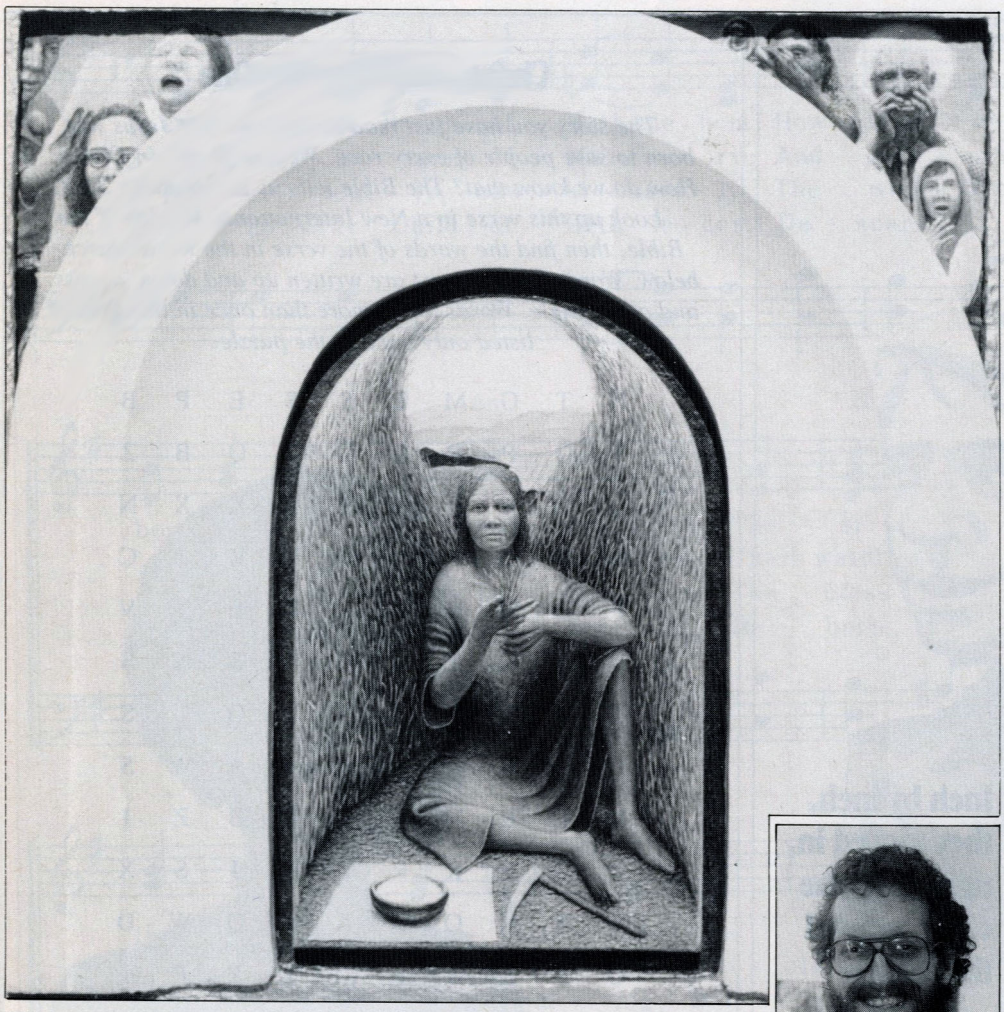
Emblems of Pain and Grace

BY JOHN BAKKER



The narrow path: central panel to "Heaven's Gate."

On a rainy Friday evening in early September, several thousand people crowd the streets in the six square blocks that make up Chicago's River North gallery district. Once home to turn-of-the-century factories, this trendy area of rehabilitated warehouses now holds more than a hundred art galleries.

On this particular Friday, most of the galleries are holding receptions for the artist they have chosen to lead off the 1989-90 season. At Gwenda Jay Gallery, one of the better galleries in the district, that artist is Tim Lowly.

Lowly is one of a group of Reformed artists who are active on the Chicago art scene. Others include Tim Van Laar, Eric Schultis, Linda Vredeveld Schultis, and Tim Vermeulen. That their work is represented by some of the best galleries in the city suggests that their point of view is being taken seriously. Lowly's certainly is—one of his works hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

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The gallery is festive and crowded. Collectors in Givency suits rub shoulders with art students in carefully tattered jeans and blue hair.

God Incarnate. Two weeks later I have the show to myself: fifteen paintings and a couple of drawings. This is a large show, particularly considering that the paintings are done in egg tempera, a painfully meticulous technique popular in the fifteenth century. Paint is made by mixing powdered pigment and egg yolk. The image is painted in black and white first. Then color is built up, layer upon layer over this foundation, until it finally reaches the appropriate hue and intensity. This intensity and the layers of tiny brush strokes yield a dense surface that has a jewel-like quality.

