A SEARCHING FOR GOD

IN THE DARKNESS

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

Mary Allegra Cermak, Bachelor of Fine Arts

The Ohio State University
1984

Approved by

Copyright © 1984
by Mary Allegra Cermak.
All rights reserved.

Department of Art
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Plates</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Remarks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Work</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plates</td>
<td>14-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Plates

1. Mea Culpa, drawing, pastel and mixed media, 1983 14

2. Les Offrandes, sculpture, mixed media, 1984 15

3. Mingling Blood, drawing, pastel and mixed media, 1983 16

4. Self Portrait with Black Hand, drawing, pastel and mixed media, 1983 17

5. Untitled, drawing, pastel and mixed media, 1983 18

6. Les Offrandes, sculpture, mixed media, 1984 19

7. Les Offrandes, detail, 1984 20
I am generally interested in the religious, the act of worship, the moment of miracles, the history of voluntary suffering. The manifestation of and reaction to the spiritual, the mysterious and unseen find an unwilling audience in our age. I am part of that audience — tight-rope walking between skepticism and faith and carrying centuries of Catholicism into every action. My primary concern is to communicate a vision of violence, ecstatic or painful, current or remembered; of doubt in the images of faith.

The strongest visual imagery in my memory was the nightly news. I grew up with daily views of the Vietnam War, more inexplicable than any miracle or act of God. The photographs of the burning children, wounded soldiers and Kent State were more powerful images than most. In a manner similar to the religious art of the Middle Ages, the Vietnam images are documentation of the unbelievable. The graphic explicitness of the Vietnam experience has surely produced a generation lacking any sense of the romantic concerning war.

While the imagery from Vietnam was deeply moving visually, the single most important influence on my life and work is the Roman Catholic Church and Her accoutrements. I find myself in the common dilemma — hovering between faith and doubt, frequently angry at the Responsible Party. This is not a faith based on any logical plan, but on luminous magic of resurrection, transfiguration, Sacred Hearts and bleeding statues. And in the midst of wonderful miracles, I carry the doubt that surfaces whenever I consider the human condition. "For since heaven as well as earth, has been made by God, you may count on
encountering up there the very same evils as here below," is the view expressed by Lautreamont in Maldoror. If such pain exists on earth and for such ambiguous reasons, what cause is there to expect that eternity promises anything better? What purpose does the pain on earth serve?

What one experiences are not isolated events but layers of effects. The Crucifixion, the Vietnam wounded, one's own scars are part of one reality, one experience of pain. Life cannot be considered as a single minded pursuit. It is accumulation and melange. Walt Whitman expresses this idea in "There Was A Child Went Forth" in the opening lines — "There was a child went forth every day,/ And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,/ And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,/ Or for many years or stretching cycles of years."

**Early Work**

My early work dealt with ritual as a process. While the Mass and the Church were extremely important to me even then, I found it difficult to bring them into the open. The exception to that situation was a portable chapel I constructed in 1974. It included an altar piece, vestments and collapsible altar. The piece seemed irreverent to me and I shied away from the subject for awhile. An earlier piece, from 1973, had been a bible holder in the form of a red-wood cow. This attempt to make a clever statement also made me very uncomfortable.

The visual impetus for most of my sculpture came from Ocea-
nic art and the art of the insane. Both revealed an obsessive quality through repetition. They also seemed quite exotic to a Mid-Western child. In a way that is odd, since I attended churches with dense and lush ornamentation. But through sheer inundation, those surroundings were wonderful but familiar. The Oceanic and insanity-inspired art were remote from my concept of human experience. They had a mystery that kept them aloof, unique. I suppose at some time we all want to be somehow different, less easily understood. It is as if an air of mystery is both an allure and a protection. If one feels transparent, one can also feel vulnerable and uninteresting. Being elusive has been made to seem admirable, god-like, a being who can't be touched.

My sculpture incorporated binding, stacking, tying. It was not simply the visual impact of the repeated methods that attracted me. Mostly I was enamoured of the time spent in redundant activity, during which one could contemplate, meditate, dream. At one time I planned to enter a contemplative order. I gravitated toward actions that kept one busy but also encouraged thought.

