind or imagination is chiefly concerned, as poetry, music and painting*".

Noah Webster further expands the meaning of the word *art* with such descriptions as *human skill*, *dexterity*, *experience*, *study* and *observation*. A more current dictionary ( Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary, 1975 ) defines art as "*an aesthetically pleasing and meaningful arrangement of elements, as words, sounds, colours, shapes etc.*" Both dictionaries define art as a careful system of expression. They do not abandon art to mere accidental expression without formal roots. In fact they further explain that *art* must be according to "*a system of rules and principles that facilitates skilled human accomplishment*". Contrary to popular myth, art is not simply all forms of expression especially expression without formal artistic foundation.

## **solid foundations**

### **Art is expression based on solid foundations of study and skillful practice that mature over many years.**

All words on a page are not a novel. All notes on a score sheet are not music. All strokes of paint are not paintings. Art without the discipline of traditional study is meaningless. Meaningless art is subject to the whims and fancies of contemporary

criticism without a solid foundation to call it real art. Real art demands real discipline. Real discipline is the accumulative wisdom and craftsmanship of hundreds of years of practise. The notion that art can be created impulsively "*for art's sake*" without a need to master the craft of drawing or painting is a delusion. Art is *techne*, a technique of using skill and knowledge to give expression to creative thought. To incorporate the meaning of art's *techne* into our relationship between *art* and *spirituality*, art can be defined as follows.

**Art is the work of artists who express their life and world in a variety of visual ways by creatively expressing themselves through a combination of learned skill, committed desire, joy of discipline, respect for traditional and contemporary methods, and diligent practise over a lifetime.**

But if art is essentially expression based on learned artistic skills, what is *expression*?

## **expression**

Expression is the form or shape artists give to the art of drawing, painting and sculpture. This expression is first of all based on the artist's reaction to life and the world around them. Second, reaction becomes a voice to give meaning to expression. The observation of life in nature and people causes artists to react. Inspired by the experience and knowledge of colour, shape, texture, form, and their affect on emotions and moods, the artist conceives ways in which to express that experience and knowledge. Expressions are drawn, painted or sculpted from without to reflect mountains, prairies, trees, water, sky, buildings, light and people just to name a few. By judging the experience with reason, intelligence, careful observation and such key ingredients of artistic form as line, shape, composition and colour, the artist creates his or her work of art.

Expression is also a voice of the artist as he draws and paints from within incorporating personal beliefs of truth and norms for life. Whether that voice is profound, critical, appreciative, narrative or prophetic, light or heavy, it is nevertheless a voice. In other words, regardless of subject or media, the artist expresses himself to give voice to his journey of life. However, artists must be challenged to be more than a voice of reporters, commentators and critics, as they mirror life. They must be a voice of truth and beauty drawn from the artist's crucible of personal experience. The artist's crucible of experience is not his or her work of art separated from a personal experience of life. The challenge is to be a creative voice for Godly character, value, and a celebration of love and compassion for the human family.

True art is inseparable from life. Therefore art is about life.

True art is more than simply decor to please a homeowner's fancy. True art is art that expresses life. Artistic expression of life is not art that merely parrots nature. Life has a voice and that voice must be heard. The artist has a voice. He must use it as an expression of his personal life and all that it means to him or her, both intellectually and experientially. All life is spiritual.

For that reason my art is spiritual because it is about my life. I make a distinction between *true* art and *other* art, that is, between market-drive art and artist-driven art,

simply because I can find no better word to describe real art about life in comparison to those forms of art that serve only to decorate. To decorate is not wrong, nor is it anti-art. There is however, a high road for art and that is to inspire.

## **spirituality**

### **Second is the word *spirituality*.**

Spirituality as related to my art has its roots in my human spirit. The natural world we see and touch with our senses is real. The spiritual world which we cannot see and touch is equally real. However, this discussion of art and spirituality is not about spirits and the spirit world. Suffice it to say when I was a child I was amazed at the discovery of the portable radio. Even though my young mind was able to fathom the transmission of radio signals along obvious and lengthy wires, but to travel invisibly through the air? Impossible. Far away from cities and houses, factories and noisy traffic, even amidst forests and presumably empty plains, I could turn on my little battery-powered portable radio and receive a signal. The empty air was full of static, audible voices and music. So it is with the world of the spirit. It is there even though I cannot see it. It surrounds me and has a profound effect on my daily existence.

Spirituality is that which touches the realm of the spirit.

Other words often used to describe this spirituality are the heart of a person, the essence of life, the soul of man, or simply heart and soul. Yet all these descriptions fall short of describing what essentially remains an elusive mystery far short of our ability to understand. Spirituality is a reason for living based on a value system outside the natural human experience. Spirituality is a force that motivates us and governs what and how we believe. Spirituality resides in the human spirit yet its source is a spirit far greater than ours. Somehow, however, I am compelled not to resign spirituality to mere trivial pursuit of meaning of words. Spirituality governs all life. And if life is the foundation of our artistic expression then spirituality is the foundation of our creativity.

Our modern era has witnessed a great hunger for spiritual truth. People of all walks of life are searching for meaning to life and a truth by which to live that life. As a babyboomer generation begins to age, questions about life beyond the grave, heaven and eternity, loom as mysterious unknowns. Yet the need to know about these things burns in the human soul. Spirituality is identified as a search beyond human existence. Unfortunately our world of consumerism has spawned endless clichés about "*catching the spirit*" to sell travel, goods and services. Mysticism combined with lore and legend have created a spiritual surrealism about an elusive Camelot, a heroic Middle-Earth, and a far-away Shangri-La beyond the horizon. The study of native spirituality is at an all-time popular high. Spirituality is real because life is real.

## **life is spiritual.**

We are spirits who have souls and who reside in bodies. Although we may study each aspect of our physical and spiritual existence separately for a better understanding of human behaviour, it is imperative *not* to separate spirit, soul and body in our creative expression of life. There exists no such human life that claims all spirit and no body or

soul, or all body and no soul or spirit. An academic separation of spirit, soul and body called gnosticism and aestheticism have caused much pain and suffering in humanity because they nurture false beliefs in a greater importance of one over the other. We cannot give greater worth to the spirit and starve the body and in the aftermath starve an entire nation. That is error. We cannot exalt intellect and reason over faith and trust. We cannot exalt the body to eat and drink and live irresponsibly as if there is no tomorrow. We cannot exalt personal feelings and as a result abuse relationships between husband and wife, father and child, mother and child because we believe life is looking out for number one - me. That is gross error. Yet these errors are often the result of belief systems that separate spirit, soul, body to exalt one over the other both for honourable and for dishonourable gain. Spirituality is rooted in our human spirit. How such spirituality inseparably affects soul and body is the quest of human knowledge and experience.

True spiritual life is a delicate, yet clearly defined balance between spirit, soul and body.

Perhaps it is better for me to abandon this attempt to explain spirit, soul and body and simply accept the fact that they exist. I believe the need for their compatibility and peaceful co-existence is paramount. Fact believes what it can see. Faith believes what it cannot see. Spiritual life is connected to faith. We believe spirituality is real because somehow deep inside our hearts we have faith in forces and yearnings we simply cannot explain. How do we explain falling in love? It is impossible. Yet we fall hopelessly in love. Ancient writings state that eternity was placed in our hearts. Grafted into our very beings is a sense of eternity. But try and explain it? It is impossible. It is easier, however, to explain natural life. It is the world of our understanding and feelings, the things we can study, measure and experience with our senses. Yet, somehow the two, our natural and spiritual worlds are connected. Our understanding of natural and spiritual forces shapes our character, our conduct, our faith and our value system. Therefore, it is imperative that we have an understanding of spirituality and the world of the spirit that surrounds us and resides in us because it shapes our lives and affects our art.

## **creativity is spiritual**

The human spirit is only one side of spirituality, only one side of the coin. To believe life is spiritual and art and spirituality are connected, we must believe that the human spirit is not alone in its spiritual quest. There is a higher authority, a higher existence. God is real. It is how we live in response to God that shapes our spirituality and impacts our reaction to all creation and the family of man with whom we share this planet. By choice of the human will we must decide to accept or reject God as a person and decide to accept or reject His will as supreme. Either choice has its own unique consequences that form the basis of our human experience and our human reaction to creation's order. Our choice affects the spirituality of our creativity. Life is spiritual reality lived in the natural. Spiritual rules over natural. Someone once said, "*we are not humans looking for a spiritual experience, but spirits looking for a human experience*".

But which spirit? We can quench our spirits to such an extent that our hearts are hardened and our spirits are dead. We no longer hear or even know divine truth. In turn we open our minds to wrong spirits whose intent is an advocacy of evil. Some of us have hearts so hardened we will deny the existence of evil. Yet, evidence of spirit, be it good or bad, is apparent throughout history. That evidence has found a voice in art as well. Art has been created to advocate good and evil.

Spiritual life is experienced in the natural. Spiritual art is expressed in the natural. Spiritual creativity gives expression and voice to such spiritual life. We know that expression as art. The natural is a mirror, albeit broken, of the spiritual. The natural offers glimpses of pure spiritual and a chronic need for all creation including man to experience re-birth. Life is spirit. We are spirit. We are human spirits in need of God's Spirit. Art is a voice of the human spirit to express natural life. Art is a voice to express experiences of the human spirit as it relates to the Spirit of God. Therefore art can be natural and spiritual. Natural art is a mirror of nature. Nature is our natural creation that surrounds humanity including the natural condition of man. Natural art mirrors our reaction to nature and our reaction to mankind in his natural surroundings.

## **natural art**

Natural art is expressed in a variety of artistic styles such as naturalism, realism, abstract and abstract expressionism. Natural art is created using any number of media in our treatment of subject matter such as landscapes, seascapes, still life settings, figure studies, and portraits, as well as our emotional responses to the natural we draw and paint in happiness, sadness, anger, and contentment. Such expression is enhanced through our perfected skill and craftsmanship, as well as our intimate knowledge of classical disciplines in fine art techniques. The artist's motive for creating *natural* art ranges from material gain, fame, fortune and notoriety, to personal achievement of higher skill levels, a greater fulfillment as an artist, and a desire to share the fruits of our artistic labours with others. Many of art history's *schools*, *isms* and *movements* are visual commentaries on nature through natural art with its construction and composition of line, shape, mass and colour, but somehow these *schools*, *isms* and *movements*, have not touched the spiritual.

## **spiritual art**

Spiritual art, however, is natural art backed by a life of quality and character whose behaviour as well as art are a voice of truth about life. Spiritual art is not an illustration of spiritual subjects. Bible characters and biblical scenes, icons and moral illustrations, portraits of saints and martyrs, prophets and worshippers, are not spiritual art. Any artist with skill and training can draw or paint them yet live in complete violation of their meaning. Spiritual art gives expression to the human spirit only if such expression is a voice of divine truth not simply drawn or painted, but lived. Such a life of divine truth is the heartbeat of faith. Such spiritual art is not abstract in content but real, not to be confused with *realism* or *abstract art*. One is content, the other style. Spiritual

art imparts life. Understanding these distinctions between natural and spiritual art, real and realism, content and style, illustration and narrative, mirror and voice, will help the artist experience a greater freedom from the pressures of religious and iconographic art and collectors of religious art often mistakenly called Christian art. Spiritual art is the higher goal of art because its roots trace back to the artist and not just the work he or she produces. Natural art can impact the realm of soul and body through the senses to offer pleasure, hope, joy, knowledge and stirring of emotions. Spiritual art impacts the human spirit to offer meaning to life.

It is a creativity that is free. It is a creativity not restricted by style or *isms*. It is pure art that dispels a myth that the artist must be an *enfant terrible* pressured by collector and marketplace to produce works whose voice is death, and death by decay, rebellion and destruction, death through depression, rejection and bitterness. Pure art promotes the artist as *enfant Dieu*, free to produce works whose voice is life - life of maturing growth, obedience and encouragement, life through assurance, acceptance and forgiveness.

