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OF ICONS, THE RENAISSANCE, AND THE MYSTERIOUS DISORIENTATION OF DISABILITY: AN ART EXHIBIT AND INTERVIEW WITH TIM LOWLY

By Heather Smith & Tim Lowly

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Click on the image to the right, "Temma on Earth," to open Tim Lowly's exhibit in a resizable browser.

***The Other Journal* (*TOJ*)**: I have noticed that your work has been consistently described as meditative, and over the past few days as I've looked through your pieces, I have been wonderfully disturbed by the stillness that is caught there. I'm wondering, are you cognizant of this or does it comes out naturally?

Tim Lowly (TL): Well, by nature I am an introvert, so it would probably make sense that I'm interested in painting that has a primary contemplative component to it: the medium of painting and the experience of looking at paintings lends itself to a contemplative state. Early on, my work was more overtly political, not in a sectarian way, but rather in relation to social injustice or other social issues. While over the years that inclination has become less explicit in my work, it is still there, and it might seem at odds with a contemplative direction. But then I don't think that making something that is contemplative means that it will be pretty or pleasant. Although those ideas aren't antithetical, I don't think they always sit on the same couch.

TOJ: It seems that there is something to the way that you hone in on a specific image that might otherwise be passed over. And I'm wondering if you have a set of aesthetics you follow or a reason for your choices of images.

TL: Back in the early '80s when I was starting to focus the thematic direction of my painting, I was profoundly influenced by work that I saw while traveling through Europe, particularly late Gothic

and early Renaissance art. I was struck by how hard many of these artists worked at making compellingly beautiful paintings, even with subject matter that was fairly tough. As I was working with my subject matter, whether it was my disabled daughter, Temma, or some other subject matter that might not be palatable to the broader public, I also attempted to make my images as visually compelling, attractive, and appealing as possible. I hoped that the beauty of the art work would draw people to something that they might otherwise not be drawn to, especially if it had been made in a manner that broadcast anger or a sense of injustice. Often "political art" utilizes an aesthetic that mirrors its message appropriately but effectively and immediately marginalizes those who might disagree with the content—kind of a sledge-hammer approach. My hope is that by using an aesthetic and technique that is associated with a different kind of image—one which is "nice" to look at—viewers will be engaged with subject matter that they typically would not feel comfortable engaging. It's more than a little subversive perhaps, but the truth is, I am interested in making beautiful work regardless of the level of "difficulty" in the subject matter.

TOJ: And now, because beauty is not defined by a set of universal principles, there seems to be much more room for the definition and perspective of it.

I was thinking about your development as a painter. Did you experience a shift in subject matter once Temma was born, a shift in the things you now deem as beautiful and the things you now observe?

TL: I was still very much in formation as a painter when Temma was born in 1985. My youth as a child of missionaries in Korea (when it was still a relativity poor nation) and the subsequent experiences I had in and after college had already inclined me theologically toward a kind of focus on the poor and the marginalized. But when Temma came along, that which had been more ideological became very real and immediate. And that had a profound effect on both how I think about painting technically and formally (that is, in the places where meaning fundamentally is cast) as well as in my choices of subjects to paint.

Beauty is a slippery thing. Jan Vermeer's paintings are predominantly of seventeenth-century Dutch women who are beautiful. He makes paintings of them that are beautiful—the organic, classic notion of beauty. I love those paintings. The fact that I see beauty in Temma doesn't mean I don't see beauty in its conventional forms as well. My hope is that people's understanding of what is beautiful in life will be constantly expanding as they grow. Of course, beauty as an idea is fairly nebulous.

TOJ: Theoretically, beauty has shifted from the viewer's taste and the viewer's own set of principles that categorize it. Beauty is definitely nebulous.

Would you consider your daughter Temma as your personal icon? It felt like there was something iconic and reverent about your work, which possibly intersects with the Renaissance's iconic sensibilities.

TL: Let's be clear with our use of language. An *icon*, as I use the word, is a window to something beyond itself, specifically something that cannot otherwise be seen. In that sense, Temma is like an icon, and my work, I hope, has iconic qualities. I should be clear in stating that I am not an icon painter in the classic tradition of icon painting or "writing," as it is more accurately described. My thoughts about icons are merely my own conjectures. That said, I would contrast icons with the work of the Renaissance. The work of the Renaissance tends to be more theatric and literary. The visual language is of a window to the things you can see, whereas the icon aims to be a window to the unseen. It might be accurate to say that my work with Temma is in a way an attempt to conflate those two approaches. That is, I'm using a visual language that became "normal" during Renaissance and continued into the age of photography where, in representing something, we have this assumption and expectation when seeing the painting that this is a representation of reality. Yet the reality of Temma, who is profoundly "disabled," has a kind of disorienting mystery about it that shifts the experience (of representing her or seeing such representations) somewhat into the territory of icons, which employ various strategies to undermine illusionistic representation as a way of redirecting the viewer toward God.

TOJ: So you are attempting to intersect the literary sense of an icon and that which is unseen?

