

## IS ART A COMMODITY OR A RELATIONSHIP?

Some of us here are Christians; some of us probably are not. We all gather together as human beings to view and be confronted with a group of paintings, the work of Marilyse Fajal. My artistic involvement is less in the visual arts than in the musical arts, so I come as something of a beginner to these paintings. In order to have a basis for looking together at these paintings, let's consider some possible definitions of some basic terms.

The first and most basic word to understand together is, of course, "ART". The English word comes from Greek and Latin words meaning "arm, skill, tool, to fit or join". I would like to limit the meaning to "DELIBERATE HUMAN ACTION". Some people think this definition is too large, but consider what it leaves out: Accident or chance is eliminated by the word "Deliberate", all the creative activity of God in nature is left out by the word "Human" and invisible thoughts, ideas and pure imagination is left out by the word "Action". Art must be speaking, writing, singing, playing, painting, moving - something manifesting choice and commitment. Moving on this basis to the word "Music", we would say that music is "sound organized by human beings."

"ENTERTAINMENT" is an important word relating to art. The English word comes from the Latin words "Inter-tenere" meaning to hold between. In that sense, we should avoid being entertained by art and rather seek to be stimulated, challenged, confronted, questioned, informed, etc. Our relationship to art should be active, responsible and interactive. The German word for Entertainment - Unterhaltung, meaning "that which holds under" is even stronger.

"TASTE" has to do with our personal, subjective point of view and our personal pleasure or pain. Many say "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like". This is said as if it were an accomplishment to arrive at the knowledge of what we like. But all animals and plants know what they like. This is natural and the animals and plants seek what is good for them. But human beings are not only natural - we are spiritual as well; significant and rebellious. What we like is often bad and harmful, so we need different ways of measuring value in art.

We need to make two confessions about our relationship to art: 1. I often dislike what is good. 2. I often like what is bad. My personal taste is not a good measure of what is good and bad.

Exodus 31:1-3 is an encouraging and challenging passage. In it we read that Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and was given spiritual gifts - skill, ability and knowledge. We know that the Holy Spirit gives the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, miraculous powers, prophecy, etc., but we often don't realize that skill, ability and knowledge come from the Holy Spirit as well. These things don't come from the devil, although they can be misused and twisted by him, as can the other gifts. We hold rejoice in these gifts, which we all have in some measure, and take responsibility for their exercise. As God is creative and we are made in His Image, so we have a Biblical Mandate for Creativity.

Christian parents often ask me: "What kind of films should I let my children watch?" "What kind of music should I let my children listen to?" These questions are asked in love and concern for the edification and protection of the children. But, they are built on a disturbing underlying assumption: that art is a commodity, which we consume. They are questions of diet: Which films, paintings, or music should I consume because they will be nourishing to me, and which should I avoid? Andy Warhol could see that the American people wanted art to be product, so he painted a Campbell's Tomato Soup Can. It was a great insult to the American people, but they loved it. If art is only products to be produced and consumed, then we can be self-centered and protective in our approach to it. But art is really expressions in various languages of observations, questions, complaints, admiration, challenges, encouragements made by human beings as part of a great conversation with the cosmos, or god and other people. If human expression is only products to be consumed, then we should never have a conversation with an alcoholic, a drug addict, a homosexual or a prostitute, because their conversation will probably not be edifying. But Jesus spent much of his time with these sorts of people because he knew who they really were - fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

The bible records what Jesus taught us - that we must become like little children in order to get into the kingdom of heaven, in order to belong with God. Some Christians think that having faith like a little child means not asking questions. But, whoever saw a little child who did not ask questions? It is their profession. Children have the courage to ask deep, disturbing, even outrageous questions because they have faith in their parents, in God and in the world around them to supply reasonable and useful answers. Our experience of betrayal, dishonesty, and unreliability in a fallen world make us afraid to ask questions. Jesus came to heal that fear so that we can be like little children again. Little children test their subjective concept of the world against the objective reality around them. For example, a child might crawl under a low table and decide to stand up. When he crashes his head against the table, he tries again,

harder. Then he begins to cry in frustration and anger that his concept cannot be realized in objective reality. He must either submit to the form of the table and the world, or he will crack open his head and die. We all are in such a position morally in relation to God's reality. We are allowed to discover the limits, but if we do not respect them, we will die. We can be thankful and rejoice in the fact that our God supplies us a stable and faithful basis against which to test ourselves and with Whom to have an eternal, meaningful, life-giving relationship.

Creativity must not be our God. Non Christians finally have no reason or purpose to be creative as Christians do. The non-Christian creativity is from a kind of frantic energy in their search for meaning and purpose. The Christian should be more creative because we have a God and personal savior to thank, to glorify and to obey. Non-Christian creativity produces many interesting, stimulating and pleasing things, because the creativity in itself is right, not wrong. It is looking to creativity for a source of meaning and purpose and identity coming from the humans themselves that is wrong. It is also the non-creativity of the Christians, which is wrong and disobedient. When we do not obey God in being creative it is basically because we don't have faith in Him to sustain us in the process and struggle.

Imagine you who are Christians would go out into the city and ask any 10 people this question: "If you would become a Christian today, do you think your life would become larger, fuller, richer, more involved with the people and circumstances around you? Or do you think your life would be smaller, narrower, more withdrawn, less involved with the people around you?" What do you think their answer would be? Jesus said he came to give us abundant life, not tidy life. We are to be the salt of the earth, not of heaven. We are to be the light of the world, not of the sky. We are not supposed to gather together to shine on each other, but go out into the world to shine in the darkness and flavor and preserve the rotting culture around us. Most people think the Christian life is a smaller life. Where did they get that idea? Why did we teach it to them?

These paintings by Marilyse Fajal are an effort to make a statement of the largeness of the Christian life. They are expressions of childlike exploration of the reality that is made by God, spoiled by sin and restored by Christ. As we look at them, let us enter into the great conversation and struggle together towards the healing truth for our lives and our world.

Ellis H. Potter

## From "Christian Perspective in Literature" by Harry Blamires

The artist seeks to give order and pattern to what is shapeless and disordered in human experience and environment.

The artist seeks to give completeness and perfection to what is defective, inadequate or fragmentary in human experience and the environment.

The artist seeks to give permanence to what is transient and ephemeral in human experience and environment.

The notes of Christian living which mark off the church from the secularized community, which surrounds it:

**1. Permanence** – The Christian transcends the transience and elusiveness, the fragility and fleetingness of even the best things life can offer with the assurance of things that do not pass away.

**2. Vastness** – For the Christian, life stretches out beyond the grave into an eternity of unimaginable amplitude and richness.

**3. Intensity** – The activity of the saints is not like the activity of so many people at the present day; sporadic, uncoordinated, but is altogether coherent and concentrated into an irresistible stream of power since it is nothing less than God's own power flowing out into the world.

Aesthetic qualities of an artistic masterpiece: not sporadic or uncoordinated, but intense, coherent and concentrated; not limited, but vast and far reaching in its significance; not fleeting, but permanent. These are the peculiar marks of the artistic masterpiece and ought to be the peculiar marks of the Christian mind and life.

In modern life human experience is sectionalized and compartmentalized, fragmentary and inchoate and the whole drift of contemporary attitude is to try to locate whatever principle of unity life may have in the person of the experiencing subject. Life is thought of as picaresque – the human hero is the center of reality.