Lowly quotes the fifteenth century deliberately. It is a cue to the art world that he, like the painters of 500 years ago, sees God as an active presence, incarnate in our everyday situation. And, like the fifteenth-century painters who cast people they knew as biblical characters, Lowly's beautifully rendered pieces draw you into a world that feels intensely personal because it is peopled by his friends and family.

One of these people is Lowly's daughter, who appears in a number of the paintings. As you look more closely, you realize that she is always prone or being sup-

ported and that she has a small device implanted in her chest. It dawns on you that despite the engaging beauty of these paintings, something is amiss.

God and Pain. In one of the paintings, "Red Earth, Stone Sky" (38 inches by 22 inches; see cover), the upper panel remains the stark black and white of egg-tempera underpainting. A solitary man stands at our eye level. It is the artist, who has cast himself as a Third World political prisoner. His back is to us. His hands are bound. He looks away from bleak hills that stretch into the distance before him. He seems to be facing unwillingly a desolate journey.

If you follow his gaze downward to the small, full-color panel that fills the horizontal space below, you find a woman, his wife, who is cradling their child. To emphasize their distance from us, the scale in this scene is smaller; our point of view is higher. Like the upper figure at our eye level, our hands seem tied. The only emblems of grace available to the mother and child are at the opposite edge of the parched field in which they sit: a picnic blanket, a small bowl of rice, a dove hovering above. These emblems of grace seem inadequate, out of this pair's reach.

The frame around the woman and child suggests a stained-glass window, another emblem of God's presence. Yet the desolation it surrounds is a parody of grace. "Red Earth, Stone Sky" captures the paradox of our personal disasters. Lowly is acknowledging that the pain of our losses often overwhelms our ability to sense God's presence.

Lowly does not allow us to turn these paintings into generalizations. By casting his family in the place of Third World political victims, Lowly makes us feel simultaneously the personal impact of global politics and the sense of loss over a disabled child. The slight awkwardness typical of egg tempera intensifies the intimacy of these images.

The pain in these works shatters the "Leave It to Beaver" world we fabricate to protect ourselves. In the real world, children are harmed or lost. El Salvadors and Ethiopias are not ideas; they are the losses endured by individual men and women.

Lowly's paintings make us share the personal experience of each Guatemalan wife whose husband disappeared, of Ethiopian parents who could only endure as their children wasted away, of the desolation North American families have suffered through cancer, AIDS, divorce. Yet whispering at the edges of this reality is the presence of God incarnate, suffering with us, touching us moment to moment.

Hammer and Torch. "Heaven's Gate" (77 inches by 60 inches), more overtly mixes personal crisis with political responsibility. The painting's six-foot-tall outside panels depict in black and white a man and a woman covering themselves as though they have been caught in adultery.

A close look reveals that this couple is actually a pair of colossal stone statues, each in its own vault. The ceiling in the man's vault is red. He stands over a broken hammer. The hammer stands for socialism: the man is the socialist worker. The vault over the woman's head is blue. At her feet is a shattered torch. She is a statue of liberty, a symbol of democracy. A tiny broom leans against the wall amid the golden shards.

Squeezed between the two six-foot panels is a tiny, twelve-inch panel (opposite page) depicting a Third World woman. She is barefoot, seated, blocking our path to the village behind her. A reaper's scythe and bowl of rice lie before her. Through a trick of perspective, the foliage along the path curves into a pair of green wings. The poor, apparently, are the angels whom God has placed at heaven's gate.

Our treatment of her and her village will determine if we may pass to join the heavenly saints above the Gothic arch that frames the scene. How ironic that the two dominant ideologies of our age be judged by this frail, dark-skinned woman whom they are so eager to exploit for economic or political position. Lowly cleverly implicates us in the exploitation of the poor around us.

"Heaven's Gate" makes us feel responsible for the ideologies in which we participate. We expect the statues that stand for socialism and (especially) democracy to be heroic in size and action. But they are literally our size, caught together in some illicit act, covering up. As we witness this cover-up, we feel implicated. We feel responsible for allowing the poor to be squeezed in a political and economic chess game that only benefits us.

The pain in these works shatters the 'Leave It to Beaver' world we fabricate to protect ourselves.

Pain and Grace. Lowly's beautiful paintings are not mere decoration. They confront us with uncomfortable moral choices. In his paintings we feel the tension between pain and grace. Because he makes us experience the pain of those we injure, he forces us to judge ideologies not by the party line but, like the Bible, by how they treat individuals, particularly the poor.

That's something you can hang over your sofa. ■