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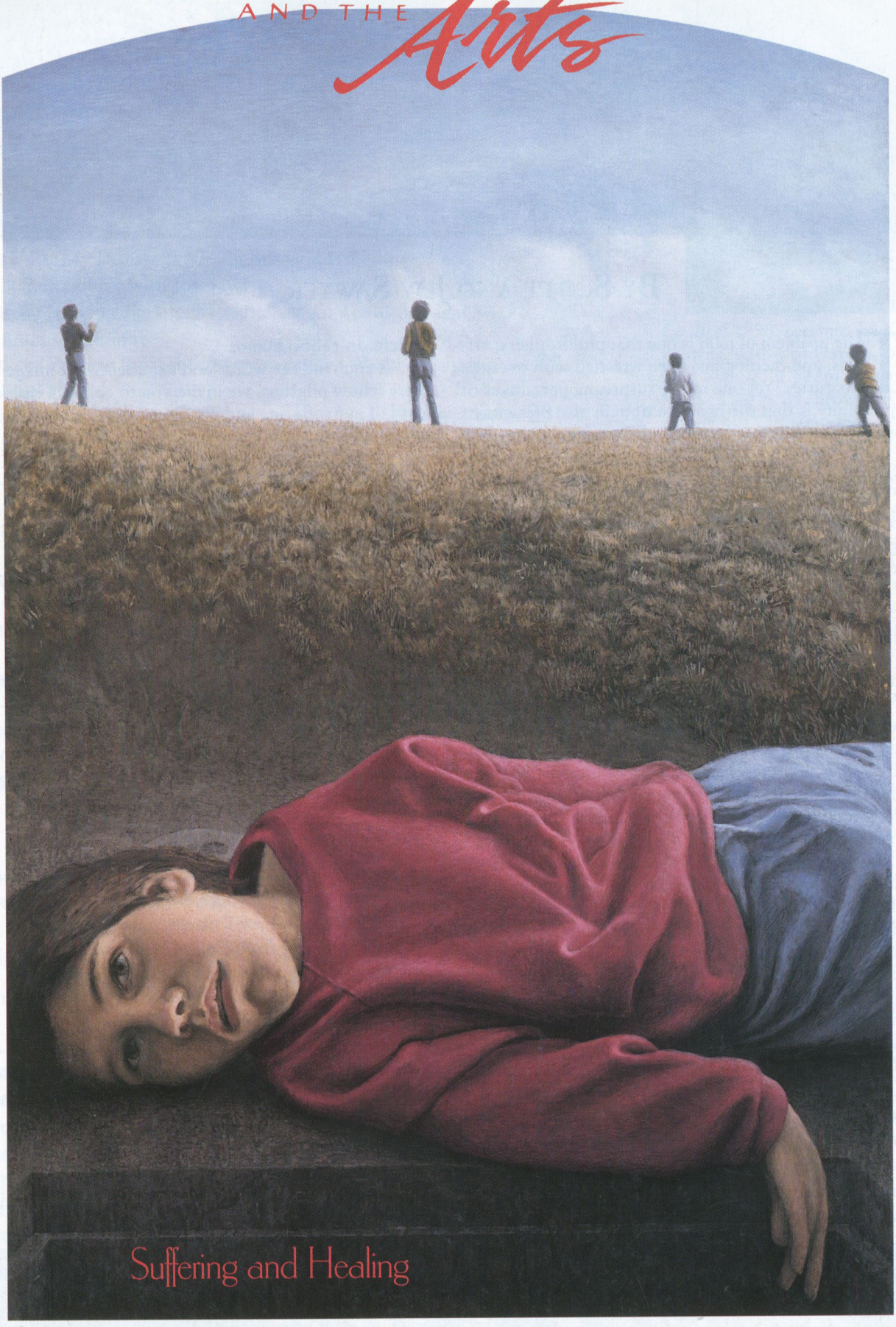

Suffering and Healing

The Realism of Recovery

By Greg Waskowsky

Artist Tim Lowly depicts his disabled daughter Temma with grace and meaning.

One is immediately drawn to Tim Lowly's paintings by their intimate, meticulous realism. Using the traditional medium of egg tempera, he carefully builds up layers of translucent color that subtly unfold into a world of light and texture.

It is a medium that seems particularly conducive to Lowly's creative temperament, which might be characterized as a kind of reflective attentiveness toward the familiar world that we all share. Yet the focus of Lowly's art falls on those who seemingly lie on the periphery of that world. These are the disabled children who increasingly have become the subject of his painting.

Initially, the child was Lowly's own daughter Temma. Born in 1985, she suffered from multiple impairments that left her with limited mobility and unable to see or speak. In time, other severely disabled children appeared. With a patient and discerning eye, Lowly has come to depict them with unexpected knowing and intimacy. But beyond this, he has gradually come to reveal through their presence a perception of reality embedded with grace and meaning. In his work, realism becomes an intersection between the eternal and the immanent.