At last I am free to draw what I see and know, what I experience and believe, what I appreciate and love. At last I am free to draw anything and everything, free to explore holiness of beauty and beauty of holiness. At last I am free to walk in the footsteps of masters whose love for the disciplines of fine art were matched by a life-long commitment to excel in their craft. I am free to break the mold of art and spirituality that restricts creativity to a sale, a market demand and the dogmatic imposition of the religions of art. Mine is a peculiar journey to draw and paint my hopes and dreams into expressions of life and a voice of truth.

## **engaging culture**

***“It is not bright colours but good drawing that makes figures beautiful.”*** Titian Vecellio (1477-1576) Italian ( Venice) painter

Many artists have failed to engage culture where it needs to be engaged right in the midst of *isms* and the world of art. They have created artistic ghettos of *“me too”* art. Me too art is art that reduces creativity to an exclusive language of religion such as *Christianese*, understood by only the elect and filled with mysterious symbols and icons whose meaning fuels the fires of doctrine, dogma and religious practise. Interpretation is for the select who have chosen theology as an academic pursuit. The world has its icons and they have theirs, especially in art. The two never meet. Their art fails to bridge the gap between two human beings whose encounter on the road of life is infinitely more important in the grand scheme of things than their iconographic art. But my burden is also for those artists who do not believe as I do. They too have created an artistic ghetto.

It is the ghetto of a post-modern world view that deliberately discounts the valuable traditions of the past in favour of impulsive and abstract thoughts that offer little life to the weary soul. Creativity is reduced to an exclusive language of high criticism. I am convinced that if yesterday's masters read today's words written about their work they would shake their heads in unbelief. Spiritual art has suffered a major

decline from the stimulating days of the Renaissance. When the *age of enlightenment* gave birth to modern art, its intent was to destroy the traditions and disciplines of the academy, in favour of a free artistic spirit.

Some 130 years later, three Israeli researchers wrote: "*nothing imprisons the mind more thoroughly, nothing stifles inventiveness and artistry more brutally, than too much freedom.*" "*Instead,*" they argue, "*the real source of productive creativity may lie in art's supposed bugaboos: rules, structure, even the occasional editor or two*" ( *Algorithm blows lid on creativity* - National Post, September 8, 1999 ).

It is post-modernism that has set out to abandon creative rules, destroy structure and even sacrifice the occasional editor or two, whose voices for a revival of classical discipline have gone unheeded. Although expressionism, impressionism, abstract expressionism, and other *isms*, offered the artist a new wealth of expressive methods, it opened the door to a spirituality whose intent was to destroy that which had been held in high esteem for centuries. By post-modernism I do not mean modern art or abstract art. Modern abstract art is a style. Post-modernism is a humanist voice for life that denies the true source of life. Instead it bestows that honour upon man himself. Man is the centre of the post-modernist's universe. God is dead, especially in art.

Post-modernism in art makes its *voice* subject to the *form* of art and not the *life* of the artist, unless the artist's dysfunctions serve a peculiar publicity function. Thoughts, opinions and views are restricted to narrow commentary on colour, space and other artistic principles. Art is drawn and painted but not lived. This is not an indictment of every artist. Many have escaped the ghettos of *me too* art and post-modernism. Instead, it is a summons to accept *art* and *spirituality* as our challenge to express truth and impart life with a myriad of styles and in a variety of media.

I speak for the artist whose heart longs for a personal *art* and *spirituality* that causes him or her to "*fly beyond the stars*" ( Francis A. Schaeffer ) and to soar with the eagles on a journey of learning, experience and discipline combined with a creative voice that offers hope and love with a voice that gives rather than takes.

## **in search of freedom**

Michael Sadler, in his introduction to Kandinsky's book, "*Concerning the Spiritual in Art,*" ( Dover Publications Inc., 1977, New York, p xiii ) argues that it is perhaps an uncommon occurrence to find an artist who is "capable of expressing his aims and ideals with any clearness and moderation." He was speaking about Wassily Kandinsky, who first penned his thoughts for a book that was published in 1914, as "*The Art of Spiritual Harmony,*" by Constable and Company in London, England. Sadler also claims that Wassily Kandinsky and his fellow leaders of what was then a new art movement in Munich, were evidence of the absurdity of a former and old convention known as "*l'art pour l'art,*" when eccentricity and an irregular life especially for the artist, were more important than any talent. It was middle-class to be sane, but between the insane artist and the sane middle-class outer world, "yawned a gulf which few could cross especially as an artist." Kandinsky and his fellow artists, considered such attitudes absurd. They were reputed to be a new kind of modern artist. They were the artist-prophets who considered themselves to be the spiritual teachers of the world. In order

to make their teachings about art valid and understandable, they were of necessity compelled to become authors as well, and translate their creative output of line and colour into words. My friend and *comrade-in-art*, Canadian drawing master John Gould, once told me that “he never knew an artist who could not write.”

My other friend and *comrade-in-art*, Renaissance master, Michelangelo (1475 - 1564) was a prolific writer as well. With over five hundred sonnets to his credit and a substantial amount of personal commentary about themes of life such as love, time, death, religion, neoplatonism, the body, and art, Michelangelo made it clear that ultimately, in the hierarchy of the arts, he ranked writing “the worthier task.” ( *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, an annotated translation by James M.Saslow, Yale University Press, 1991, USA, p. 34 ).

I therefore propose that the modern era will see an increase of those artists who will become compelled to express their views of life and the arts, whether their artform is visual, music, or words. The question remains, “but will they be worth listening to? Will I be worth listening to?” I suppose the fruit of my labours will be the judge of that.

To undertake writing anything of worth about art and spirituality, I must possess a working knowledge and experience about both art and spirituality, yet I am challenged to be flexible enough to remain free from any dogmatic temptation to cast the writings “in stone” and create yet another new doctrinal *ism* about art to be filtered into the young minds of new artists.

We do not need more doctrines and dogmas about art and spirituality.

I began my journey in art in the classical tradition. Whether I chose to draw the human form, or vainly attempted my versions of *Group of Seven* landscapes or a Winslow Homer seascape perhaps, I remained thoroughly grounded in traditional classical disciplines of realism. Any attempt to create an abstract painting, was a mild form of arrogance as my motive was no more than an “I-can-do-that-too” attitude. Yet, it did touch a sincere appreciation for abstraction as a form of design that simplified line, colour, and shape. After all, design, or *graphic design*, became the very substance of my creative work during the fifteen years I owned a national advertising agency. Graphic design is a form of abstraction that simplifies artforms for aesthetic reasons and practical reasons such as the limits of printing and other means of reproduction.

Perhaps the greater challenge of writing about the spiritual in art is to take meaning that has been obscured or mystified by visual arts and express that meaning in a language of words that touches the hearts of everyday people in an everyday world.

## **spiritual food for real people**

**What good is art if it is not spiritual food for real people in real time, as an expression of artists who themselves are real people in real time.**

Whether the convention of writing is old or new, it is necessary. Post-modern philosophies have obscured if not destroyed the real meaning of art and life, and the calling to every artist is to restore that meaning, so that those who follow in their footsteps can apply the spiritual in art to their daily lives, with a hope that there is a *river of living water* from which our tired minds can quench a longing thirst for truth. It may seem academic to claim art is spirit, or to be an artist is to be spiritual, but it is

nevertheless true provided we accept the fact that all of life is spiritual, and that spirituality is not the exclusive domain of the artist.

Who then are the prophets of this modern epoch in which we live? And are they worth listening to?

The answer lies in our ability to be fruit inspectors.

Art is more than just the expression of an artist's views and opinions, or simply a prowess of technical virtuosity. Art is not just some echo of a religious legalism or iconographic storytelling. The artist, like everyone else on the planet, lives out of what he or she believes. How the artist lives will inevitably bear fruit, sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet.

## **art is the fruit an artist's life**

If the artist is compelled to write about art, specifically about works of art he or she has created, and if the artist publicly exposes his or her fruit for the world to see, then all who see must become fruit inspectors, for reasons of ensuring their own spiritual health. After all, bad fruit can spoil an entire crop. Bad influence has a way of corrupting beliefs. The reason we inspect the fruit is to see whether it is worth eating. If the fruit appears sweet yet the life of the artist is bitter, do I want to take a bite? If the artist offers a fruit that bears glad tidings of solutions for life, yet none of the solutions are applied in the artist's own life, do I want to take a bite? If the artist offers a fruit that bears a brutal critique of human values, yet none of the critique offers a viable way out of the mess, do I want to take a bite? If artistic beauty is a cover for personal violence, is it not a charade, a pretense of worthwhile thought? Is beauty only to be exploited? Does sex really sell? What good is it to listen to the man sing, "all you need is love," when as soon as the music is over and the crowds have left, he returns to his hotel, trashes the room, drinks and drugs himself into a stupor, and then goes home to beat his wife and ignores his children. Sentiment? Perhaps. But is it the kind of love you need? No!

Some jump on the civil libertarian bandwagon and shout, "but you shall not judge and you must be tolerant." Everyone has freedom of speech they cry. As Canadians we have freedom of speech guaranteed in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and I am painfully reminded many other countries are not as fortunate as we are to have the right to freedom of speech enshrined in a constitution. But that right is not a guarantee of intelligent speech. Therefore we must discern between what is good and what is bad, what is intelligent and what is dribble. Our life depends on it. But we are not judges, just fruit-inspectors. To judge is to condemn which is not our duty, but to inspect is to discern and that is our duty. We have a human right to choose the apples we eat. Some are a bitter fruit of rebellion, some are a sweet fruit of righteousness. We must be sure which is which.

As we inspect the artist's fruit we become increasingly aware of our need to search for a deeper meaning to life - a spiritual meaning. We are no longer satisfied with mere mimicry or blatant copying of externals regardless of their persuasive claim that realism is the only true picture of life. But the spirit of an artist is as real as his flesh and that is the paradox. Whatever spiritual answers we look for, they remain inseparably tied to our human existence in that increasingly demanding world of flesh and blood.

The flesh finds satisfaction in the realism of reason, intellect and feelings, whereas the spirit finds satisfaction in the *sur*-realism or abstractions of reality that speak directly to an emotional soul with truth that is beyond realism. Dare I say a truth whose realism is faith.

Is it possible then that realism satisfies the soul and abstract art satisfied the spirit?

And if that is true, is there a great divide between those artists who stay as children in the soulish world of emotions, feelings and reason, the things we can see, and those who grow to maturity in the spiritual world of faith and the things we cannot see? Of course, that question is often fueled by other intentions such as where most of the money is to be made, and the often obscure line between market-driven art and artist-driven art. The art market of realism exchanges billions of dollars in sales each year. Abstraction does not fare as well. Therefore the prophets of our artworld and the voices of art itself are confusing. Is it sales and satisfaction or is it truth and consequences they offer? Is it fact or faith? Is knowing what a work of art looks like of greater value than what it says or how it makes you feel?

## **art and faith**

### **The engine that drives the spiritual in art is faith.**

But faith in what or faith in who? Is it faith in traditions, in academic canons, and in skills and techniques? Is it faith in ourselves? Is it faith in art history and in art movements or are we moved by faith's companion of fear who persuades the artist to believe he or she is simply not contemporary enough? Or is it faith in God? Is there a spirituality in art where the human spirit of the artist is inspired by the Spirit of God, inspired to create life and not just mimic religious activity with icons and symbols? Is there a spirituality in art that is beyond realism. Is it an abstraction, that is abstraction as a form of artistic expression not as a creed? We do not need more abstract thought and opinion; we need spiritual realism.

