Hammers and Bells:

Thoughts on "The Bell, Struck: Tondos by Tim Lowly and Matt Ballou"

Matt Ballou, June 2011

At first, when I was still in the midst of making work for this exhibition, I found myself at a loss for what to say about it. This was a strange sensation for me; I usually have too many words. Later on, after conversing with Tim and Michael about the show and spending more time considering how to craft a statement, I was still stymied. What to say about such work?

It was then that my mind turned to Annie Dillard, which is always a good thing. Here is a short excerpt from her amazing novel *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

> "When the doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with the lights in it.' It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The lights of the fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had my whole life been a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."[i]

"I had my whole life been a bell, and never knew it until that moment I was lifted and struck." There – that was the feeling I sought to express about being and seeing and making. It's a feeling, I think, that we all seek. It's connected to having an experience that evokes awareness of such an order and such meaning that we find ourselves reverberating with its power, acknowledging it, submitting to it.

Nature has that effect. Perhaps Dillard's story strikes the appropriate chord because we're all familiar with nature being the vehicle for this kind of experience. All of us have been "lifted and struck" by sunsets and storms and seas and stars.

Similarly, we've all been transported into arenas of vulnerability, dependence, and transformation through our relationships with other human beings. We're bells that are meant to ring in concert.

I think artworks aspire to that same core effect of reverberation. Great artworks certainly have it because they amalgamate and draw upon nature itself, but also because they exhibit a relational component by virtue of how they are conceived, made, and presented to the world. The very existence of artworks is entirely dependent upon nature and the relational instinct of the human heart and mind. Any epiphanic power artworks contain is borrowed, in a sense, from both the natural order and our instinct for community.

But this is a show of circle-based artworks, and one can legitimately ask what circles

have to do with the kinds of transcendent, almost mystical, experiences about which I speak. I could, in an attempt to explain why circles – why tondos – came to carry the sort of importance I suggest they do, bring out the archetypes studied by Mircea Eliade or Ananda Coomaraswamy. I could get into how the Neo-Platonism of the Renaissance forced a geometric symbology into the practice of art. I could suggest that Ptolemy's model of the universe influenced the theology and philosophy of art making. I could use Rudolf Arnhiem's studies of visual dynamics and human physio-cognitive tendencies to show how certain forms are, by default, significant to human beings. All of these (and many more) are reasons why the circular format has been important and meaningful over time. Ultimately, however, the purpose of all of that symbolic loading was the initiation of intense engagement. No matter how we get there, regardless of the manner in which we find ourselves in that state, it is deep contemplation – a kind of thoughtful, prayerful meditation or reverie – that is the aim of the visual experience.

So I come to the tondo seeking a way to enter into contemplation, into a mode of prayerful stillness. I'm not saying that this state doesn't manifest in normal rectangular-based artworks, but I believe that the tondo lends itself to different ends than its rectilinear cousins do. The reason for this is that we have been so inundated with the rectangle of photography, of film, of television, and of the computer and smart phone screen that their dimensions signal the character of the medium rather than the experience of the eye. Their formatting has come to reference their medium instead of the physiological and psychological manner in which we see.

Each of those images is, in a certain sense, provisional. They are provisional in that they always communicate about what is beyond their frames; they always suggest the imminence of some other image soon to appear. This limits the potency of what is within the frame. Rectangles and squares are not meant to circumscribe or close off the boundaries of a world. They are instead meant to function as windows and doors, and the idea of proliferating provisional images – whether on the next website, in the next frame, or in the implication of the rest of the world – is deeply attached to their manifestation. After the advent of photography the rectangle is cinematic by default, and it opens up a world that exists beyond its borders. While this offers much that is beneficial and useful for image making in our time, there are pictorial modes that require something else. Because it is practically impossible to imagine a pictorial space that ceases at the boundary of the picture plane, many two-dimensional images today can't be read apart from an overt awareness of movies and photography in the minds and eyes of viewers. Most of them were created from that very frame of reference, so it makes perfect sense that they would reflect it.

I think the tondo can be something else, can come from someplace else. I think it can be the sort of picture we don't read through the filter of photography-based multiple provisional images. The tondo is neither a window nor a door. It allows for the artifice of containment to focus our eye. It allows for an iconographic bounding, an enclosure defining the place where image exists apart from non-image. It allows for the creation of relational conduits – something I think all great artworks are able to do – which is a mode of communication that relies less on the veracity of representational depiction and more on poetical, felt relationships to what is seen.