TL: Actually, I mentioned "literary" in relation to Renaissance art, and what I had in mind was that while the art of the Renaissance tends to be more theatric and concerned with story, icons (to me) seem to invite a more centralized and less wandering focus. Certainly, many icons are related to narratives, but the emphasis, formally and otherwise, is on the central subject. Although this practice bears some similarity with Renaissance portraiture, the intention is radically different. As I mentioned previously, icons employed pictorial devices, ones that we might mistakenly regard as somehow more primitive, such as abstracting form and gold leaf, devices that undermine an illusionistic reading of the image. Thus, the icon's focus on a central subject has little to do with realistic representation and much to do with an intention to direct the icon viewer, or perhaps more accurately stated as the "reader," to a state of meditative prayer.

One of my favorite periods in art is the late Gothic–early Renaissance period where artists were floating between these two worlds. Artists like Rogier van der Weyden and other Flemish painters seemed to suddenly have their eyes opened to the real world, and they were painting everything—everything was in focus, everything had equal attention. The level of realism in this work is astonishing. At the same time, they still had an utter reverence in relation to God. The humanism that develops during the Renaissance is relatively minimal in this work. But, perhaps for the first time, we encounter paintings of the real world with a human Jesus represented as being fully part of it. I mention this period because I feel a kind of kinship with the kind of suspended state these artists were in. Although I'm not interested in making religious art per se, I do hope to make work that operates with a similar kind of dual awareness: painting as hope and painting as experience, simultaneously.

TOJ: Now going to "Temma on Earth," what caused you to choose the aerial angle for this painting?

TL: I have done a number of pieces where Temma was lying on the ground—because she can't walk or sit on her own, lying down is basically her natural position—and as I was working on various pieces of sculpture and other paintings, I began reflecting on the way in which she is a reminder of our relationship with this earth. The effect of gravity on her is a simple metaphor for the nature of human existence.

After I had done these series of sculptures, I photographed them and sent the photographs to my parents. My father called me on Easter Sunday and said he thought I should do a sculpture of Temma after the resurrection. That sparked a long conversation about the resurrection and ideas of what the resurrected body would be like. Contemporary notions of the resurrected body, I think, are actually largely driven by a Renaissance-based idealism of the human body. Although "Temma on Earth" is set in an existential present as a meditation of life "on earth," the reference to the Lord's Prayer ("Thy will be done on earth as in heaven") might be seen as raising the question of what the resurrected body might be like.

In the painting, you're seeing this figure from above, yet when you see the painting, it is a bit disorienting because she is above you and floating on the wall. She simultaneously appears plastered to the earth and yet floating like an angel. This disorienting perspective, where the viewer is seemingly suspended visually up in the air above the subject is referred to as the "God's eye view" in cinema.

Related to this is the manner in which I took reference photographs for the painting. I would take a photograph four feet above ground level, pointing the camera straight down, and then I would shift to the side a couple of feet and take another picture, and on and on in like manner. Eventually I had twenty-four or so photographs that I photocollaged together so that the effect was similar to a topographic map. What is significant about this is that the human eye can only see from one place at one time. If you were standing and looking down at this child who was directly under you, you would see the bottom of her chin and the top of her feet. The nature of your location would be looking up at her head and then down at her feet. Whereas in the painting, due to the way the reference photographs were taken, you're seeing everything from straight in front of it. It conveys a sense of intimacy, because the photographs were taken from a relatively close distance, but the only way that human perception can see so much from relatively straight on is from a distance of thirty or forty feet away. As a result, there is this strange simultaneous intimacy and distance.

To give relevance to this painting, I need to refer back to the Renaissance's development of perspective, which is in accordance with the movement toward the growing relative importance of the individual in society. The basic principles of perspective were developed during the Renaissance, a simple example being the way railroad tracks converge to one point on the horizon line. This became the standard way of constructing space in paintings, but what is implied by this system is that the painting is being seen by one person, in one time, and in one place. It's very specific and plays very specifically in relation to the image you are looking at. That is not true of most prior art. If you look at mural paintings of early Egypt, you find a method of presentation that has no perspective. I would suggest that implicit in their manner of spatial representation is a

relative lack of concern for appealing to an individual viewer. The way they approach making art is vastly different than the relatively individualistic perspective introduced during the Renaissance.

What does this have to do with my painting? I wanted to make a painting that subtly shifted the viewer out of conventional perspective. In a sense, this is a painting that contains in its manner of being seen an impossible perspective; that is, somehow we are seeing from many places simultaneously. Perhaps it is an even more apt perceptual metaphor for "God's eye view."

When an image is presented to us, we take a lot for granted. For instance, most people don't think about how the way in which something is being represented is actually a primary way in which meaning is being formed by the painting. We tend to associate meaning with symbols and subject matter—even that term implies where we assume the meaning of a work of art is located—but I

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About the Authors

Heather Smith
Heather Smith is a visual artist living and working in Seattle, Washington. She received a BFA in painting at Columbia College in Chicago, Illinois. She currently is studying at Mars Hill Graduate School for her Masters in Counseling and Psychology.

Tim Lowly
A Chicago-based artist, musician, and teacher, Tim Lowly was born in Hendersonville, North Carolina, in 1958. As the son of medical missionaries (his father was a hospital administrator), he spent most of his youth in South Korea. He attended Calvin College and received a BFA degree in 1981. In 1981 he married Sherrie Rubingh, and their daughter Temma was born in 1985. She is profoundly disabled (cerebral palsy with spastic quadriplegia) and has been a primary subject of Lowly's work. Since 1995 Lowly has been affiliated with North Park University in Chicago as gallery director, professor, and artist-in-residence. He is represented by Koplin Del Rio Gallery in Los Angeles

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