I usually mistrust *isms* because eventually they all suffer the same demise - irrelevancy. Nevertheless, this "art of the spirit," this *pneumaism* as I have named "art of the spirit," is a valid *ism* because at its core of expression lies a freedom every artist dreams of and few truly find. Instead, many succumb to the religion of art. Art and religion have been friend and foe throughout history, but the sometimes uneasy partnership and sometimes very profitable relationship, have made art a religion unto itself. Like its counterpart with which we are perhaps more familiar, namely the church and world religions with their collective strangleholds, art suffers the same strangleholds as religion. These strangleholds are the confusion and division of numerous artist denominations. Artists, art historians, critics, collectors and patrons, all flock to the church of the *mannerists*, the church of the *realists*, the *impressionists*, the *expressionists*, and in our modern and post-modern era, the all-too-familiar pluralistic church of the *modernists*. Each church has its own converts, its own doctrines and ambitious evangelism programs, to persuade an art-thirsty world that theirs is *the* way of truth and light. Those who control the wealth of art even espouse there is but one Rome. Rome's church is *classicism*. Some claim there is one Paris, and the church that

resides there is the holy church of *impressionism*. Others claim New York is the true Rome and the church that resides there is the holy church of *modernism*. Many church galleries fill cityscapes around the world with rooms full of ancient and contemporary icons. Each artistic denomination has its own doctrines, its own dogmas and confessions, and a litaney of rules and regulations. Memberships are often exclusive, with little opportunity for any form of ecumenism among the churches. Therefore, we must remain diligent inspectors of fruit produced by the religion of art, including the fruit we produce ourselves. Is it worth eating? I am no exception to this inspection. Is my fruit worth eating?

## **art and freedom**

### **The spiritual in art is freedom.**

The spiritual in art is a seed of freedom sown in the artist's heart, a seed that will produce a body of work that rivals the great master of any age. Therefore the fruit of such an artist's life is a freedom that allows the artist to express himself or herself totally outside the box of conventional artistic religion. Not only is the artist free, the artist's work is free. Yet, there remains that impressive paradox about freedom which is liberty. It is a mistake to think that freedom is a guarantee of individual liberty. To be free is not to take all kinds of liberty often at our own discretion. To be free is to be free to serve. To be free is a commitment that we become bound to serve one another - at least so it should be. Post-modern philosophies advocate an individuality that exalts personal liberties at the expense of others. These personal liberties have given the artist a license without responsibility. Art has become *art for art's sake* with no social responsibility to touch the lives of everyday people beyond mere decorum and a disposable function of "here today gone tomorrow". The thrill of the experience is gone and a new consumer impulse now drives our needs. Artists demand to be accepted and funded without question, while they construct buildings without foundations and advocate that building materials of yesterday are no longer suitable. Art critics, art professors, curators, and historians, have created an art criticism that is so steeped in its own "for-the-moment" doctrines and canons of art and language, it has ceased to have any meaning at all.

As a result the illusion of the artist's new-born freedom of modernism has become a greater slavery than those who have stayed within the box of traditional realist art. Since the dawn of our modern age, artists have dug a hole so deep it appears impossible to get out. Some claim that in order to get out of the hole, we need to abolish contemporary abstract art and return to the virtues of realism, romanticism, and mannerism, when everything was predictable, according to standard academy rules, and art was pretty and impressive. But realism, romanticism, and mannerism, have created their own holes and their own churches, and some in retaliation claim we must abolish them. Then there are those who throw everything out and claim primitivism is the art form of the new world. The sound of a mono rhythmic ancient drum is exalted above the multi rhythms of an orchestra. Primitive becomes the antithesis to carefully crafted traditions. Primitive is primitive meaning undeveloped. Primitive can be raw, rough and very beautiful. Traditions can be refined, polished and very beautiful. The two are not enemies. Regrettably, primitive often is an excuse not to grow artistically or to develop

skills and technique. It is primitive's association with the spiritual or native spirituality that creates the illusion of a spiritual art that is somehow more pure. Yet, primitive art too has created yet another hole, another artistic religion with an *ism* for a creed and a specific *look* for a badge. I have seen native art so imprisoned in its own canons of expression it is virtually impossible for artists to escape into freedom of art. Where then is the freedom we seek?

## freedom and ism

### To be free is to be led by the Spirit of God

To take liberty is to do what is right in our own eyes as we indulge in post-modernism's art-isms including art without foundations, traditions that are abandoned, and philosophies of art and life that are empty. But, freedom is a choice of spiritual values that "binds" the artist to his or her art, with liberties that aim to serve rather than lead. We need more servants and less leaders, especially in the arts. We do not need more pontiffs of earthbound artist religions whose pinnacles of expression touch only the minds of the readily-persuaded, in target markets that are carefully and strategically planned. We need artist-servants who will touch the hearts of people, especially in these perilous times when so many just need a helping hand to take them through the night time of their fears.

Art must become an expression of a holiness of beauty and a beauty of holiness, not bound within a religious dogma of one-only style or *ism*, but set free in every possible means of creative expression, while standing on solid foundations, especially the foundations so beautifully and carefully built by those masters who served in centuries past. For them the paradox became reality when as servants they were leaders. Therefore the artist then and now is compelled to become a voice, a prophetic voice for what is right and for what is holy. Holiness is separation. Holiness separates the divine from the earthly, the spiritual from the material. Holiness separates the values of the kingdom of God from the values of the kingdoms of this world. The only *ism* that remains workable is one that is not an *ism* at all, but a freedom of expression that inspires the artist to soar with eagles into the unseen and often unknown. *Pneumaism* as true "art of the spirit" embodies such freedom of expression and is not an *ism* after all.

The English sculptor and engraver, Eric Gill (1882-1940), in an essay titled, "*The Priesthood of Craftsmanship*," which first appeared in *Blackfriar Magazine* almost at the time of his death, said, "a work of art is a word made flesh. That is the truth, in the clearest sense of the text. A word, that which emanates from the mind. Made flesh, a thing, a thing seen, a thing known, the immeasurable translated into terms of the measurable." (*Artists on Art*, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, edited by Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, Pantheon Books, New York, 1945 ). His foundation stone upon which we may build our works of art is a profound truth. Art is a word made flesh when it serves us with that creative genius to express the immeasurable in measurable ways, that is, to express the spiritual in material ways and give spirituality in art a voice of hope for today.

This is therefore my understanding about the spiritual in art.

This newfound servant freedom of expression in art is art's true spirituality, a spirituality that takes liberty to serve our families, our friends, and the members of our communities at home and abroad, whether that service is in realist, modernist or any other style

The spiritual in art is freedom of expression based on experience that grows into a distinct voice, a unique voice, the voice of the artist. Diane Michals, a photographer, said: "The drama of the interior ( spiritual ) world may ultimately be more real than the exterior ( material ) world."

## **the view of experience**

Once again, I must emphasize that my views about art and the spiritual in art are my own views. Even though these have been influenced by a number of people, the essential roots of my views are found deep in the soil of experience. It is in the soil of experience where my worldview as applied to art and the spiritual in art has been *tried as silver in the furnace of the earth*, as each experience of life underwent a purification of time. Therefore I maintain that whatever has been said and written about art, and whatever has been experienced in the creation of art, remains inseparably bound to what has been said and written about, and experienced in spiritual truth by the artist. Since my experience of spiritual truth remains inseparably bound to the kingdom of God, I am compelled to experience my art in the same light. Despite efforts by dualists and trinitarians to dissect the human condition into soul, body and spirit. I am of necessity and by divine design one being. I can choose to examine each area of spirit, soul, and body, with meticulous scrutiny and with an academic prowess that might impress critic and scholar alike, but I must return to the logic and reality that I am one person. At no time can I paint in the studio and leave my spirit at home. Neither can I contemplate the universe and eternity only to leave my soul to clean jars of turpentine or to stretch a canvas.

The spiritual in art must of necessity be understood in light of an inner struggle that took years to experience as I tried to understand the meaning of life as an artist in real time and in relationships with real people. And a struggle it remains as no one sees the world perfectly clear. The experiences of life and art retain a mutual tension that struggles between the known and the unknown, the material and the spiritual. But at least in my personal struggles, I have come to know and have experienced that the spiritual in art is somehow connected to the kingdom of God, because it is precisely in the values of this kingdom where I have found so much peace and joy in good times and bad times. The heart of that kingdom is freedom, therefore the heart of the spiritual in art must be freedom. My freedom became a concentrated effort to understand life not as an upside-down world sees life but as a right-side-up kingdom perspective sees the meaning of life. That perspective is called *servanthood*. To be last is to be first. To be weak is to be strong. To be poor is to be rich. To be a servant is to be a leader. To be an artist is to be a servant. Only then I can be free.

## the artist as servant

When transposed into the world of fine art, servanthood becomes the perspective of the artist, a perspective that aims to understand the real reason for art to satisfy a longing to find freedom of expression. This servant freedom of expression is art's true spirituality, a spirituality that takes liberty to serve our families, our friends, and the members of our communities at home and abroad. As we find our freedom in art we are set free to serve the family of man with great liberties, liberties that are not dictated by art's religious *isms* or by anyone or anything else that would impede our growth as an artist. Just as the spiritual in the kingdom of God is freedom, so the spiritual in art is freedom.

The spiritual in art is freedom of expression based on experience, that is, my experience of life and faith, and that brings me back to what I said earlier. My experiences of life and faith and their expression in my art, as they fuse to become spiritual, remain very personal. It is my wish that over time my experiences will grow into a distinct voice, a unique voice, namely my voice, to be added to the voices that have preceded me. Yet I urge you to be ever so cautious as to inspect the fruit before you take a bite, including my fruit.

If indeed the spiritual in art is freedom of expression, and freedom of expression has its roots in the experiences of life based on the values of the kingdom of God, then what do those experiences look like? And if indeed freedom of expression based on experience becomes a voice, what kind of a voice is it? But first the experience, then the voice. Too many voices speak without experience, yet often much experience is too intimidated to speak.

I am of course speaking about the experience of the artist.

What is the experience of the artist? My experience as an artist is the experience of my human spirit. And that experience finds expression in every form of art including a variety of media and styles. That experience has become increasingly more real as my creative spirit journeys on the road to abstraction.

Modern art, or neo-modernism is surely more than a bunch of undisciplined, paint-wielding artists, and definitely not mere abstractions that exist *in vacuo*. Modern art, or neo-modernism, also known as *pneumaism* is a creative expression by men and women who embody a faith and spirituality of life and truth. Hence, art will live as long as it can find artists for its incarnation. We are caught up in a titanic struggle of ideology, filled with dynamic ideas that battle for position of priority in our minds. They are the new credos of the modern era, or lack of such credos, that attempt to build foundations of truth and lies, inviting all who build their lives on them to trust in man alone. Technology and science will deliver us from our woes. The artist cannot remain on the sidelines and only be a spectator only to this epic battle for the human mind. The artist's mission is to engage in that battle and make his voice heard. That is our mission. For those mature enough not to balk at some profound spiritual expression that may ring familiar and even bring to remembrance faith of our fathers and mothers, or the pain of often not-so-pleasant disciplines of an institutionalized religion, disciplines that sometimes turned to abuse, the mission may seem formidable.

## seek the kingdom

***“He who made everything, first made each part and then from all chose the most beautiful to demonstrate here his sublime creations, as he has done with his divine art.”*** Michelangelo (1475-1564)

To seek the kingdom of God is a must regardless of past prejudices, because our comfort lies in a truth that somewhere amidst the mistakes and injustices of the past lies a remnant of liberating truth, a truth that still retains the vital ingredient of an abundant life. It lies at the very heart of my faith that the kingdom of God has in a real tangible sense become fact for the present. It is here and now. To search for the spiritual in art, I am compelled to search for or “seek first” the kingdom of God.

Since the dawn of time we have searched for the meaning of life. We have searched for a life filled with peace, joy, love and power, to change the circumstances of our lives and to affect our basic human needs of safety, provision, protection, security, esteem and relationship. That search remains at the core of my being. Therefore, I am essentially a “searcher.” It is *where* and *for what* I search that will determine the course of my life and provide essential resources for the decisions I will make along the way.