During this same period my drawings began to be a way of story-telling. After years of drawing the perfect bodies and smooth skin of most models, I became more interested in my own display of scars, puckers and discolored skin and the events that they implied. Bodies of real people are engaged in life and thus the figures in my drawings indicated activities, rituals of uncertain meaning. In one drawing, a male figure appeared to be either urinating or pouring seed upon the ground. A female figure stood behind, hesitantly watch-
ing. I was moving toward the parable tradition inherent in the Church and away from the abstraction of doctrine. Stories, however inter-
preted, invite the viewer to participate.

The drawings and sculpture of that period were two very dif-
ferent, although related, bodies of work. I found nothing really con-
tradictory in that situation. Consistency in appearance does not
guarantee consistent success. I found that what was appropriate to
paper could only be artificially imposed in fiberglass or twine. This
is a situation that has resurfaced in my current work as well.

Recent Work

Currently my interests are much the same but manifested dif-
dferently. I still look to the religious, the state of the world, to
other art. Mostly I look to words. I feel a closer kinship to au-
thors, their work being so clearly directed outward, using a language
intended to communicate with others; it seems so purposeful. Some-
times it is disturbing that literature should be more absorbing to
me than the visual arts — as if I had more faith in words. But
there is a sort of logic to it. The rhythm in a written word is ex-
citing, the storytelling tradition more connected to my past. Al-
though all writing is exciting to me, it is principally to fiction or
narrative that I am drawn. In any event I find far more writers have
an effect on me than practitioners of other art forms.

The principal aim in my current drawings and sculpture is to
suggest a story, a moment that implies either a story in progress or
the memory of an act. (See Plates 1 and 2.) There are four areas of
literature that I view as supporting me in that direction; the metaphysical poets, the crucible tradition, the contemplatives and contemporary writers who deal with issues of faith. The metaphysical poets, especially Henry Vaughn, John Donne, Thomas Browne and Francis Quarles, present a relationship to God that I would like to address in my work. They confront and address God directly. It is a dialogue in addition to praise, praise that takes into consideration the skepticism and delight raised by the then recent scientific discoveries — a round planet, astronomy, perspective. These poets had a deep love for their God and his miracles, a love they expressed in often very physical terms; of a union with God as the product of love, of love as a miracle given, never earned. The darkness and skepticism in these thinking men do not lessen that love. If I draw a remnant of a miracle that involves pain and shock, that does not lessen the miracle.

The most exciting aspect of these poets for me is that they find the darkness exciting because they might pierce it someday; the mystery is a challenge even in light of the fact that it may be that the darkness is impenetrable, in which case they marvel at the darkness.

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim,
from "Night" by Henry Vaughn

This poetry is very visual, which is undoubtedly a major attraction. I want that imagery in my work, shimmering, violent and
descriptive. It would be untrue to claim that I always draw what I believe. Excitement and doubt are tantalizing lures as subjects to hold my interest.

Both the crucible tradition and the contemplative involve search. In the crucible tradition, particularly Grail Quests, the search is for spiritual attainment through physical tests. In the Faerie Queene for example, Britomart searches for virtue in herself while on a physical search for her lover. In contrast, the contemplative writers are concerned with a totally internalized search. In The Cloud of Unknowing the author offers instruction on becoming one with God by losing oneself. The author of The Revelations of Divine Love discourses on the lessons given in sixteen revelations granted her by God. The destination of the soul is the same for both groups.

Of the contemporary writers I particularly admire Richard Gaddis, author of The Recognitions, and Nikos Kazantzakis, author of several works dealing with Christian life and its effects. One example is The Greek Passion, in which the imitation of Christ is carried to the obvious end of martyrdom. Another major author whose work has had importance for me is John Gardner, whose characters experience the wonder in the little mysteries of life in books such as The Sunlight Dialogues and Nickel Mountain.

