**The Artist Speaks of Uncharted Chaos”**

*by Lynda McKinney Lambert, March 22, 2013*

*We will begin this story as we enter into a winter dining room in the late 1940s.*

*Still*

*Small*

*Alone*

*Quiet*

*Twilight*

*I dropped down onto my hands and knees. My soft navy blue corduroy jeans brushed against the tightly woven varigated gray wool pile of the carpet as I knelt down before the antique buffet in our dining room. The hot air register on the nearby wall blew warm air onto my face. I was the oldest child in this family of four children.*

*Being alone is something to celebrate for it is not often that I was without one of my two brothers or my sister. On any typical day, we played “school” together. I was always the teacher and they were always my students. It was always my classroom, wherever we were playing.*

*On other days when we played together, I was the queen who ruled our little empire. Being the queen was my occupation. I was born to be the queen. One of my responsibilities was to give orders to the other children. They were my servants. On one special evening I was alone just long enough to disappear out of view from my siblings.*

*I slowly reached under the worn edges of the darkly stained oak buffet. It was a heavy piece of furniture that seemed to extend the entire length of the dining room wall. It was held aloft by sturdy, carved legs. I stretched my entire body underneath its rough unfinished underside. The edges of the wood caught my red knit sweater and pulled me to a quick stop, with a tug. I pulled back and lowered myself closer to the floor so that now my bare stomach touched the coolness of the highly polished hardwood floor that extended out from underneath the rug. The floor boards created a smooth frame around the rug and the entire floor seemed like a painting with the edges of the walls acting like a frame. Hidden away in this tranquil, smooth space, I remained very quiet. It was dark in this wedge of unseen space. This place made me feel safe and secure but best of all it was a secret place hidden away from all the others in the house. I could stay there for hours undetected. This was a space where I could secretly watch and listen and dream by myself. From the early days of my memories, I embraced the feeling of solitude.*

*I watched*

*outside and inside*

*merged*

*I relaxed*

*dozed off*

My early childhood experiences marked the beginning of an internal dialogue, a silent discourse, which has continued throughout my life. The early experiences of child’s play signal the activation of an inner world; the contemplation of mysteries. In early childhood, I found hidden places where barriers between spirit and matter dissolved. In these experiences I knew I was complete.

Recognition and awareness of mystery continue to be addressed in my art at the present time as I approach the seventh decade of my creative life. I entered into metaphoric places of height or depth. I discovered an actual location that separated "here" from "there."

Horizontal was separated from Vertical. And at the apex of the two, I realized and meditated on transitions to another world that is unseen; it’s authentic. Past memories mingled with present realities and all of it became what was existent. Memory itself became the motif, image, and theme I have pursued in my art.

I am not alone in my urge to uncover images from childhood memories through making art. Many artists have addressed the role of memory as a recurring theme.

When Piet Mondrian was asked the question – Are memories real? He replied:

*“What was real a moment ago is so still, and you continue to exist now, no less*

*than before. Has the connection between you and things ceased to exist just*

*because you no longer see them, or are looking at something else? Besides,*

*isn’t the one just as real as the other, and so cannot the one make completely*

*real the memory, or retained image, of the other? Is not our capacity to*

*perceive beauty constantly there?” (Mondrian 78)*

In early childhood memories, “outside” and “inside” merged. Even now, so many years later, there continues to be awareness that outside and inside is simultaneously present as I describe a world in my art. My pictorial world view operates on spiritual and physical levels. There is a place where vertical and horizontal meet. At this apex is where I live. It is written about by Arthur F. Holmes in his book, Making of a Christian Mind.

*“What an artist chooses to portray is a comment about reality as well as*

*values. Artists create out of the habitual furniture of their minds. What they*

*exclude is as important as what they include…Abstract or nonrepresentational*

*art and music…are an implied comment about reality.”*

*(Holmes MCM 121)*

My own creative process initially involved working with the mystery of chaos to create something that is ordered. It was James Baldwin, the African American writer, who said that human beings are creatures who conceal an interior of “uncharted chaos” which lies beneath the surface reality. I could see that Baldwin understood the human condition so well. Through Baldwin’s stories I came to understand my own work process. I recognized the “uncharted chaos” was my own internal world; my fallen nature as a human being.