In my search for real answers, answers that I believe must be tangible and material, that is, answers that can be touched and experienced, understood and felt, I invariably remain restless because I have discovered that life, regardless of tangible material answers, points to a deeper need. That need is a spiritual life with a deeply-rooted passion for spiritual answers for daily living. As a result, I keep searching for answers. As early as 6000 BC, according to the record of ancient writings, we have been given a clear answer for a spiritual life. We were given a clear choice for life. One choice was a *right* life of love, peace, joy and power. The other choice was a *wrong* life of fear, hatred, anxiety and defeat. One choice was called “the dominion of light,” the other “the dominion of darkness.” One requires a totally “others” motivated life, and the other a choice of a totally “self” motivated life. For many this will appear to be getting uncomfortably close to an all-too-familiar primitive and religious persuasion, a persuasion we have feared and resisted because it bordered so often on coercion. The choice, however, appears to be more of a summons than simply a preferable option for life. The choices I make to satisfy a deeper spiritual need in my life, will affect not only my personal spiritual life but my material and physical life as well. The choice is surprisingly simple. The results of that choice are eternal.

## life is choices

***“To be able to translate ideas, to create a living art – this has been my aim.”*** Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), French painter

Everyone has to make a choice. Life is choices. There is no neutral ground with “observation status” only. We are summoned to choose the kingdom of God.

My adventure of faith has been a journey of many years, and a journey that has embraced the arts as much as it has embraced spirituality. The journey has been worth

it and the reward is a growing sense of fulfillment that has taken me way “outside the box” of achievement and success. At some time in my busy life, I wanted to know, “*who am I? Where did I come from and where am I going?*” During my ad agency years I discovered my search for answers was fueled by a very profitable business of consumer spending and advertising whose *merchants of perceived benefits* spent billions of dollars each year telling me who I was and what I could be if only I bought their products and services. But their empty philosophies, man-made doctrines, and advertised lies, made the answers more complicated. Religion didn’t enlighten my search either. Instead of keeping my faith simple, religion made my understanding complicated through man-made doctrines and endless dogma, those weary wranglings over words that accomplished nothing but confusion and doubt. There came a time I would have to throw that mountain of uncertainty into the sea and instead choose to climb a mountain of another kind - a mountain of real faith - the *mount of beattitudes*. The year was 1981, the year of lasting change. As I live to give evidence of a changed heart through all kinds of trials, temptations, and unchanged adverse circumstances, will others catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God in me?

And how will the change affect my art?

True art is created first in the heart that is in the spirit of man, and then on canvas, in stone, on film, on disc, or on paper. It is on this new mountainside of faith where I began to build the foundations of my artistic life and to nurture the experience and knowledge I would need to give voice to my art. Art is one medium with which to effectively spread abundant life, providing I fully understand the meaning and purpose of art and not by default assume art to mean the creation of simply icons and illustrations. These have had their place no doubt in the history of art, but today there is a great need for a prophetic voice. Art must become a voice of spiritual freedom.

Only then can the artist be free from the tyranny of any *ism* or style, or movement, be they realism, mannerism, modernism, minimalism, and destructivism. Only then will the spiritual in art be a river of living water for both artist and audience.

In one corner of my studio some children wrote their name in silverpoint on the wall. They were a grade six class who had come for a visit and a taste of drawing in silverpoint. Their names on the wall were a response to me, the person, the artist, who invited them to write on my wall. It was ok to do. There would be no parental discipline and consequences for writing on the wall. In the other corner stood a recently completed large classical drawing beside an abstract painting on canvas. The teachers who accompanied the children were impressed. Theirs was a response to art. The two responses of children and teachers were a glimpse of real art, art of the spirit.

## **the new frontier of contemporary art**

This notion of a new frontier in contemporary art started as a discussion between fellow artist Peter Leclerc and I during our weekly dinner at “*Chez Wendies*” before our Monday evening life drawing session. Our discussions have frequently centred on the prophets of doom who vie for rating points in broadcast media. Can the artist be a prophet of hope? What will be the next move in art? In fact, we wondered if there would

be any new movements at all. Have we seen the end of creativity with only a concentrated effort to re-live movements of the past in what we conveniently call “neo” movements? Hence the call of some for a *neo-realism* as an antidote to a tired modernism.

But where is the “cutting edge,” and the “new wave” of creativity? Some look to technology but that is not cutting edge creativity. It’s simply cutting edge production or reproduction. I mean cutting edge original creativity.

As our discussion continued on a fine late afternoon in the spring of 2004, I suddenly heard myself saying, “I am the new frontier.”

Today I am where I have never been before. It’s called today. Today is my frontier and every piece of artwork I create this day is at the very edge, the cutting edge of my new frontier. The new frontier of contemporary art is not a movement, nor an “ism” or genre, neither style nor technique.

### **I am that new frontier.**

What I say and do today, I have never said before on this day. What I have to say in my art is in fact “a word from the frontier,” a word that must stand the test of worth if indeed others as well as myself are to listen to it. Can every artist make the claim they are therefore cutting edge and very contemporary? Yes, if they have something worthwhile to say. Then it is cutting edge creativity at the very forefront of the new frontier - very contemporary and modern indeed. It leaves me to wonder and perhaps that is the subject of our next discussion - namely, how then to we define “worthwhile.”

What are the standards by which the artist defines worthwhile?

Perhaps it must begin by what the artist believes to be a worthwhile personal life, a life wrapped in a sense of personal worthiness whose foundations are not material truth but spiritual truth.

## **the artist as a spiritual leader**

***“There remains a simplicity of purpose or role similar to understanding the creative gift of artistry, namely to be a voice in the community. Art of itself does not transform, only people transform and such transformation is lasting and fruitful if such people are led by the Spirit of God.”*** Essays Volume Two, by Gerrit Verstraete

Once again I came face to face in my studies of great artists that all of them, as I read their life’s history, were in some way profoundly connected to the spiritual aspect of their lives. Names such as Michelangelo, Dürer, Rembrandt, Rubens, Kandinsky, Van Gogh, Matisse, Mondrian, just to name some, are most familiar as artists who made an impact of varying degrees in the world of art for generations and in the world in which they lived. Each had a heart-felt desire to go deeper than mere mimicry of nature. Theirs was a desire to have a voice, a voice that somehow would speak the message that pressed close to their hearts.

On May 6, 1997, I wrote in my Essays: *“If the objective of art in any disciplined medium is recognition, fame, notoriety, wealth and publicity, the resulting works of art will never reach beyond the mire of tired imitation and populist decor. Ambition,*

*acceptance and sales are the roots of all such art of the pocketbook. If the objective of art in any disciplined medium is a voice for the human spirit, the resulting works of art will reach far into the creative excitement of exploration and fruitful invention. Service, wisdom and truth are the roots of all such art of the spirit. The true artist must shift from the material order of western culture to embrace art of the spirit.”*

Such a call to create art of the spirit will require a paradigm shift in the way we perceive art's role in society. “Art for art's sake,” has become a dead issue and no longer satisfies the demands of a creative journey. Instead, a call must be extended to all who aspire to become artists, that indeed theirs is a call to spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership in the arts is a determined and committed effort by the artist to elevate the cause of art and the expression of art above the material realm into the values of a spiritual realm, where one cannot put a pricetag on love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, self-control, and justice. There is no artistic “ism” or creative movement that can legislate against such values and remain standing. Instead, spiritual values will triumph again over material values as they did during the Renaissance.

What makes the artist a spiritual leader is not the value of his or her work, nor the simplicity or complexity of technique and style. It is the plain fact that he or she is committed to live the spiritual values of life. Art created during the artist's life must be a reflection or expression of that life in what he or she believes. It is as the ancients said, the creative power of “words becoming flesh,” that is, what we say and what we do are the same. We are what we believe and hopefully what we believe is grounded in sound spiritual values that warrant each artist to become a true prophet for the times and not just a clanging gong echoing tired voices of past dissent and empty rhetoric that never changed a person's life once.

The artist has a mission and that mission is to fulfill this sacred calling called art. Art is the visible voice of society, the visible voice of a community, a visible voice that somehow transcends geographic, natural, ethnic and cultural borders. Let the new prophets in art be men and women of discipline, qualified to be spiritual leaders because they heed their own voices first.

## **conclusion**

***“To the pilgrim soul it's a greater salvation either in war or love to know how to lose a lot than to gain a little,”*** Michelangelo (1475-1564) as he comments on the voice of earthly appetites.

Spiritual beliefs form the foundation of core values, morals, and ethics, upon which I base my decisions for accepting or rejecting natural beliefs. Once accepted, natural beliefs including natural law allow me to determine where my position is ( positions are ) in the family and in community life. Natural beliefs and position based on spiritual beliefs form the basis of decisions by which I pursue daily life as I aim to live in safety, security, sustenance, shelter, sustainability, and self-fulfillment. This then is life as I believe it to be and life as I believe I should live. Such life now begins to take on a “voice,” a voice that grows with maturity and time. My art is therefore an expression of that voice, which in its simplicity is a voice of my human spirit ( pneumaism ) and in its

complexity a personal paradigm, that is, art of the human spirit inspired by the Spirit of God.

How then is my art and the human spirit inspired by the Spirit of God?

Perhaps the answer is no more and no less than a “spiritwind” that blows wherever and whenever, free from any other “ism,” yet free to explore and express, to create inside and outside of the box of conformity, tradition, realism, abstraction, positivism, negativism, objectivism, and subjectivism. Yet despite my abundant freedom, it is a voice that remains constructive and not destructive. It is a voice that produces in the hearts of people fruit of the spirit, a rich and abundant fruit comprising peace, joy, love, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, excellence, worthiness and quality, all because the artist from whom such a voice is heard, bears testimony of having experiencing the same fruit. When such fruit is produced, art is truth and a voice of truth that can and will affect real, productive and meaningful change. If not, art is mere illusion, mere fantasy or emotional decor. Such art may for the moment “tickle the ears,” but has no substance to affect real change in culture, community, family or the individual. Art for art’s sake is illusion, but art for truth’s sake is a voice of change. That is art’s greater mission, to affect change.

To conclude: I have chosen to believe the divine is a person with a name. He is God and He has chosen to express Himself through people, men and women alike. Art is a divine gift that enables artists to create visible expressions of what God wants to say to deepen the divine relationship, a relationship whose hallmark is love. That creative pneumaist growth is a lifelong journey. It is not an easy journey for it is filled with self-doubt and fear of rejection. Technical virtuosity at least brings some sense of peace knowing you can express yourself well, technically that is. It is a spiritual journey not to be confused with a religious journey for the two are not the same. My experience has been that it is a very fulfilling journey that brings a freedom beyond description.

I leave you with a question to ponder. Why has art been so prolific, so vibrant and alive in those countries that preach and practice freedom? This is not some western or capitalist phenomenon. This is evidence that freedom, despite its inherent struggles and failures, nevertheless produces a wealth of creativity in every expression of art. It is not a mere coincidence that the greatest movements in art, all art’s *isms* and *schools* were birthed in countries that sought to bring freedom to its citizens including freedom of religion. It may have taken centuries and cost much in blood, sweat and tears, but the testimony of history is an awesome legacy of creative output in many art forms from music to visual arts, from architecture to literature, and from inspiration to innovation.

Pneumaism as art of the spirit is the new frontier of contemporary art as it strives to give today’s art an even greater creative freedom and stronger voice for those values we so desperately need.

***“If the objective of art in any disciplined medium is recognition, fame, notoriety, wealth and publicity, the resulting works of art will never reach beyond the mire of tired imitation and populist decor. Ambition, acceptance and sales are the roots of all such art of the pocketbook.***

***“If the objective of art in any disciplined medium is a voice for the human spirit, the resulting works of art will reach far into the creative excitement of exploration and fruitful invention. Service, wisdom and truth are the roots of all such art of the spirit.”*** Gerrit Verstraete, May 6, 1997.

**part two**

# **the studio**

**an intimate portrait of the artist's studio**

Remembering 1993, when I built my island studio

## the studio

Welcome to my studio.