The use of realism as a link between the sacred and the profane has its origin in the great Flemish masters such as Jan Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. What characterized their remarkable style of painting was its very transparency, the way in which even the commonest of objects emerged with a mysterious lucidity, as if quietly shining in the light of the infinite. The significance lies in that, rather than embellishing reality through the imagination, the vision of these artists was inherently objective and impersonal. It was as if the artist's personal perceptions, with all their subjective limitations, were displaced by a deeper way of seeing. Rather than fragmentary and transitory, the everyday world appeared with a stillness and coherence.

There was a significant theological underpinning to this mode of realism. By mirroring the work of the Creator, the artist depicted objects not according to their temporal nature but rather in light of their true identity, as they existed in the mind of God. Implicit in such a vision was redeemed reality with a wholeness restored to all its isolated and forsaken facets. What the viewer perceived was a world in supernatural clarity, in which all things found their true place and meaning through a divine relatedness.

Such a view is very close to the attentive, selfless realism with which Lowly depicts his subjects. Yet whereas the late medieval painters had a remarkably theological construct to develop their vision, Lowly does not. He is a contemporary artist, working in a largely secular world with all its fragmented complexities. That is why his realism is one of recovery, and the means by which this recovery is effected is found in the intimate rapport he has developed with his daughter and other disabled children.

Through the artist's patient discernment, they are freed from the distancing, isolating glance of pity. Reality once again congeals into wholeness and meaning. And it reveals itself through the mysterious light of these children. This is what gives Lowly's paintings the quality of parables. They allow the world with which we assume familiarity to teach

us something.

An early painting, *Day to Day* (p. 10), embodies this vision. The child around which the image unfolds meets the viewer face to face, that essential relationship of any meaningful human encounter. We are further linked to her by the artist in that she is seen from the unique perspective of the one who's arms holds her. Thus we cannot consider her impartially, but must see and know her as only her unseen supporter can.

There is something unique and peculiarly affecting in the way in which the supporting hands merge with her passive body, suggesting a single, intertwining form. It is from the particular intimacy of this meeting that the painting appears to radiate outward, opening beyond the suspended child to the gold, pavement-textured background behind her, to the pure infinite blue sky above. The panel on which the image is painted is a wedge shape that resolves itself into an arc. It is a fragment, yet it implies a whole: a circle that at once encompasses a specific human connection and the infinite expanse of all creation.

Mirrored Image

Mirror (p. 6), painted in 1998, acts as a companion piece to *Day to Day.* It is an image that speaks knowingly of isolation rather than radiant immediacy of physical connection. The central image is again that of the child, only now she is glimpsed in the mirrored image that lies on the parched earth, which is a fragmented pattern of fissures.

She is still the presence that gives the painting meaning, but it is a presence that must be experienced in faith rather than tactile certainty. The luminous image in the mirror of Temma and the fragment of sky with the blue coolness of water brings with it a poignant sense of meaning and connection in the midst of the isolated landscape.

Together these two works suggest something of the breadth and the gravity of Lowly's vision. They show a reality richer and more mysterious than we might at first imagine, one that encompasses the radiant intimacy that blossoms from physical touch as well as the intimations of faith that are only known in the heart's stillness. Lowly's depiction of children reveal both. We encounter them in a silence, isolated from the incessant activity of the contemporary world that surrounds them.

For those of us inhabiting that world, they seem to possess a vulnerability so encompassing that it easily becomes their sole identity. As a consequence, we are tempted to see them only as isolated, anonymous forms of perpetual suffering and quickly turn away. But Lowly's images of them draw us deeper, toward reality's center. He reveals through their very vulnerability a stillness, a presence of something at once sacred and elementally human. In this presence, we are closer to pure wellsprings of life, that eternal source of being that contrasts vividly to the arid, ephemeral world in which we are often forced to function.

Mysterious is a word one often encounters in descriptions of Lowly's work. Like realism, it is a word that can obfuscate as much as it reveals. For the mystery of these paintings is one not of Romantic vagueness but of a certainty beyond our understanding. Like all true visionaries, Lowly shows us a deeper sense of reality. His images cross over the barriers of descriptions and assumptions that separate us from the world and one another. They reveal what the poet Charles Wright describes as "some place beyond the lip of language, / Some silence, some zone of grace . . . "

It is here that we come to recognize something intimate yet forgotten. These are paintings illuminated by compassion; not the compassion of personal sentiment but a compassion that dissolves the distinctions of our separate viewpoints—those of artist, subject, and viewer—and allows us to glimpse the world in its indivisibility.

It is in the lucid stillness of this recovered world that we come to realize we are all touched by the same grace and the same hunger.

Greg Waskowsky is outreach curator for the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, MI. E-mail: jwaskowsky@aol.com. *Tim Lowly resides in Galena, Illinois, where his wife is a United Methodist pastor. The son of medical missionaries, Lowly spent most of his youth in South Korea. He received a BFA degree from Calvin College in 1981. Since then his work has been included in numerous group and one-person exhibitions. Hiw work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and the Arkansas Art Center.*