In addition to the literary baggage, there are also visual influences that seem pertinent to this year's work. The history of martyr portraits is an interest that took hold after I saw a large collection depicting the martyrs meeting their various ends. Aside from the obvious attraction of the bizarre, there was also the more
lasting impression of obsession, of something stated so repeatedly as to leave the viewer both entranced and confused.

The sense of sacred violence is central to my goals, the violence visited upon the faithful by a schizoid or duplicitous God. The stigmata mimics the Passion of Christ as man. The recipient of the stigmata is being favored by God in being allowed to suffer as He did for the sins of others. My interest is in the reaction one must feel toward such an "honour." Surely one must feel shock, horror, most certainly embarrassment at being so visibly marked. After all, Cain was the first to be marked by God; perhaps the stigmata is doing penance for the sins of Cain.

The stigmata drawings reflect a new experience for me, an extended period of time spent on one subject. Although similar ideas run through many transformations, I have never felt that sticking with one image was necessary. In this case, however, I wanted to push through a group of related works to emphasize the obsessive nature of the subject, to create a sense of confrontation and to give myself a direction to follow. (See Plate 3.)

The use of gold and other metallic elements was important to me. Gold has the reputation of signifying preciousness, so that was a tool I could use. Also the gold surface has a high attraction value for me. And I do not mean the subdued or sparing use of gold. I preferred overstatement to "understated elegance" in these drawings as a reinforcement of the obsessive subject matter. Another impetus for the use of gold was the holy picture. I collected holy pictures in school the way other children collect baseball cards. The valu-
able ones were the most ornate, with gold borders, gold haloes, tragic or miraculous scenes. They were given to us by teachers as rewards and the sense of sacred personal possession was strong. It was a way of owning part of God, grasping onto the holy. There was the feeling that one had a little bit of power, a claim on the mystery, a possibility of KNOWING SOMETHING WONDERFUL.

In presenting the stigmata as the manifestation of God communicating with man, I wanted the sacredness of the event and the preciousness of the depiction to be clear. An extravagant use of gold suited both my purpose and personality. The use of sprayed doilies served a similar purpose. Firstly, it built up the visual surface layers of the drawing. Also doily patterns themselves suggest a preciousness; patterns as decorations manifest a human-made object, a purposefulness, an intentional attraction for the eye. (See Plate 4.)

I think the decorative aspects of both gold and pattern were important because it is in decoration that man leaves his mark as a creator, says that a cup has a purpose beyond holding water. That same cup can provoke thought, record history, invoke pleasure.

Other aspects of pattern were that it remains flat and has no specific message. The doilies were used to suggest both fields and heavens simultaneously. They didn't intrude to the degree that they needed to be identified beyond that level. At some point, however, it became too convenient and frequent an addition to the drawings. I still liked the use of doilies but they were certainly no replacement for the use of pattern in Persian or Spanish manuscripts.

The other considerations in the drawings were color and
distortion. Colors that are gentle in themselves, have a prettiness not immediately related to the subject in the case of the stigmata—those are the colors that I felt most attractive. The blues, greens, roses seemed more decorative than tragic. Religious art has always had to attract the viewer with whatever means were available so as to gain the attention of an illiterate or initially uninformed congregation. After all, religion was the main entertainment, consisting of stories and wonders.

We have all been exposed to so much distortion and abstraction, we all recognize the visual language of both Henry Moore and the game of hangman. I'm not certain any amount of distortion on paper can upset us as it once did. The world presented by Francis Bacon would be the exception to that thought. I feel total helplessness before his work and would aspire to that intensity. But in my drawings I became increasingly uncomfortable with the pretty colors and the exaggerated distortion. They began to seem like recreational activities with known strictures and all too expected results. Also the subject matter may have been fascinating even to me but I was feeling exposed and disloyal to my past. The reactions I received indicated that I wasn't communicating a complete sense of faith or doubt. In any event the last drawing seems more like a cartoon of a drawing than the genuine article. (See Plate 5.)