Let me take you into my studio and you can watch me work today:

First, I begin my work by recognizing and giving honor to my own inner chaos! The interior chaos is balanced by my need to put things into some kind of rational order. I accomplish this from the beginning by laying down some marks; a splash of color; a calligraphic mark or word; a layer of text; a fragment of something I have found while taking a walk perhaps.

I must confess to you. At this point there is no real plan. I hope this does not disappoint you. But, that is the truth of it. There is no blueprint that I will follow. My only thought is to begin making Art. The only strategy in my mind is to begin laying down information which will be the beginning of the work itself. That information is intuitive. The mark making is initially done randomly, yet intentionally.

My creative work begins when I find something interesting or colorful or intriguing to me. It may be something like the brilliant blue and orange label I picked up on a narrow street in Venice; a scrap of newsprint from a Chinese newspaper I found in Chinatown in New York City; a crispy brown dried up, curled leaf from the sidewalk of the campus where I work; a chunk of blue-green moss from a walk in the woods in early morning mists while walking in the mountains of West Virginia; perhaps a small sliver of silver-pink bark revealed when the snow melted in the woods that surround my house; a smooth piece of veined marble from the Untersberg Mountain in Austria. The beginnings of a painting can be found anywhere.

Just as I have no notion of where a work of art will begin, I also have no notion of where it will lead or what the end will even look like. Are you surprised to learn that the journey begins and the destination remains unknown to me?

I like living this way! It is an adventure. I just have a sense that this thing is interesting, or colorful, or tactile, or unique and I choose it as a place to begin my work of art. Somehow, it spoke to me and I responded to it by choosing it. The line, gesture, mark, word, color, text, accident- that is the “something” I begin with.

The “something” of the found object becomes my raw material. I am working with the unknown when I begin. I am working in a way that feels like “uncharted chaos.” I can begin anywhere and with anything. The possibilities are unlimited. The fear of failure is strong as each new work begins. There is a tension and a kind of anxiety that I experience as I begin.

### Rollo May, a psychologist, wrote in his book, The Courage to Create, concerning this feeling of adventure in art making:

*“in the case of abstract painters, the encounter may be with an idea, an inner*

*vision that in turn may be led off by brilliant colors on the palette or the inviting*

*rough whiteness of the canvas. The paint, the canvas, and the other materials*

*then become a secondary part of this encounter; they are the language of it,*

*the media, as we rightly put it.”*  (May 39)

I love to say to people, “I can make art out of anything.”

I do, literally, mean anything! That is the philosophy I share with my students. When students recognize that as true, I can see it is like a light has been turned on for them. Their faces seem to light up when this fact sinks in and they begin to know it is true and try it for themselves. When they discover they have God-given senses that are not dependent entirely on their eyes or their intellect, it is a very exciting discovery for them.  *“Creative imagination is present…in the artist…who explores possibilities he has sensed but not known.”* (Holmes CWV 118)

Because of my world view that the world is ultimately ordered by God, I subsequently, intentionally, begin to layer and order the apparent chaos from which the art work originated.

Making a work of visual art begins through risk taking and use of “found elements.” There is no particular order in which a work begins. It is to all appearances a chaotic process. I continue working with the myriad of initial colors, lines, textures, imagery and forms until they become an ordered world. Sometimes it takes a long time to begin to find that sense of order amid the unbounded chaos as I keep working towards that end. That is the true challenge, to bring order to the work and to bring it to a completion that makes sense. When this happens, the artist can stand back and say, “It is working.” That is always the goal.

Rollo May understands this process fully. He wrote, “Joy comes when you find the form required for your creation.”(May 147)

Through looking at trees, seeds, roots, trunks, clouds, and other aspects of nature in the world around me. I am affirming individuality. Joy comes into the studio when the elements take on a form that is required for my creation. I often stop to dance in my studio, whirling about and singing along with some music on my Bose Wave Radio or with a CD that I am enjoying. Movement, music, and dance come into my art as I work.

