



## *Magnificat*

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*“God’s ways are not our ways,” the saying goes. God consistently confounds the expectations of this world inverting the wisdom of mankind as he pursues his purposes for his creation, choosing unlikely agents for equally unexpected undertakings. Moses—the tongue-tied fugitive charged with negotiating with Pharaoh to lead his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Gideon—from the weakest clan and the least important member of his family called to defeat the armies of Midian with a small band of men. David—the impulsive adolescent shepherd called to be a warrior although he is apparently no match for Goliath. Peter—the ill-tempered disciple designated to be the cornerstone on which the church will be built. Paul—the zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus who is God’s chosen apostle to the Gentiles. The list goes on and on. Unqualified, unimportant, unprepared, unsavory, and ultimately unsuitable; they commonly respond like Gideon, “who am I to do this?” or try to wriggle their way out of doing what God has asked of them. Why is it that God nearly always chooses such unlikely characters to do his work? The answer lies in that most unlikely culmination of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind—the incarnation of the Christ through Mary—and perhaps more specifically in Mary’s song recorded in the book of Luke (1:46–55), the Magnificat, that announces with a prophetic voice the imminent arrival of a new age in which the present order will be overturned and replaced with a new one—God’s—which will reign supreme and for all eternity.*

Creation. Incarnation. Art. God creates and calls it good. The Word becomes flesh for love of his creatures so that they might know him better and be restored to himself. The painter paints for love of his materials and to know himself and his world more fully. Because we are physical beings we come to know things through our senses. “I love paint,” says Bruce Herman. “I love the smell of it, the feel of it. I love to work with it; to see what it can do and what it can become.” The smudges, scratches and occasional fingerprint in these paintings signal this intimate involvement of the artist with his materials. Samuel Escobar has said, “the Incarnation is the greatest translation ever, and poetry [or art] is a little incarnation,” making the invisible visible. These paintings have a palpable presence, inviting us into an equally intimate relationship with them. Achingly beautiful, they ask us to be fully present with them to contemplate being and presence through their tactile surfaces and sonorous color harmonies. As it is in the case of the woman with the precious jar of nard who anoints Jesus’ feet with a lavish, apparently gratuitous outpouring of all that she has, so the artist pours all that he has into his art as an offering and gift in order “to make paint sing.”<sup>i</sup> *Magnificat* is both proclamation and acclamation, inviting us to celebrate the unbearable goodness of being and the “radical physicality,” as Herman puts it, of the gospel.

There is much to be learned from the example of Mary and her participation in the Incarnation. The two triptychs that anchor this exhibit, *Second Adam* and *Miriam: Virgin Mother* represent the dual paths of discipleship that Mary exemplifies: the *via activa*, where Mary is active participant called to be a key instrument in God’s most critical work and the *via contemplativa*, where Mary is reflective witness pondering the implications of God’s audacious plan. Just as he has so often throughout history, God chooses an unlikely, decidedly unimportant, and apparently highly unsuitable agent to be the means through which he will come into the world a helpless infant. What could be more unexpected? What could be more uncanny? And yet what could be more consistent for a God who will overturn the powers and principalities that rule in this world? Just as God chose to use a small

band of undistinguished men led by Gideon to defeat the armies of Midian, so God chose a poor young teenage girl to be the vessel through which he would defeat the forces of death. And as God explains to Gideon, in this way it is *God's* glory that will be made known because there can be no doubt about who has brought about that victory.

### *Influence and Inspiration*

Herman credits a conversation ongoing for over twenty years with trusted friend and longtime colleague John Skillen and their shared enthusiasm for and dialogue with the Italian Renaissance tradition with prompting him to undertake the subject of Mary in his painting some five years ago. But equally significant to this work is the influence of the three most significant women in his life—his wife Meg and daughter Sarah, who served as models for some of the paintings, and his mother. In addition, conversations with close friend, painter Tanja Butler, who has herself recently undertaken a series of paintings on Mary, have informed his understanding of both the artistic and theological heritage of Mary and have also provided insight into his own work and artistic process. Strong women, every one, it is they who have inspired much of the thought that lies behind this body of work by helping him to recognize the distinct experience of women in cultures that do not often honor them and the particular sensibilities they bring to negotiating the joys and challenges of life with grace and integrity. The distinctive dignity and repose in the midst of suffering that Herman attributes to Mary in his paintings derives from his observation of these women. With this understanding, the paintings of woman at significant stages of life provide an indispensable counterpoint to the themes of the triptychs, bearing testimony to the mundane yet profound truth that we often get our first glimpse of God when we really look at each other.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot (1919) challenges his reader to understand that no artist stands alone but must be seen in relation to those who have gone before. We stand on the shoulders of “the dead poets”, able to see perhaps a little bit farther only because of what

they achieved before us. Herman's work embodies just this kind of complex interplay between tradition and innovation. Drawing from the deep well of the Christian tradition, he casts that imagery into our present moment by melding it with contemporary modes of expression where the abstraction of surface complexity carries just as much meaning and weight as the representational content. The patchwork of gold and silver leaf, tarnished and worn, with vibrant color passages scratched, abraded, over-painted, and sanded smooth, these beautiful yet marred surfaces are the visible signs of divine presence in a world that is broken and tainted by the Fall.