Bright-red numbers on a clock tell me it is seven in the morning as I step into my studio. It is still dark outside, and as is common on many early mornings on this island, especially in November, the view from my studio is shrouded in fog. A full moon tried in vain to penetrate the misty veil that night, casting pale shadows and a thin blue glow through the trees. Sometimes I am in my studio in the middle of the night, with the view outside as my only consolation during another night of inner turmoil. Life offers many battles, sometimes on the inside and sometimes on the outside. To deal with each one of these struggles, whether large or small, I retreat to my studio, where I can wrestle without the worry of waking my family or being too reserved in my strategy for victory. This morning, however, is not the aftermath of such a night. In fact, I can be accused of being somewhat overly excited this morning. Some may wonder what the excitement is all about, but for me, well, it is a day to begin a new drawing. I spent two days preparing a masonite panel to ready it for silverpoint work. On my knees, surrounded by a plastic drop sheet and newsprint, I messed around with gesso, flat white primer, and marbledust, creating a white ground for the drawing. While the surface was still wet, I splattered guache, gold dust, and silver enamel on the white ground. With tracing paper and a lucite roller the fun began as I rolled all sorts of random effects into the wet ground. After the panel had thoroughly dried, a quick sanding smoothed the surface enough to begin drawing. That was two days ago. While preparing the masonite panel my thoughts wandered to subject matter. I decided on a drawing of Krista. I have many sketches and reference photographs of her. The sketches and photographs have been a source of many finished studio drawings that span some six years. It was Krista who first introduced me to a model's view of the *sacredness* of modeling. One day, after a long modeling session, she commented on the artist-model relationship and called it special.

I asked her to explain.

"When you create drawings using me as a model," she said, "I feel the moment is special. It is sacred because a moment of reality is captured and frozen in time. It is also an honour to be chosen by an artist for such moments of reality, moments that find expression in art."

She also said, that this *sacredness* is enhanced when the artist-model relationship is one of trust and integrity. We both lament Hollywood's relentless misrepresentation of artists and their models. Even the blockbuster movie, *Titanic*, was a dismal failure in presenting the artist in a true light. No sooner had Leonardo DiCaprio, the actor, settled down to draw his model, he gave in to other passions, passions that boosted the movie's ratings to ensure box-office success. He put down his pencil and sketchpad and seduced the young woman. Rubbish. That was neither a sacred moment nor was it art. We both agreed *Titanic* wasn't the only movie to taint what could have been an artist's sacred moment.

Krista has moved to Nova Scotia to attend the Nova Scotia Institute of Art. She has always wanted to design jewelry as an extension of three-dimensional artwork. The last time she wrote me, she had found some work as a model to begin paying for her studies and life in Halifax. "But," she said, "I hold you up as an example of highest quality in the way you draw and the integrity of your creative journey. You are a joy to

work with." I am flattered. Good models are hard to find. Modeling is not a mere exercise in sitting still or standing nude before a bunch of artists or in front of the artist in his or her private studio. I have seen excellent models and really bad ones, and the difference was definitely not looks. The best models are the ones who understand the artist, who willingly work with the artist to create artistic poses, and who can sit still for great lengths of time. Even though I offer models a break every twenty minutes or so, the good ones can sit still for at least an hour and would rather not break their concentration. Another quality of models is their aesthetic beauty as defined by what I call *topograpgy*. A model's topography is the variety and quality of muscle shapes, the contours of figurative line and an overall, well-defined physical structure. Sometimes that structure is young, sometimes old. Beautiful figures are not defined by natural "endowments," a lesson I learned long ago when studying with my favourite teachers back at art college in the nineteen sixties. John Alfsen would chastise us when we seemed too preoccupied with other than topographic images. He once poked a student in the side and condemned the beginner's drawing as simply "local colour." He pointed to the student's feeble attempt to draw endowments, stating local colour is not what makes a good drawing. Good drawings begin on the inside of the model. I will never forget John Alfsen's comments.

Beauty as applied to figurative drawing, is the interpretation of what I see and what I know to be below the surface of the model, which in turn inspires me to express the human figure in line and mass, especially when I draw during a group session of life drawing, such as Monday evenings with the Drawing Society of Canada in a large room at the back of the old Occidental Hotel and Oxy Pub in Nanaimo, British Columbia. The human form is the toughest thing to draw. After an hour or so of complete immersion in my drawing, I am lost in another world, a world of classical disciplines and tremendous satisfaction as the drawing takes shape on my paper. Models as people often are less important than models as topographic wonders. Most of the models I draw are distant from me personally. They remain topographic wonders. That is not to say the human form is impersonal and void of soul and spirit. It is only in my studio where I have time to explore the soul and spirit of my models. Most drawings, however, are studies of human anatomy. At least, that's the way I draw. Only when a particular pose of a particular model inspires me to create a finished drawing in the studio, do I take the time to draw not only what I know and see, but what I do not know and cannot see - the human spirit. Some models have become friends. When they inspire me to draw, each drawing becomes special as anatomical wonder is blended with personality. Krista is such a model. There are others as well.

My thoughts this misty and dark morning, however, are far from Krista, Michael, Noel, Erin, and the *Titanic*, even though the next drawing *taxiing on the runway*, will be a drawing of Krista. It's an aspect of the creative process in me I am very familiar with. I discovered it while managing the advertising agency I owned years ago. The agency had a portfolio of clients that numbered about one hundred with small budgets and large budgets. As creative director, I usually had anywhere from ten to twenty projects on the go. As I concentrated on the creative solutions required for one, I discovered that somewhere in the back of my mind was a capability to think about other projects as well. While producing a television commercial I could, with little effort, think about the design of a magazine ad for another client.

Now, as days and years in my studio grow into an ever increasing body of work, I discover again and again, that while working on one drawing, my mind is free to roam to other ideas for other drawings, without affecting the concentration and creativity of the drawing or painting in progress. I liken the process to a number of airplanes preparing for takeoff as they taxi on the runway. My present drawing has been cleared for takeoff and is now in full flight, yet at any time, I can look back down the runway to see what idea is brewing in the recesses of my mind. Often when one drawing nears completion, the next one is ready to fly and becomes a real encouragement especially when the one nearing completion has sometimes taken as much time as eighty to one-hundred hours from start to finish. These are the meticulous and carefully crafted studio drawings, quite unlike the spontaneous Monday night drawings that take much less time to do. In my studio, however, time, creativity, and motivation, are carefully balanced over time to allow clearing for takeoff for each drawing. I have been known to jump ahead in the lineup of my thoughts. A drawing, brewing somewhere back five or six places, may suddenly jump the line and take off. No one seems to mind.

Today I begin a new drawing in silverpoint, and the particular pose of Krista I have chosen, will no doubt remain an inspiration for the entire process. Silverpoint is an exacting medium that dates back to the fifteenth century, with its predecessor, metalpoint, especially *lead*, dating back even further. I love silverpoint's meticulous challenge as I carefully build my lines and tones on a mixed-media surface. Like exposed photographic paper in a developer's bath, a gentle image begins to appear on my paper as silverpoint gradually darkens to no more than a middle-grey. In time, silverpoint drawings "mature" to take on a tarnished look of brown and black as a result of oxidation. But, I am ahead of myself.

It was ten years ago when I built my first island studio, but it was not the first studio.

I began in my first studio when the children were very young. Jeff and Wendy were still toddlers. Alice and I were blessed with four more children, six in total, and I have had something of a studio through all of them. We had bought a semi-detached home on Playford Avenue in Mississauga and my designated creative space was a corner of an unfinished basement. It was a reasonable space but very confining as the ceiling was barely eight feet high. When we moved to Pine Avenue in the Port Credit area of Mississauga, I occupied a guest room facing the backyard. It was a small studio but it had a view. From my window the sky was filled with tall trees, green grass, and a steep embankment beyond which stood an oil refinery. For a season I did enjoy a downtown Toronto studio, which in fact was the back portion of a large space I had rented for the commercial design company I began after I graduated from art college. The space was at 74 York Street, four floors above *The Nag's Head Pub*. That was the late sixties, a time before the children were born. When the studio grew into an advertising agency, I gave up my drawing and painting space on York Street and concentrated all my creative efforts at a new business address and a large executive office complete with a massive drafting table. Within a few years, the thriving ad agency moved quickly from townhouse to commercial buildings, as we bought our "way up" in the Toronto real estate market. Drawing and painting were moved to a home-studio again, where I managed to find some spare time, usually on weekends only, to work on art. I used to dream of owning a large mobile studio so I could drive to wherever nature inspired me. My life drawing and figurative work were limited to the time I spent at art college,

drawing in their continuing education program. That amounted to one night a week, which I managed to do for many years after I graduated. The mobile studio never was. My basement-spare-bedroom studio was used for landscapes and seascapes in oils, acrylics and watercolours. I often wondered what it would have been like to have had a studio like Tom Thomson's studio, once a frontier northern Ontario hideaway and now a small wooden shack standing carefully preserved on the grounds of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg. When I am not in my studio I am sketching my *coffeeshop people* at Tim Hortons in Nanaimo and elsewhere on Vancouver Island. When weather permits I travel to favourite locations to spend time *en plein air*, drawing in the forest or by a waterfall. I think of Emily Carr's mobile studio, and the times she took it deep into the forest along with her pets, to spend solitary time painting and sketching.

Not until the whole family moved to Gabriola Island, however, did I get my first "real" studio. By "real" I mean a place designed and built especially for art, and not something leftover after other family priorities had laid claim to any spare space.

My present island studio is a spacious room measuring some twenty-five by thirty feet with a large closet for supplies, files and other stuff, as well as a small loft for those things I may never need again but hate to toss out. Light is cast abundantly throughout the studio as the sun pours through two skylites in a cathedral ceiling. Two large windows face east, a large window faces west, and sliding glass doors face north. I have lots of light including the much-coveted artist's light from a northern exposure. On certain summer days it is so bright in my studio, I cannot draw. During the fall and winter, darkness wraps my studio in silence as early as four in the afternoon. Few realize we live halfway between the 49th and 50th parallel, the equivalent of Gander, Newfoundland, and as far away as Scotland. The studio is attached to our family home which I built at the same time ten years ago in 1993.

I love my studio.

In one corner stands my drawing easel and the view past my drawing board is our front yard and a long driveway that slopes briskly down towards the road some eighty feet away. Our house is built on a half-acre lot and over the edge of a large boulder about three-quarters of the way into the lot. That rock is big enough to warrant a two-storey house and a generous crawlspace that looks more like a basement. My studio is built on the uppermost portion of that giant rock. Except for some patches of blue sky, wherever I look I see trees, tall trees, towering trees, so tall they scare me when Pacific storms pass over the island. Sometimes during those storms I hear a big *thud*. Another tree has fallen, once on my old car but never on our house or on my studio. Last summer our neighbour cleared most of the trees that edged our property and at least from that corner, the threat of falling trees no longer plagues me. When it rains it rains hard and long. Water falls straight from temperate skies and the sound on my steel-roofed studio is a steady drum of staccato sound that beats alternately between downright cozy and somewhat frightening.

In the other corner stand all my painting supplies. A blind wall is lined with bookshelves, storage units for paper and drawings, a round oak table with four chairs and my trusted stereo. Right beside the door to my studio stands a wooden drafting table that serves as a lightbox as well. It's a good place to spend a day creating art. With just steps from the family kitchen, I am never far from cookies, coffee, and lunch. Nor

am I far from my wife Alice, whose companionship in marriage I have enjoyed for over thirty-five years, since 1967, the year we said "I do."

When time came to expand and make more room in the studio, I cleared out all remnants of office and computer stuff. These now stand in a spare bedroom turned into a small office. That was just a month or so before the year 2002 sped to a close.

At last, a space all my own.

