Lowly resume

From Searching for the Spiritual exhibition catalogue
Text by John Wilson

Chapel Painting (Ordinary Time), 1993, 19" x 17", tempera on panel. Reba Place Church, Evanston, Illinois.

Tim Lowly's paintings have a poignant sense of time, of presence in a special place. This sensibility raises his work to the level of devotional image or icon (icon means image and denotes a sacred panel painting of a religious personage). Lowly sees the icon as a "conduit or catalyst directing the viewer beyond itself." Chapel Painting has the sacramental quality of an altar painting, which it was meant to be. Small works like this remind us of the private altar paintings made in the Netherlands in the Late Gothic period, work admired by Lowly. These tiny worlds, with their fully realized and presentational forms, can allow for a penetration into the microcosm, "directing the viewer beyond." The altar painting charater of this work is reinforced by its binary character. One surface is for "ordinary time" in the church, a time following Pentecost, at time not one of the liturgical seasons. It depicts a woman standing on the roof of a church with her back to the viewer in an open-armed, ancient posture of piety or prayer. An early nineteenth century painting by a German artist, C.D.Friedrich is an influence. But Lowly's figure mediates between the viewer and a rather bleak, contemporary urban view. The reverse is designated for a special time in the Christian Church: Lent. Here a smiling youth faces the viewer extending Lenten ashes which sift through his hands. The two figures, near and far, seen from front and back, form a kind of spatial communication from one side to the other. The

monochromatic or "grisaille" painting technique is appropriate to the somber mood of this church season. It also helps identify the work with traditional altar painting.

As in other work of Lowly's, it is the image rather than formal order that is the primary vehicle for the painting's content. The power of the image in such work as this was remarked by the German artist, Max Beckmann who said, "If we wish to grasp the invisible, we must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible." As a means toward spiritual expression, such realism as seen here is in direct contrast to the abstract art to be considered below. Lowly addresses the spiritual in another way. He makes clear that his careful, reverent use of technique, in this case a painstaking application of egg/oil emulsion tempera, is a form of meditation and prayer. Thus, the very act, the very process of making, is seen by some--including others encountered here--as a guide to the spiritual. In this we are reminded of Byzantine icon painting or the Zen Buddhist use of contemplation to prepare for the act of drawing.

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