The aesthetic of fragmentation seen here is the painterly equivalent of Herman's conception of the body broken—a visible manifestation of all creation's groaning, the need for its redemption, and redemption's tremendous cost. A devastating house fire that consumed his family's goods and most of his paintings in September of 1997 set his work on this new trajectory that led to the series *The Body Broken* (2003) and the group exhibition *A Broken Beauty* (2006) which explored along with artists like Erica Grimm-Vance, Tim Lowly, and Mary McCleary the paradoxical relationship between beauty and brokenness which is the true state of human beings and this world. Herman imbues his figures with an arresting monumental importance, a quality also found in the work of Bay Area painter James Weeks, a mentor (along with Philip Guston) in graduate school at Boston University School for the Arts, who first noted a striking correspondence with Richard Diebenkorn's painting in the veils of color that provide an architectonic structure to the work. Although a connection may be seen between the lush color and enticing abstract surfaces of Guston's early paintings, it is the social conscience that takes center stage in Guston's later figurative paintings that relate to the probing of the human condition that is the essence of Herman's work.

Palimpsests—faint traces of things that have been erased, reworked, or overdrawn—constitute yet another distinctive component of Herman's visual language. Intrigued by the symbolic implications of the palimpsests so commonly found in Italian art and architecture that bear witness to the ways in

which an image or structure has been revised, replaced, or renovated in some way, Herman introduces these ghostly images to indicate the multi-layered and multi-faceted nature of reality and to remind us of our incapacity to apprehend it fully. But just as it is impossible to grasp the complex unity of God's redemptive work in a strictly linear fashion with its overlays of prophesy and fulfillment, hope and memory, it is impossible to unpack the iconographical intricacies and theological depth of Herman's paintings by dealing with the paintings as discrete entities, one at a time. They are best understood in dialogue with one another. Like the *sacra conversazione*, the Italian Renaissance altarpiece form that inspired them, they invite us to engage our theological history and the implications it has not only for the Church but perhaps more importantly, for ourselves. Recognizing this, the paintings of woman at various stages of life make manifest the import and intent of the redemptive work depicted in the triptychs, reminding us that it is in every woman—and every man—that God's work is to be made complete.

#### *Mother of God, First Disciple*

Until recently most Protestants had seldom contemplated the significance of Mary except as a foil for Jesus in the Christmas story or as a mother grieving for her son beneath the cross on Easter. This new attention to Mary has had profound effects within the church because, when one looks at Mary, one is confronted not only with Mary but with Christ and with one's self. Virgin, mother, servant, prophet, witness, disciple—she is all of these but it is perhaps this last, disciple, that is the most significant to consider. Recognizing Mary as “the first Christian” casts into sharp relief some important truths that may easily be overlooked. Mary is the first to believe that the child she would bear was indeed God's son—the Christ who would restore mankind to himself. She bears witness to that truth by going to her cousin Elizabeth, perseveres in that faith in spite of the collapse of all expectations of what his coming would mean to her and to the oppressed people of Israel, stands with him at the cross, and bears witness to the empty tomb. That belief both carried her through as she fulfilled her ominous

calling to be the *theotokos*—the mother of God or God-Bearer, as it is more accurately translated—and cost her dearly as she was required to embrace the suffering that would necessarily entail.

The dispute over the designation of Mary as *theotokos* (God-Bearer) or *christotokos* (Christ-Bearer) in the early church was fundamentally a debate regarding the doctrine of the Incarnation and the true nature of Jesus Christ. In the fifth century, the designation *christokos*, which may sound perfectly acceptable to our ears (after all, how can we quarrel with the designation of Mary as the mother of Christ?), accounted for only one of those natures—the divine—not both. With this in view, the phrase “born of a woman” invites reflection on the very particularity of the Incarnation—a particular woman who bore a particular man, Jesus Christ, who was no less than the Word of God. Herman’s depiction of Mary overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in the central panel of the triptych *Miriam: Virgin Mother* brings the incomprehensibility of this convergence into sharp relief. Who could imagine that the Almighty, Omniscient, Omnipresent God would deign to limit himself in such a way? But in view of the theology of creation/re-creation where God creates and Jesus Christ re-creates, Mary’s “yes” to God takes on profound significance and makes perfect sense.