I cannot underestimate the influence that contemporary poets have had on my own work. During my undergraduate studies I found a kindred spirit in the poet, Robert Bly. In his poems I caught a glimpse of truth to be found in mythology from ancient times, handed down through the ages. I was particularly captivated by the metaphorical world he created out of natural images such as snow, ice, fields, trees, stars, night, and animals.

Bly uses metaphorical imagery from nature to define conditions in society and cultural events. I found in his poems sensitivity to and keen awareness of human consciousness and memory. In his book, This Tree Will Be Here For a Thousand Years, Bly used imagery from the landscape to describe a feeling like my own. Bly writes of being

*“aware of two separate energies; my own consciousness, which is insecure and*

*anxious, massive, earthbound, persistent, cunning, hopeful; and a second*

*consciousness which is none of these things. The second consciousness has a*

*melancholy tone, the tear inside the stone, what Lucretius calls 'the tears of*

*things', and energy circling downward, often felt in autumn or moving slowly*

*around apple trees or stars. “* (Bly 6).

I am aware that there are two physically and perceptually different aspects of spirituality that I speak to in relating the stories from my childhood observations. There are *ascending* and *descending* aspects in my memories that continue to be important as I create my artwork. Ascension is often illustrated by verticality, bright light, and jewel-like color.

Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, said that “beauty” is a proper name for God. He outlined three conditions for beauty:

1. Integrity or perfection
2. proportion or harmony
3. brightness or clarity.

We can see that Jesus Christ is shown in artworks as having a light emanating from his body, or surrounding him. In works from the medieval ages we see him through the darkness of the interior chapels. He is depicted with a golden halo of light around his head. The artist actually used gold to create this feeling of heavenly light in a sacred space. I have stood in medieval churches in Europe and allowed myself to become one with the darkness of the space so that I could see the frescos as they revealed themselves through that darkness. Sometimes seeing clearly has to happen in near darkness in order to begin to see the luminosity and spiritual light that comes from those art works.

In Gothic cathedrals we see Christ the King of Glory seated inside a golden mandorla. He rises in the air above the flaming votives on the altars. He is dominating in the space above the ceiling arches or outside in the natural light on the columns carved in stone. The figures are elongated to indicate that this is a spiritual person or event that we, the viewers, are looking upon. The figures seem to stretch, effortlessly, upwards towards the light, leaving their feet dangling towards the earth.

When visitors descend the stairway into the basement chamber of the Sistine Chapel in Italy, they encounter a world where light shines into darkness in a swirling, agitated world of painted figures flying overhead in a synthesis of events from history, mythology, and the creation story. This is the chamber in which cardinals gather to pray and to seek guidance when selecting a new pope. It is very significant that this dusky chamber below the surface of the earth is the place where a holy leader is chosen.

In this underground cavity painted figures from the Bible cavort with and intermingle among figures from Antiquity and Greek mythology. In this dark chamber, we look up into the light to the ceiling painted by Michelangelo to see a physical depiction of the Creator, God, extending his arm and finger to touch the finger of the first Adam and to bring him to life. The architecture and art of the past is living testimony that sacred events can take place in brilliant light or in deep darkness. Every place can be a sacred place and there is not any darkness too deep for God to penetrate.

In the Old and New Testaments we find that images of light are identified with God and Jesus Christ. Yet, we also find this idea in the early pagan writings and in the philosophy of Classical Antiquity. This light is a theme that runs through the thoughts and writings of Plato. Light brings clarity, especially intellectual clarity such as in “the light of reason.” Light as an image can indicate holiness, life, growth, guidance, and the presence of the Creator. And, yet, I also believe that when we examine the scriptures and Christian heritage closely, we discover that even in darkness and descent can be found the presence of God.

On cold winter days like this one, the little girl inside of me is still the child-queen. My scepter became my paint brush. Even though my eyes no longer see the details and colors that surround me, I lift it up to the canvas. The noble brush is loaded with colorful pigments, and I continue to rule my world through the magic of art.

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