Finally, thirty-two years after our first child Jeff was born, and my first basement studio, plus five more children, through many leftover spaces in a number of houses as we moved to bigger homes, with every bit of space first in line for much-needed family growth, I am alone in my island studio. There is no longer any need for anyone to interrupt me to use the computer, check emails, or look through files. All that is left now of sufficient reasons for anyone to enter my studio is only to borrow masking tape, scissors, or to get some paper. But, I am working on that too. I am not a recluse, however. Of course I love my family. It's not that I mind the interruptions either. Our whole journey together as a large family has been a very interactive journey with the only "private" space, our personal bedrooms. Even those at times became a gathering place. It's just that when I begin a new drawing I need privacy and solitude. It is a very sacred moment to begin a new work of art. It is also a very emotional moment as I take that first step in "*separating dark from light*" with the first strokes of a pencil, a silverpoint, or brush, to mark my commitment to the work and the creative process. It takes me quite some time and emotional effort to begin a new work. Sometimes it takes days as I fidget around in the studio, doing everything I can to avoid beginning a new drawing. I'll doodle, drink too much coffee, wander too many times into the kitchen to see what cookies there are, write some more in my journals, listen to music, and stare at that big white piece of paper I have mounted on my drawing board. It taunts me.

"Come and draw on me, if you dare," the paper whispers and sometimes shouts.

I turn away to avoid the paper's daring glare.

Finally, in a moment of determined courage, I find the strength to begin, and suddenly the first lines on paper open the floodgates to hours of endless drawing. My friend and long-distance mentor, John Gould, calls the moment "real time." I love to draw in real time.

Other times I am so deeply involved in my drawing, interruptions actually startle me and cause me to lose concentration. There are also times when the subjects of my drawings, specifically nudes, are such that viewing is for mature audiences only, even though, my children have never been ashamed of my journey as an artist, nor have they been "sheltered" from my figurative work. I am no longer a landscape or seascape artist, nor do I draw and paint wildlife and portraits. I am a classically trained artist with a passion for drawing, especially figurative drawing, a time-honoured tradition that dates back centuries. My journey in painting has evolved along abstract and minimalist lines. However, with a certain amount of persuasion, I am known to have painted a large canvas with waves crashing into a lighthouse, and another canvas with a towering wave. Both paintings are oils, one a wedding gift to my daughter Angela and her husband Jeff, the other a wedding gift to my daughter Karen and her husband Doug. I have also been commissioned to draw dogs. Michael Brown and Camila Midence are American friends who insist I create large black-and-white drawings of their "family," who are a breed of magnificent labs. Carlos was the godfather of them all. He was a yellow lab. His drawing

hangs in their diningroom. Sophia, his partner, will soon grace a wall as well. That leaves three of their offspring and any number of adopted dogs.

This morning I have once again turned on the studio lights, placed my second cup of coffee carefully beside my drawing easel, and turned on a favourite CD. Because my studio is attached to the house only on the north side, the side of our front hallway and kitchen, I can turn up the volume of my stereo without disturbing the rest of the family. This morning's choice is classical music.

As soon as my silver stylus hits the mixed-media surface of my drawing, my thoughts take flight as well, beyond thoughts of other studios I have known along the way, to deeper thoughts of art, its divine purpose, and why I love this special place called *the studio*.

Silverpoint is an exacting medium, yet when mastered it brings tremendous satisfaction to know I have touched base with a drawing technique that dates back to the fifteenth century. It takes a couple of days to prepare any number of pieces of paper with a ground I mix myself. Then after the paper has dried I press the sheets to make them flat for drawing. A bit of sanding and burnishing ensure a smooth surface. I usually plan my silverpoint drawings from subject material that is carefully selected from my sketch files and photographs I have taken. After I have put a quick outline of the drawing on paper, I begin the gentle task of layering careful tones in silverpoint and building the strength of lines one stroke at a time. When I can go no further with silverpoint, which usually means a middle-grey, I often choose to "kick up" the lines and tones with a bit of graphite. This pose of Krista is a standing back view with a large, patterned-cloth draped and gathered over her waist. The actual image is nine by seventeen inches, and simply called "*Krista*." I wonder how she is doing as the first winter snows have begun to fall in Halifax. It can get pretty nasty "out east," as those Atlantic "Nor-Easterns" come roaring through with sleet, blinding snow, and driving wind. Hope she stays bundled up as she experiences the drastic change from the temperate climate she grew up in.

My thoughts drift to another time when someone else inspired a series of drawings.

I began this special series of drawings in late March of 2001. The drawings marked the first time I ventured deep into my own soul to express emotions associated with seeing a friend depart for Europe. Not that I had never drawn emotionally before. Many drawings were inspired by people, as were for example, "*the lady in blue*" drawings of 1999. But Carla was more than an inspiration. Not only had she become a friend of ours, my wife and I counseled her for six months as she "rose from the ashes" of a life in which she lost nearly everything, including many of her possessions such as a waterfront home and cherished belongings that spoke of dreams and hopes of a promising future, and a husband who, after only a few years of their young marriage, deserted her for another woman. Carla came into our lives as "a bird with broken wings," but she rose again healed, strong in her faith, and determined to get up and start again. My creative inspiration first took flight as a poem titled, "*a bird with broken wings*." A month later I felt inspired to express the emotions and thoughts of that poem in a series of drawings. In total some ten large drawings were completed, some in chalk, some in colour pencil, and one large spontaneous drawing in silverpoint, titled "*I watched her fly away*."

Three years later, in May of 2004, I was honoured to perform the marriage of Carla to her newfound love David, aka Yukon. It was a very special moment. In case you

wondered, I am also an ordained pastor in our community and licensed by the province of British Columbia to perform marriages. Or, as one friend and fellow artist once quipped, "a pastor who draws naked people in the basement of a pub."

Not long after the Carla drawings, I experienced a similar outpouring of creativity because of someone else who came into my life and inevitably into the studio. As my thoughts drift to memories of a flower called the *Western Trillium*, I remembered sharing those thoughts with my friend and painter, Helen Lucas. I wanted to encourage her in her own creative journey, so I thought the story of the *Western Trillium* would inspire her.

"Dear Helen," I wrote.

"You might want to get yourself a coffee or tea as this 'epistle' will take some time to read." And so I began my story. To this day it remains a wonderfully encouraging story that touches the very heart of the artist in me, and is perhaps even a glimpse of what art's pure form looks like, a form I call "art of the spirit." Because the story is very personal and involves a close friend, confidentiality does not permit me to share all details, nor do I need to.

Again, the events surrounding this creative story came as a result of my wife Alice and my position of pastoral leadership on Gabriola Island. Her name is Alisha, a young single mother, who with her daughter Ciaran came into our lives in a special way. Alisha was a deeply hurt woman, with pain going back to her childhood years. When we got to know her and Ciaran, she experienced a wonderful awakening. Both Alice and I walked and counseled her through much of the pain of her past and present, and nurtured her to spiritual and emotional health. Alisha became like a daughter as well as a priceless friend. Alice and I became godparents and guardians of her daughter Ciaran. Alisha's biggest test of faith came in January 2001, when her mother, at the young age of only forty-eight, passed away and in May 2003, when her father passed away. Through it all we saw in Alisha a miracle of resolve to put her trust and faith in God.

It was also a time I had run into a dry spell in my work. Drawings seemed to come with difficulty. One day, my wife and I went for a walk through Cathedral Forest, one of my favourite places of retreat. While in the forest, I came across the *Western Trillium*, a feisty early spring flower that rises singularly from the forest floor. Somehow that flower spoke to my heart. Pointing at the flower, I shared with Alice that it took courage for the single-stemmed *Western Trillium* to reach for the top in that massive forest surrounded by trees hundreds of years old. I thought of Alisha and how she had the courage to press ahead with life, despite pain and adversity. It berthed a poem called "*The Western Trillium*." When I finished writing the poem, I sensed the dry time was over. In my spirit rose a myriad of ideas and creative thoughts.

To start the river flowing I did a small drawing of the trillium and along with a copy of the poem, gave both to Alisha. The inspiration continued for many more drawings.

As I watch the "*Krista*" drawing develop slowly before my eyes, I wondered about art's purest form. Is not this the purest form of art, to touch the spirit of men and women and encourage them to press on? Do I in fact get a glimpse of real "art of the spirit" when I experience how my work as an artist touches the lives of people right where they are? Whether it is the vocabulary of aesthetics, the disciplines of line, form, mass and colour, or the liberated expression of heart and soul in any medium, it all boils down to touching someone when he or she hurts or when he or she celebrates life with

joy and passion. Sometimes it takes a flower to remind me of the beauty of people and how much I need them and we need each other. People often remain a greater joy than my artwork. So my escape from this often frightening and mad world is an escape into beauty, the beauty of people, be it a portrait, a coffeeshop person, a figure study, a themed drawing, and even an abstract painting. All because it is usually these precious people who are the reason I stay inspired and motivated to carry on myself. They are family and the extended family of friends who I love so much.

Leaving my thoughts of the *Western Trillium*, I am jarred back into the present. Something's wrong with my drawing. I am not satisfied with the way a particular area of the drawing is developing. I am probably drifting too far in my thoughts and not paying enough attention to my work, but such is the liberty of working in the studio. I cannot erase silverpoint, one of the reasons the medium is so exacting. I have no choice but to carefully apply new ground over the mistake and wait patiently for the mixture of gesso and marble dust to dry. It's only a very small area at the bottom of the drawing, so drying time should be fifteen minutes or so. I think I'll take a break and have a deliciously flavoured coffee. Of course, that means walking past the cookie tin. Oh the perils of an artist's journey in the studio.

A half hour later I sand the new patch of white ground and continue drawing. Soon the drawing develops in a seamless fashion with no hint of any mistake.

It was Helen Lucas who first called my studio a chapel. It is an interesting description of my studio yet an apt one, considering I spend most of my days there, and each day I am very aware of my spiritual as well as creative journey as an artist. In fact, I have learned the dividing line between art and spirituality is a very faint one. Art is an expression of my spirituality and spirituality is a river of life for my art. What better place than in the studio to draw and paint as well as meditate on the issues of life. For those reasons, the studio is a chapel, a sanctuary, and a place to which I can retreat should the pressures of life begin to overwhelm me.

Such is the case this morning, and it is only seven o'clock.

I cannot escape the relentless pressure of those who resign artistic success to sales and a pedigree of "who is who" of galleries who may or may not show my work. I cannot begin to number all the times I have been told to draw "what sells," or what the market is buying. Maybe after ten juried shows I can sport some ambiguous initials behind my name to say I have arrived. When I discussed this with a friend, who also has walked this road through art, we both came to the same conclusion. We have arrived. At least, suffice it to say, we are qualified to call ourselves artists. She too is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art & Design, and the AOCA ( Associate of the Ontario College of Art & Design ) we carry behind our names is sufficient. I only took on the challenge of a BFA, Bachelor of Fine Art degree, to further qualify to teach drawing in those places where academic degrees are required. I haven't found a suitable place yet to pursue a masters degree to qualify me to teach at university and college levels.

A knock on my studio door interrupts my thoughts. It is Ciaran, my godchild.

It is Tuesday and she has come to spend the afternoon with me as she does every Tuesday, while Alisha, her mom, takes care of an after-school program at the island's *Gathering Place* for youth. It's just around the corner of my studio. Ciaran has taped a sign to my studio door which already sports my own sign that says, "private studio." It serves as a constant reminder to my children that this is dad's space and not an alternative playroom. In her handwriting, seven-year old Ciaran, wrote the words, "my

studeoo too," and taped the piece of paper just below my sign. Sometimes we get on the floor of the studio and make colour pencil or colour marker drawings. Other times we go down to the familyroom to play with toys. It's a welcome break from the disciplines of studio work. It may appear I have abandoned my own children to favour and spend time with Ciaran, but that is not so. When all our children were little, I spent countless hours drawing pictures with them and playing the games we loved so much. It's just that they're all grown up now and I miss the "little ones." Suzanne, now eighteen, once asked if she could put a drawing on the refrigerator door as well, beside the drawing from Ciaran. Of course she could. Ciaran reawakens, as hopefully will my grandchildren, the joy of being with children and see an unbridled creativity I long to stay in touch with. When our first grandchild, Haley, was born to our daughter Angela and her husband Jeff, I found myself on the studio floor smearing paint around large sheets of paper as we fingerpainted together, a two-and-a-half year old Haley and a fifty-eight year old *opa*. It's a thrill to stay in touch with a child's creativity.