### *Second Adam* Triptych

The *Magnificat* represents Mary’s resounding assent to Gabriel’s astonishing announcement and God’s mysterious salvific plan. Echoing the words and prophetic voice found in both the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2-21) and the Song of Hannah (I Samuel 2:1-10), Mary celebrates the impending fulfillment of the redemptive history foreshadowed in the Old Testament with words which declare it is already accomplished in God’s righteous sovereignty. This fulfillment takes center stage in the triptych *Second Adam* where *kronos*, historical time, collapses into *kairos*, God’s time, wherein the relationship between all things is revealed. The shifting planes of luminous blue and gold blur the distinction between the physical and transcendent as architectural structures transform into veils of color and the impervious gilded surfaces of the divine realm. Beneath the Cross, the first Adam,

naked and bent by the toil that is his lot grasps a vine that leads upward to the crucified Christ, the source of all life. The scored and fractured surfaces of the ground that surrounds him indicate the challenge of his circumstances that threaten to engulf him. The vine, transfigured into gold and melding with the scaffolding as it rises, may refer to Christ serving as a bridge between the City of God and the City of Man—causing both the demolition of the human edifice and laying the foundation of a new, holy order; the powers and the principalities fall even as the divine architecture rises. The patches of blue breaking through the frame at the top and the chinks in the gold-leaf surface that reveal the underlay of ruddy gilder's clay seem to indicate the breakdown of the barrier between earth and heaven. The crisscrossing lines behind Christ recall the two thieves who may represent the metaphorical scaffolding of mankind's sinful nature that required the raising of the Cross. At the top of the Cross, a spiraling form that could be serpent or vine, recalls the story of Moses lifting up the standard with the coiling bronze serpent— God's cure for the plague of fiery snakes unleashed upon the Israelites for their disobedience. Christ becomes that same heraldic standard, the final and singular antidote that restores all creation and mankind to himself, thrust upward by the will of God against the forces of death and destruction. This represents the radical inversion of the Gospel where death defeats death to bring eternal life to those who do not deserve it through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ's gaze, cast down in the direction of both Adam and Eve, and his feet touching Adam's head; both gestures transcend the barriers of time to link these events inextricably. The earthy faces and flesh of the figures in both triptychs invite our touch and remind us that we are all the sons and daughters of Adam—which is from the Hebrew *adamah* meaning "earth"—and thus limited and otherwise destined to be returned to it when we die, as "dust to dust" and "ashes to ashes". The scale and somatic persuasiveness of Herman's figures requires our participation with them, blurring the boundaries of image and reality so that we too become actors in this story.

To the right of Adam we find Eve, a broken and weeping suppliant cast in shadow, blindly reaching out to touch the vine, her trailing hand marking the legacy of sin that has passed from generation to generation. Her prostrate figure situated over a gilded ground recalls the goodness of the created order, God's presence with her despite her despairing state. Eve is lost but not abandoned. Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden* is depicted in shadowy form on a medallion at the base of the column between Adam and Eve, indicating the rift their disobedience created with God and with one another. Behind her stands Mary, the second "Eve", vigilant at the cross, turned inward in prayer to contemplate the terrible cost of their—and our—redemption. Pale transparent streaks of mauve that frame her carry depths of melancholy and confusion as she traverses the realms of memory, hope, and grief. Yet a golden light radiating behind her supports and shores her up, holding her firm with the tangible imprint of an invisible hand which seems to touch her arm as if to assure her of God's presence even, perhaps especially, in grief. Flanked by the shadowy palimpsests of the earthly order that is fading away, Mary is not only a mother grieving for her son, but also stands as a symbol of the Church—pondering and treasuring—all things past, present, and future that converge in this one moment. This Mary, standing alongside Christ at the Cross, represents the substitutionary suffering that is at the heart of the Christian gospel, for just as Christ willingly chose to give up his life so that we might live, so Mary willingly undertook the suffering that assenting to God's call would demand. These events have implications for the Church and for the whole human race, as Beverly Roberts Gaventa explains in her essay "Standing Near the Cross",

To consider Mary in light of the cross summons, first, images of the *mater dolorosa*, the sheer fact of Mary's grief and the grief of all who acknowledge the relentlessness of the human rejection of Mary's child. Yet more is at stake than shared grief. Mary's association with the cross recalls for Christians the scandal at the heart of the gospel: that God's actions on our behalf meet ever and again with misunderstanding and rejection. In Mary's "standing near the cross" (John 19:25) Christians may find themselves alongside the suffering world and its vulnerable God.<sup>ii</sup>

Mary's prophetic response to Elizabeth's recognition of the messianic identity of the child she carries announces the coming of a new age when the Lord will bring "down rulers from their thrones" and fill "the hungry with good things" sending "the rich away empty." The status inversion proclaimed by the



*Magnificat* where the lowly are exalted and the mighty are brought down designates her as advocate of the poor and downtrodden, a calling widely recognized beyond feminist and liberation theology as central to the work of the Church.