This is why the tondo – the Western circular image format – is so closely related to the

mandala, which is the Eastern circular image format. The mandala is not meant for didactic transmission of factual information. It is meant to stimulate a meditative, prayerful awareness in the viewer. This is a kind of awareness that goes beyond mere apprehension of pictorial narrative as moral treatise. Rather, this is an awareness of the embeddedness of meaning in what is before, within, and beyond human beingness. The tondo or mandala is, at its best, a fixture that enables the viewer to enter into a state of contemplation or prayerfulness or calm awareness. It is less about clarity through identifiable imagery and more about becoming aware of being via evocative imagery.

Evocative imagery is that which causes us to do more than simply acknowledge the fact of something. Evocative imagery moves us beyond what we think we know into what Gaston Bachelard described as "the astonishment of being."[ii] It is a poetical, sensed understanding rather than a rational, empirical understanding. A rational grasp of nature doesn't lead one to muse on "the tree with the lights in it." A rational grasp of such and such formal structure, such and such subject matter, or such and such cultural symbol doesn't lead one to be "lifted and struck" by an artwork. That sort of information is not what creates awe in scientists studying light from 13.5 billion light-years away or that causes viewers to weep before Bellini's *St Francis in the Desert* or that causes audiences to spontaneously stand in shocked reverence during Handel's *Messiah*.

What I am trying to do – and what I think Tim has always been able to do with his amazing body of work – is to create images that hold to a logic of contemplation or meditation or stillness or prayerfulness more than to a logic of representational rationality. Tim's works function in this contemplative way because they have such a strong sense of otherness in them. He has described his daughter Temma as "profoundly and wonderfully *other*"[iii] and, considering that so much of his work over the last twenty-five years has concentrated on her, it makes perfect sense that this otherness would permeate his work. It's otherness in that it makes the dramatic claim that our being is more important than our doing, that our dignity as *Imago Dei* is so much more legitimate than any value we might manufacture for ourselves by finding our identity solely in what we do. This is why quietude and prayerfulness are so important as a part of the art experience. What we submit to and participate in is more necessary than what we dominate or manufacture.

Because of this tension between selfless reception and self-determined effort I try to be careful in my practice. I want to hold onto observational representation – and the rigorous effort it requires – to the degree that it allows for identification and translation, but I hope to transform it toward the higher end of engagement beyond surfaces and appearances. As the great painter Lucian Freud has said,

> "There is a distinction between fact and truth. Truth has an element of revelation about it. If something is true, it does more than strike one as merely being so."[iv]

Truth does *more* than strike one as merely being true. Truth is more than the transmission of facts. It lifts you and strikes you and so you ring with awareness of your own contingency and limitation. You ring with a sense of the miracle of your own beingness and consciousness. You ring with an acknowledgement of the infinite wrapped up in the finite things of this world, of revelation inherent in the slivers of divine light reflecting from dingy mirrors (like you and me) and dim lamps (like our words and pictures and

songs). You ring with praise for a God Who would use messy, conflicted entities like us to manifest Himself into the world.

We come away from ringing experiences like these without lucid rationalizations or technical data. In them we don't find neatly packaged principles for a better life or five easy steps to success. Our encounters with truth and meaning often leave us with fewer answers and less certainty. Being rung can leave us agitated and dumbstruck, at a loss for cheap platitudes or fast explanations. Sometimes it's in our silent confusion that we're ready to find humility. Russian artist Andrei Tarkovsky explains it this way:

> "The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good."[v]

Artworks are hammers for striking bells such as we are. When we are in a particular sort of relation to them they can create spontaneous, sympathetic ringing in us. We're made to ring, and we're always ringing for something or for someone. But when we ring right, when a certain sound is called forth from us because of some magic, supramundane connection with what is beyond us and before us, we find ourselves being the bells we were meant to be. I think art – good art, art that aims to nurture the human spirit and that functions as a sightline for the human soul – is a kind of divine communication that churns us like nothing else can. Yes, it's still a shadow. Yes, it's still broken and limited and frail. But it is a holy resonance and a sacred trust.

It seems to me that this is the greatest end of any artwork, and it's what I'm always looking for in my making and my viewing: to find a tiny catalyst within the work that stimulates me to forget about myself, that shakes me and harrows me, that moves me into a place of quiet – sometimes gentle, sometimes disturbing – awed awareness and thankfulness.

I pray you can have that sort of viewing experience here today.

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[i] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York, NY: Harper, 1998. Page 35-36.
[ii] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971. Page 116.
[iii] Tim Lowly, Internet Posting, Available online: http://www.flickr.com/photos/timlowly/5729942113/in/photostream
[iv] Quoted in Robert Hughes, *Lucian Freud: Paintings*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1989. Page 20.
[v] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections of the Cinema*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986