That is not to say the disciplines of studio work are a chore. Not in the least. If it weren't for those disciplines, I wouldn't be able to draw the things I want to draw. It's no secret that creativity is ninety-five percent hard work and five percent inspiration. Anyone who pretends it is otherwise is deceived. I love the discipline of studio work. Whether they are endless hours and full days in the studio, the thrill of starting a new work, the satisfaction of completing a drawing or painting, or simply the comfort that perseverance and patience *do* pay, these studio disciplines are the foundation stones of all creativity. Those who ignore them build on sand. Those who cherish and nourish them build on rock. Tomorrow I will continue my silverpoint drawing, but for the moment it is play time. Sometimes my wife Alice warns me not too get to rambunctious, after all, she says, "you're not twenty anymore." So, we curl up on the sofa and watch some afternoon cartoons.

The thing I like most about my studio is its solitude. An artist needs solitude to work out the creative process, a process that so often runs miles ahead of the actual painting on canvas or drawing on paper. Solitude is the fertile ground in which discipline grows. Solitude is a good thing. There will be plenty of time later for social interaction, family time, and recreation, but while in the studio, the word is *solitude*. Sometimes it is necessary to let others know solitude means no interruption, not even the phone. The reason I like solitude so much is because during my time alone I can work on developing my disciplinary skills and as a result reap a rich reward of very productive creativity.

A budding artist once asked me, "how do you manage to get so many drawings completed in a matter of months?"

I replied by asking him a question.

"How much time do you spend in your studio?"

"Well," he said, "I walk my dogs in the morning, then I have a shower and breakfast, and after some phonecalls to friends, I get into the studio by noon. I work till afternoon tea and then get ready for supper and evening dance classes."

"There's your answer," I said.

I am in my studio by the latest at eight in the morning and that is after I have spent time in personal devotions and answering emails. I don't look at my computer again until the following morning, unless I have set aside a day to work on my essays and personal journals. I work in the studio until late afternoon and then I quit. Evenings

are for relaxation, not work. My studio remains dark in the evenings. When other duties and responsibilities require me to stop working in the studio, I plan for those duties and responsibilities in carefully measured times. These responsibilities include the joyful commitment to the island's children as I teach drawing to homeschooler groups and students at the Gabriola Elementary School. Every second Friday I write a newspaper column and prepare a cartoon for the same newspaper. The rest of the day I look after administrative matters for the *Drawing Society of Canada*, which I founded in 1998. Every Wednesday morning I mentor a student. I don't have hobbies or "other interests," except for long distance driving. Most of my time is studio time. Five of our six children have moved out to get on with their adult lives, so there is plenty of time available to work in the studio. But most of all, I enjoy my studio time, where solitude, inspiration, perspiration, and reflection, add up to daily renewal.

One regret, however, is that I am limited in the size of drawings I create. Not because I cannot draw large, but because I cannot see large. I need reading glasses for most of my up-close drawings. I can still draw vigorously from life using quick arms-length gestures and strokes to create quality sketches, but not sustained drawings. These are the drawings that take anywhere from ten to a hundred hours to complete. These are the academy drawings, the Renaissance drawings, and the mixed-media works. To satisfy a need to work large, I shift gears and create abstract and expressionist paintings on large canvasses. My favourite size of canvas is four foot square. The antithesis to meticulous drawing, as spontaneous and free as the actual drawings may be, is painting. I readily switch between the two, even though most of the time drawing wins the greatest prize of designated hours.

Tuesday is gone and the prospect of an early start in the studio the following morning excites me as my silverpoint drawing awaits my touch.

As morning dawns in another grey wash, my drawing beckons to work in great detail on the Krista study. It is turning into a gentle but precise silverpoint work. Some would argue as to the reason I would choose such a demanding medium of a tradition that appears far removed from our contemporary, post-modern present. But therein lies the mystery of silverpoint. Silverpoint does not allow for speculation and fantasy about competing in the ever-increasing glut of reproduction art. Silverpoint is not reproducible, so each work, each drawing, is an original work of art that belongs to the very hours in which it was created, making the individual work very contemporary. Reproduction silverpoint is an oxymoron. It is not possible. The beauty of silverpoint lies in its unique effect on paper. It is silver on ground on paper. To reproduce it tends to reduce the silver drawing to a graphite look-alike, as both silver and graphite look similar to the untrained eye. Unfortunately, every image of a silverpoint drawing that appears in my collection of art books, looks like a graphite drawing. However, the discerning viewer, who comes upon an original silverpoint work in a gallery or in my studio, quickly notices the mysterious silvery sheen of a silverpoint work, a sheen that cannot be reproduced with even the finest inks and best presses, including digital technology. This inability to reproduce silverpoint eventually led to the craft's drift into obscurity with the advent of reproduction technology. By the seventeenth century, when artists had discovered they could transpose the art of silverpoint or metalpoint drawing to metal and stone plates, engravings and etchings were born, and silverpoint became out-of-fashion as reproduction art flourished. Rembrandt, a painting and drawing master who became famous for all his etchings and engravings, was known to have

created only one silverpoint work. It wasn't until the nineteenth century, when a revival of silverpoint began in the United States. That revival never spread to Canada and silverpoint is virtually non-existent in the collections of drawings in Canadian galleries and museums. At the risk of sounding somewhat exclusive, I know of only one artist in Canada, other than myself, who draws in silverpoint. He is John Gould who first introduced me to the medium in the late nineteen-eighties. Since then, I have discovered only one other Canadian artist who, by his own confession, "dabbles" in some silverpoint work.

My drawing looks beautiful.

Slowly it begins to emerge from the ground-coated, masonite panel, as delicate tone is laid upon delicate tone, with an occasional hint of a sparingly graphite line. Krista is beginning to look like a beautiful work of art.

Even conventional beauty seems to be out-of-fashion in the world of high art, but it thrives in the world of decorator arts, the landscapes, fantasy works, and wildlife creations. Needless to say, everyone is free to pursue personal tastes be they high art or decorator art. I do not create works of art that conform to contemporary colour schemes in fashions, home decor, and other trends. My studio is a place where I give voice in art to the feelings and spirit that reside within me. I do have something to say, yet I am equally aware of the limits of my artistic abilities. But, when I choose to "push the envelope" and dare tread far beyond convention, even in silverpoint, wonderful things happen. Silverpoint ground has been resigned to traditional coatings of calcified bones and other calcium carbonate compounds suspended in a diluted mixture of rabbitskin glue. However, when I push beyond conventions, I discovered new grounds in mixtures of plaster of Paris, marbledust, guache, watercolour, gold dust, silver enamel, and even colour pencil stick washed with solvent. The end-result remains a diverse experience of a number of new grounds that takes me to soaring heights of satisfaction. Who says my work is traditional? Who implies my work is void of modern experience and contemporary expression? Some have and they are wrong.

But rest assured, I will not mount a protest march on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery to defend my creativity and lay contemporary and modern claims to an ancient artform.

I remind myself not to spend much time arguing with critics. Instead, and despite temptations to do otherwise, I will let my drawings do the talking for me. Not only do I feel very contemporary and modern in my silverpoint work, the feelings exist in all my other drawings and paintings as well, whether they drift towards realism or venture far into the realm of abstract expressionism, or when I stretch my wings to paint the *conchetto* works.

It is just about eleven o'clock and time for a flavoured coffee. Perhaps there's a cookie left in the jar, unless of course Matthew has beaten me to the last morsel leaving me only crumbs. My current drawing of Krista comes in a long lineup of silverpoint drawings, as I prepare for a one-month solo showing of my work in Vancouver, during February of 2003. I began the new silverpoint drawings in August, and now it is November. Even though I have quite a few earlier silverpoint works, I want this show to be fresh and recent. If Krista is the last drawing in this series, I can expect thoughts of new works to begin to thrive any day now. Something inside me says it's time to stretch my wings and do some spontaneous drawings in chalk just to loosen up the muscles and joints, and lay down my reading glasses for a spell. Now that the northwest corner of my

studio has been cleared and prepared for painting, perhaps I will switch to oils and acrylics and leave drawing altogether, at least for a season. Painting is not a different artform for me. Painting is an extension of my drawing.

Yet another reason the studio is such a special place for me is the opportunity it gives me to give something back to this great country I call home. I have been privileged to spend time in such far-away places as Africa, Mexico, Israel, Europe, the United States, and our Canadian Arctic. Every time I return from my travels the moment of touchdown is an emotional one. I am reminded of the time I stood on the deck of a converted troop and supply ship as it slowly steamed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In the distance I could see the majestic headlands of what was to be my new homeland, Canada. The year was 1958, and I was thirteen years old. Canada remains a vast and awesome country that has so much to share with those who call her home. Somehow, I feel honoured and moved to leave something for Canadians today and for future generations, as well as leave a legacy for my children and grandchildren.

Art is much more than just a mirror of nature. Art is a voice. Specifically, art is a voice *of* the artist and not just a voice *for* a cause. Art as a voice *for* a cause is simply advertising. Art as a voice *of* the artist is the conscience of society. I believe the distinction between *of* and *for* is an important one. I can think of one area where the distinction is very necessary and that is in what we know as religious or iconographic art when compared to pure expressionist art. I have seen the mistake made that art is yet another tool for proclaiming the faith of the artist, or his or her religious affiliation. As a result, art is reduced to mere icons that in some graphic or symbolic way represent illustrations of the tenets of faith and doctrines of belief that occupy the artist in his or her spiritual journey. Art becomes an advertisement *for* a religious cause or a specific church denomination. Little is known of the artist.

My thoughts in the studio, whether I draw or paint, are a blend of an extreme and not-so-extreme understanding that shapes my daily worldview. Most of the time my thoughts are good but sometimes they are bad, especially when people have offended me or simply "rubbed me the wrong way." Usually, any clash of wills and ways revolves around issues of personal faith. However, what I do believe has been and is constantly "tried in the furnace of the earth," to become solid foundations of truth. I know of what I speak and believe. As a result, my art becomes an expression of how the issues of faith and life shape me as I live and play in a community of people, and to a larger extent how I live and play in the family of man. It is not enough to mirror a majestic, snow-capped mountain only to freeze the image in time. What does the mountain do *to me* and how does it shape my actions and reactions to the infinitely varied courses of life? My passion is the human figure, not only because it poses the greatest challenge in drawing and painting from life, but also because inherent in the human form are all aesthetic and artistic *voices* with which to speak of my personal journey. My journey is a never-ending search for what Augustine called the "city of God," that eternal place called home forever. Yet, my journey remains a never-ending transformation as this city finds an eternal home in me, in the human spirit, as I seek first the *Kingdom of God*. Somehow, my art must become a voice, not for doctrine and dogma, but for the effect that search and that journey have on my day-to-day life in the company of family and friends, or in times of solitude in my studio. Only then will I create a valuable contribution to Canada and those who call her home. And should by the grace of God, my artistic voice be heard and seen beyond these borders, then I am the more pleased. For those reasons and

more, my studio remains a special place not only to consider the possibilities of my creative journey, but to consider as well the promises of a spiritual journey. For reasons I cannot really explain, art has given me a spiritual consciousness that causes me to think deeper and deeper about the issues of life and eternity.

Not all thoughts in the studio are bright and bubbly. Many are serious thoughts. Sometimes futility and despair crowd my thinking especially as a result of injustice. I feel surrounded by injustice. Political expediency, capitalist profit, media exploitation, bureaucratic waste, and unqualified commentary, make me angry. I see injustice towards the real poor, towards women, the abandoned single mothers, and towards children. Sex and drugs still sell and authorities pretend powerlessness when in fact they know it's too profitable a boon to give up. Art suffers too. True recognition is hard to come by in Canada at least from the art "establishment." A renowned scholar said, "nearly all institutions, unfortunately, work with bureaucratically conceived and enumerated criteria of worth and excellence which have nothing to do with intrinsic value." It seems that with some national institutions, for an artist to become a success he or she must first be a success. Funds are rare and granted along political not artistic lines. Gabriola Island is far removed from the Toronto and Montreal scenes. The internet is a weak and sporadic link to collectors of fine art but a goldmine for digital reproductions of genre. The millennium grants of 2000 read like a political riding map of the Liberal government's election strategies. I am comforted that some of Canada's greatest artists are my peers who have accepted me as one of their own, something I did not ask for, but they offered generously nevertheless. I am humbled. There also appears to be little comradery in the arena of figurative art, especially figurative drawing in the classical tradition. Drawing remains painting's poorer sibling. Post modernism, minimalism, destructivism, "shock art," and publicity stunts, favour the galleries and an unsuspecting public.