In the panel to the left of the Crucifixion, *Mary at Cana* depicts her meditating in *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden that refers to her virgin purity as the vessel for the Incarnation) adumbrating Christ's first miracle where water will be turned into wine—the catalyst leading to Jesus' eventual death. The overlapping of the three scenes in the triptych and the translucent veils of paint offering faint glimpses of forms and colors just beneath the surface coincide with the penetrable nature of time and memory, suggesting a God's-eye view of the outworking of mankind's salvation. A horizontal line that passes from Adam's hand grasping the vine to Mary's breast establishes a connection between cause and effect. Gazing at the water pots, she contemplates the dilemma of the good wine that has run out. Suffused in warm light she stands as a witness, wondering and waiting, for the fulfillment of God's promise, looking forward and back in time, pondering the meaning of Jesus' enigmatic reply to her request for help, "Woman, what have I to do with thee, my time has not yet come." The Eucharistic implications are clear where the wine foreshadows Christ's saving blood. Linking time from anticipation to the fulfillment of that promise, the two Marys in the panels flanking the Cross are mirror images of one another differentiated only by their age, the color of the headdresses, and the texture of their skin. Yet the visible weariness and signs of aging in Mary at the Cross reveal a private suffering and the personal cost of following God's call. Just as the figures in Italian Renaissance altarpieces, these figures are engaged in a holy conversation with one another across the center panel, collapsing time and evoking the timelessness of the divine perspective.

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Contrary to common perceptions, most of the Reformers held Mary in high regard. Many accepted the designation of Mary as *theotokos*, understanding this title's christological significance. Both Luther and Calvin presented her as an exemplar of obedience and faith who should appropriately be honored

and emulated, albeit avoiding exalted titles or formal ceremony. It is in fact Mary's very humanness, so readily seen in these paintings, that commends her as a model to the Protestant mind. Like Job, Abraham, David, and so many others who came before her, she struggles and misunderstands, yet persists in her faith in spite of those very limitations. She provides a model for the life of faith, it's true, but of a woman who is truly *one of us*. Lutheran theologian Lois Malcolm writes in an essay titled "What Mary Has to Say about God's Bare Goodness" reflects on Luther's *Commentary on the Magnificat* that, "the lesson that Mary...teach[es] is that God's bare goodness, even when hidden or unfelt, gives the equanimity not only to defend the right or the truth...but to face whatever may come with an 'even mind'."<sup>iii</sup> Mary's quiet strength, so evident in these images, as she wonders and waits for the unfolding of God's plan at Cana and witnesses its unexpected culmination at Calvary can be no better assurance of God's faithfulness in all things—at great cost to Himself.

#### *Miriam, Virgin Mother* Triptych – Container of the Uncontainable

How do we begin to apprehend the significance of the Incarnation and what it meant for a poor teenage girl in an occupied land to become the Mother of God? It may be surprising that the Mary in this exhibit looks just like one of us. But that's exactly the point. In selecting Mary, God chose an ordinary girl for an extraordinary task. Even her name, Miriam, was one of the most common names of the time as was the name designated for her son, Jesus, or *Yeshua* as it is in Hebrew meaning "salvation" or "Jehovah is salvation." Yet the very undistinguished nature of these names serves as a reminder that God came as truly one of us and continues to select ordinary persons to be agents in his redemptive plan. Mary, too, stands as one of us asked to participate in the work of God quite apart from her capacity to do so, thereby ensuring the recognition of the extraordinary nature of what God would do.

Organized chronologically from right to left (as one reads Hebrew), the triptych *Miriam, Virgin Mother* presents us with the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary; Mary as she is overshadowed by the

Holy Spirit; and Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Counterintuitive for the western viewer who typically reads left to right, this progression both underscores the Hebrew origins of Christ and also highlights the scene of the *Visitation*—since it is our natural tendency to look here first—where Elizabeth and John the Baptist within her womb acknowledge with joy and anticipation the identity of the Christ-child that Mary carries and Mary's prophetic response in her *Magnificat*.