At the same time that the drawings became less of an interest, I wanted to be working three-dimensionally. My background was in sculpture and architecture and I wanted to return to working with volume, with the embraceable. I wanted to work with the figure as well.
The theme had altered somewhat. What a work is about is perhaps best left less than fully stated. One might leave out some important but subconscious aspect or intention, or limit the viewer's ability to bring his own experiences to the piece by saying too much. Nevertheless, my purpose in the figures were as follows; something happened to us, we made some extra-normal sacrifice, we addressed our God — how does our memory affect you, the viewer? — or me, the maker? I wanted this work, whatever form it took, to be confrontational, to demand a meeting of souls.

The shirt forms grew out of an initial consideration of hair shirts, occasioned by a rereading of Utopia. Hair shirts are a sort of vestment; not really a sign of the grandeur of God, they are more an indication of the penance of man. And they are frequently private, most admirable when private. Thomas More's hair shirt was discovered only after his death. An initial confusion in my attempts at the shirt inspired forms was as to whether I should emphasize the shirt aspect of the form or the figures implied. I had trouble seeing it as an issue. Even in the early and unsuccessful attempts, I was thinking "souls" while still saying shirts.

One thrust of the shirt form was that clothing is a form of revelation, of identifying priorities and beliefs. To that end, the clothing becomes one with the wearer. In the early forms, the application of quasi-sacred and precious materials, which I found successful and appropriate in the drawings, was simply unsatisfactory and dismal three-dimensionally. The holy cards and gold leaf looked like add-ons rather than part of the personality of the form. This was
partially due to the fact that the cards were of paper and had more in common with the drawings on paper. It was only when the interior and exterior forms and materials meshed that I found a "soul" form which could communicate.

The three dimensional form demands attention in a way that a drawing does not. It can mimic reality and thus its distortion can be more wrenching than a two dimensional presentation. It can suggest a past life or experience that ties it to the viewer. The mere fact of volume confronts the viewer, challenges his own claim on space. In this respect, the distortion may more fully involve the viewer, suggest the pull of muscle, the twisting response to life. Gesture can more fully embrace or repel. (See Plate 6.)

Materials in sculpture draw forth yet another response. Sculpture invites touch, comparison with our own skin. While the early shirt forms attempted to communicate pain and loss through the application of increasingly ugly materials, hair, steel wool, thick wax, I found the results not only uninspiring but quite hostile to the subject at hand, intentional and humble self-sacrifice. The simpler the materials became, the more unity and respect the forms had. Ugly and unrelenting stretches of steel wool were less provocative than wisps, suggestions of the coarse, remnants of past sufferings. The holy do not boast of their pain or ecstasy. (See Plate 7.)

Another departure concerned leaving the consistent use of burlap to create the initial form and using materials in a way that gave each form an individual personality. The freedom to use straw or nylon fiber as structural materials came partly from a growing
confidence with the casting process and the form itself. (See Plate 2.) Of more significance was the realization that each loss and each figure had to be personal, had to be individually considered and portrayed. Surfaces had to affirm that here a private act occurred; even a martyr dying in the Coliseum makes his own sacrifice as an internalized, highly private statement.

It is a curiosity that, for me, the sculpture, more life-like and with clearer references to humanity, should also be more removed and private than the drawings. The attitude change I experienced during the course of this work is that of public curiosity to private doubt. Where the drawings could be seen to intrude on the moment of a miracle, the fragile and less visually spectacular figures provided the opportunity to be one with the moment.

I suppose a few words on the future are expected. My own expectations are simply to continue, to learn what a dialogue with God implies. I want to learn whether the sacred, the only imaginable, is ever portrayable. I would like to create groups of figures, interacting figures. Will their interaction exclude or involve the audience? I want to attain the same sensibility in drawing as in the figures, a sense of the remote found in medieval art and holy pictures; faith portrayed, respect for mystery.

The other elements I have utilized sporadically: the use of music, candles, architectural elements, are still things I want to pursue. Scent also has potential as an element, especially given the symbolic significance of incense. My concern is that the result
could easily become a side-show. The important facet in any future work must be a sense of reverence, if not for God, then for His followers. How can I make any conclusion here? I'm not finished, I'm still in progress.
Plate 7