There is also a dark side in the community where I live. Amidst the claims of tranquility, and abundant creativity in our "isle of the arts," linger deep-seated suspicions of every big corporation, and government decision. Conspiracy theories abound, and some even believe religious conviction is a social disease, while they line up at food banks to collect groceries generously donated by the island's churches.

Pardon me, but my rejection is showing.

I have to watch myself because sometimes I get so angry I cannot draw and the protective shield around my quiet studio sanctuary is punctured. Damage control is paramount. It sometimes takes a few days or a week to heal. Forgiveness can be tough sledding.

I come back to the unique position of my studio as a creative workplace, a peaceful sanctuary, a chapel of celebration, and an island of retreat. Is it any wonder that when people suggest I "take a break," I ask them, "from what?" Who would want to leave such a special place? When other calendar events demand time and attention, I always look forward to my return to the studio. Even long distance driving is accentuated by the knowledge the drive will end right where it started - in the studio. Now, for those who would suggest I have become a recluse, I remind them that the greatest priority of life on this planet is my wife, my children, my grandchildren and a growing number of very special people who are my friends. The studio will never be an excuse to remove myself from the love of people I have come to cherish so much. After all, art without love is nothing but a clanging gong, of which there are too many in our

post-modern era. To create art in a vacuum of love-less feelings is a waste of time. Such art turns the studio into a prison and for some even a morgue.

That is why the door to my studio is always open. Rarely do I lock it and when I do, it is only for an hour or so when I need to be assured of an uninterrupted time, especially when I begin a new project.

I have completed the Krista drawing and for a short while I will leave the drawing on my easel. It gives me some time to walk away from the concentration it took to create the drawing and hopefully catch any bits and pieces I need to change before putting the work in my collection of portfolios. I turn the drawing upside down for a few minutes to check if the composition is balanced after which I carefully remove the paper from my drawing board and coat it with a light spray of fixative, not for the silverpoint, but for the small amounts of graphite on the drawing. When the fixative is dry I further protect my drawing with a piece of brown kraft paper and place both drawing and cover carefully into a designated portfolio of work. These in turn are stored in one of many drawers in my horizontal storage unit or placed in their portfolios in clear plastic bags for storage on the loft of my studio. Sometimes I file my drawings according to style and sometimes according to a theme or specific subject matter. Academy drawings are the longest of all my works. They are carefully crafted according to traditions of centuries ago and the result is a high degree of realism especially in human form. My second style is the Renaissance drawing which is more spontaneous, but still within the boundaries of tradition. The third style is the throw-all-caution-to-the-wind effect of drawing on mixed-media surfaces. Even though I may draw on the mixed-media surface with conventional tools such as silverpoint, carbon pencils, guache, colour pencils and chalk, it still remains an unpredictable work whose outcome isn't decided until I am nearly done. I consider it a wonderful blessing to be free to switch between these styles whenever I wish. In fact, now that I have completed Krista, I will switch to some Renaissance style drawings in sanguine and sepia chalks. I have a special supply of Russian-made chalks, perfect for the next adventure in my studio.

Some of my favourite media with which to draw are the time-honoured and traditional Conté and Wolff's carbon pencils, graphite pencils, Prismacolor pencils, and conté sticks in the usual array of sanguine and sepia. To create large drawings I will mix "puddles" of colour using watercolour or guache. When dry, these puddles become inspiration for random shapes and background for representational drawings. The mixed-media surfaces for silverpoint I have already explained and sometimes I use copper and brass instead of silver. Pen-and-ink is reserved for *en plein air* sketches, often in brown inks when I work in the forest. Another favourite medium and technique I use often is monoprinting. In its simplest form, I place random splatters of India ink on glass and spread alcohol over the ink. As fast as possible, I place paper over the mixture and *pull* one-of-a-kind prints from the rapidly drying ink. These become backgrounds to my *petites noir* drawings. Guache and water monoprints are less demanding in that I can take more time to pull prints. Sometimes, the entire floor of my studio is covered with monoprints that need to dry thoroughly before I press them flat. One of the messier techniques is a process I developed in which I *patinize* paper. I spread flat-white primer latex paint on cover-weight drawing paper and while it is still wet, I spread copper paint into the mix. I often use a circular mat to create my "copper moon" shapes. When all the paints have dried, I apply a second coat of copper paint accompanied by random spreading under tracing paper and a lucite roller, and while the

copper paint is still wet, I spread a clear patinizing solution over the mix. I let the final mix sit as I watch with fascination how the patinizing solution gives the entire "copper moon" an antique, greenish-oxide effect. It makes for great drawing with soft Pitt black oil-pencils.

Some artists prefer to draw on an angle with their paper mounted on a drafting table. I prefer to draw in the upright position or in the painting position, with my paper taped to a drawing board held securely in place on a painter's easel. First of all, a painter's position allows soot and other drawing debris to fall straight down without collecting on the drawing. It makes for cleaner drawings. When I use carbon pencils I usually mask off areas after I have completed them so as not to get them dirty. Another reason for a painter's position is that it allows me to see the drawing at any time in its proper perspective thus eliminating one of the most common errors in angled drawing, namely that of *parallax*. Parallax is a natural reaction to a drawing that gets closer and closer to the artist's body as he or she leans over the work. The artist starts off big and bold at the top of the drawing with arm outstretched. However, as the drawing gets closer to the bottom, or to the waist of the artist, arm movement lessens and the drawing becomes disproportionately smaller. Parallax is the most common cause for figure drawings that are out of proportion. Working in the painter's position avoids parallax. I am speaking about those drawings that require up-close-and-personal attention and in a seated position, such as my carefully crafted academy drawings. Larger, more spontaneous drawings are created at full arms-length, usually in a standing position.

Regardless of media and techniques I use to draw, I purpose to remain alive and fresh in my work, by constantly changing styles, techniques, and media, and by experimenting with new mixed-media and grounds on paper. I even mix expressionist and abstract techniques with ancient design disciplines such as the "*Golden Section*," a Greek mathematical invention dating back to somewhere around 500 AD. And to satisfy my passion for variety as well as excellence, I will often create major studio drawings, such as my "story drawings." These drawings tell a story of sorts in a large composition of line and form, by placing the composition within an invisible but very present Golden Section grid. One such drawing was titled, "a prayer of choice" and told a story of Coast Salish carver, Richard Krentz. Drawing can be such fun. Drawing is also more than capable of spanning the fullness of creative time, from ancient mathematical disciplines to Renaissance techniques and from impressionist discoveries to abstractions of all kinds, to create a body of work that is as contemporary and *vogue* as any expression of our attention-grabbing sibling, better known as painting.

When all fountains of drawing seem to have dried up, I switch to painting large canvasses, just to get the stiffness out of my creative bones. It may sound like a cliché, but "there is never a dull moment in my studio," especially the *conchetto* works which incorporate a vigorous process of flinging paint, dripping, splattering and rubbing in the manner of action painting of the fifties and sixties. Like my granddaughter Haley, who fingerpaints on the floor, I "fingerpaint" on canvas. Now that's cool!

And if I am not drawing or painting, the studio is a place to write.

When I enlarged my studio space, that is, when I re-arranged my studio to make room for more painting space, I moved my computer and files to a spare room just off the livingroom. It now serves as my writing space. John Gould once said that he never met a real artist who couldn't write. My mentor of yesteryear, the great Michelangelo, was a prolific writer as well. He wrote some five-hundred sonnets and the entire

collection is carefully published by Yale University in English and Latin, as "*The Poetry of Michelangelo*." So, I am in good company when I say I too love to write. My writings span some thirty-five years in the form of poetry and commentary. For the past ten years I have written for our local newspaper sharing my thoughts in a column about my journey of faith. In 1997, I decided to commit my thoughts on art to a series of essays which I have titled, "*art of the spirit*." These thoughts have grown into a collection of essays and commentary about art and my journey through the arts, a collection that now comprises a second volume altogether with some one hundred topics of discussion. Some have been published in *Bottega*, the journal and newsletter of the *Drawing Society of Canada*. In 1998, I began "*in search of a city*," an epic poem inspired by my natural surroundings and motivated by my spiritual quest. In addition to these essays and poems, I have written about and researched classical drawing disciplines, the art of silverpoint drawing, a special work called "*Homeward Bound*," about who these Verstraete's are and where they came from ( my father wrote the first volume ), and last but not least a number of writings about spiritual matters.

Bright-red numbers on my clock tell me it is five-o'clock in the afternoon. Already the day is very dark. I began my day in the studio in darkness and end the day as such. But all is not darkness. When summer is in full swing, daylight floods my studio very early and the last rays of sunshine linger for as long as ten to ten-thirty at night. Summer is a special time to work in the studio as well as a special time to brighten my days with long hours *en plein air*, somewhere on Vancouver Island and preferably deep inside a forest or on the log-strewn beaches of Pacific Rim National Park. I am tired after my day's work, but I feel satisfied *Krista* is a good drawing and the prospect of a new day and a new beginning in the studio, leaves me feeling at peace within and without. I sense the next drawing is ready for takeoff.

Soon it will be summer.

The weather channel has promised more fog tonight. Inevitably however, one day, November will turn into December and then another new year will dawn, another spring, and at last summer, when my studio becomes the great outdoors.

Thank you for keeping me company during this special visit to my studio.

Ps. You are invited to visit my studio anytime at [www.gverstraete.com](http://www.gverstraete.com)

**Gerrit V.L.Verstraete** was born in 1945. He has been a professional artist for over 40 years. He began his fine art studies as a child in the Netherlands, his country of birth. At age five, he was introduced to formal art lessons by renowned Dutch artist, Stien Eelsingh ( 1903 - 1964 ), co-founder of the arts group *Het Palet* at the *Hopmanshuis* in the medieval city of Zwolle. In 1958, the Verstraete family moved to Canada. After completing highschool in 1964, he enrolled at the *Ontario College of Art & Design* in Toronto. He graduated with honours in 1968, and is an *Associate of the Ontario College of Art & Design ( AOCA )*. The journey, however, took an unusual course for the young artist. Instead of pursuing fine arts full time, he founded and owned a design studio that soon grew into a nationally accredited advertising agency. For 15 years, and with a large staff and offices in Toronto and Ottawa, his creativity appeared in print, on billboard, radio, television, in corporate design and "*business theatre*". His work included many creative projects in the world of performing arts with some of Canada's leading dance and theatre companies. Married and with a growing family that would soon count six children, he continued to attend evening drawing sessions at the college to keep his skills sharp and work fresh. In 1982, he founded the *Christian Communications Centre* whose work included teaching, conference management and publishing. In 1993, he moved his family to Gabriola Island, British Columbia. There he built a large family home including a spacious studio. Today he spends full time drawing in his *Masterpeace Fine Art Studio*, and as an artist and spiritual leader he remains deeply involved in the community. Gerrit Verstraete is the founder of the *Drawing Society of Canada*, and its online educational initiatives including the "*Gallery of Canadian Drawing Masters*," and the *Canadian Academy of Drawing*. In 2001, he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree ( BFA ) from the *British Columbia Open University*. He is a consulting member of the *European Academy of Culture and Arts* in the Netherlands. His work is exhibited in a number of galleries and collected by individuals and corporations in Canada, the USA and abroad. Recently, his work was accepted into the "*New York Collection*."