In the *Annunciation* on the right, the angel Gabriel alights before Mary in the enclosed garden, a strange otherworldly being just entering the world of matter. Raising his still dematerialized hand in a gesture of proclamation, he greets her with the words, "Hail, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." The Gospel of Luke describes Mary as simply "a virgin," yet virginity is not intended for itself but only as a precondition for its proper fulfillment, in marriage, or, in the case of Mary, as the fitting vessel for the son of God. Quelling Mary's fears, Gabriel kneels before her. His outstretched hand touches the belly of one of the three vessels situated between them declaring that she is to bear "the Son of the Most High...whose kingdom will never end." Covering the mouth of the vessel with one hand, she touches the other to her heart in acceptance, acknowledging that she *is* indeed that pure, closed vessel awaiting the filling with God's son. Following tradition, the marred and beaten column between them prefigures the suffering and humiliation of Christ's flagellation before his crucifixion. The broken arch behind Gabriel signifies the brokenness of the world and signals the overturning of that fallen order which is already underway reminding us that it takes but a word from God and it is so. A golden light hovers behind them indicating the divine spirit that has penetrated the world of men.

While God chose Mary, an unlikely, ordinary young girl as the agent for his work, in this instance it is truly her assent that is extraordinary. As Scot McKnight explains in his book *The Real Mary* (2007), Mary's pregnancy was just cause for stoning in first-century Judea, and Joseph, as her betrothed, was

*expected* to divorce her or accept his own shame. Mary could only expect that this would be her fate so that these facts make both Mary's and Joseph's agreement to God's plan all the more remarkable.

In an essay titled "A Space for God" Robert Jenson introduces a particular type of icon designated the Virgin of the Sign which presents Mary with a "window" into her body that reveals the Christ-child within her.<sup>iv</sup> This particular type of icon is frequently accompanied by a Greek inscription that is most accurately translated "The Container of the Uncontainable." The very idea that God, who is "uncontainable" would choose to "contain" himself and become a helpless baby born of a woman seems incomprehensible, the awkwardness of the phrase in English translation simply accentuating that incomprehensibility. But with the recognition of its absurdity comes a realization of just what it means for God not just to choose but to *want* to dwell with us. While the Incarnation is the ultimate example of his desire and of the lengths to which God will go to bring about our reunion with him, the story of the entire Bible is of a God who wants to dwell with us. Yet, looking back to the many ways that God reached out to Israel time and again only to have them reject him, Mary's assent may be seen in a new light. As representative of her people Israel, she overturns their "no" with her "yes," agreeing to be "God's space in the world," as Jenson puts it, bearing Emmanuel, who is God with us.

In the central panel entitled *Mary Overshadowed*, Herman breaks new ground simply by depicting the event. Typically represented by a dove approaching the Virgin Mary or gilded lines penetrating her womb in an Annunciation scene, here the moment of incarnation is placed front and center, presented with monumental clarity and power. Echoing artistic precedents also depicting communion between a human and the divine such as Titian's *Danaë* and Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Mary is quite literally overcome—physically, mentally, and spiritually overwhelmed, engulfed by the Divine Presence. The gilded panel sets it apart, as a moment out of time as God becomes Man. The ruddy ground surrounding Mary conveys the intensity of experience and possibly foreshadows the blood that will be shed at the Cross. The vibrant freshness of the blue and green of the shawl she clutches offer a

glimmer of the new life to come. Seven burnished gilt squares (perhaps suggesting the form of a dove) hover above Mary, symbolizing the spirit of God and foreshadowing the glory of the Church that is coming. Wearing a simple white dress indicating her purity, Mary makes that “space for God”—the illimitable, the uncontainable—receiving the Messiah, the Promised One, into her body. A sliver of blue and broken surface area to the left of her seems to indicate the piercing disruption that has always come when the divine enters the human realm. Emphasizing the startling and seminal moment as God descends to become human, this central panel appears to slip down, lower than the adjacent panels of the triptych—effectively bringing God and Mary both lower, literally into the viewer’s space. In a reverse mirroring, the Crucifixion panel in the triptych *Second Adam* rises far above the others asserting the effective result that as Christ descends into hell on the Cross he provides for mankind’s ascent to heaven.

In the *Visitation* at the left, Mary and Elizabeth clasp hands in warm greeting. Elizabeth touches her womb as John leaps within her (echoing the Angel’s hand in the *Annunciation* panel), recognizing the Messiah as the child Mary carries. They smile knowingly at one another, sharing a moment of intimacy as an ochre colored light hovers between them. Understanding the extraordinary nature of what God has done they are joyful and at peace in spite of the hardship they will each endure. The dog, a traditional symbol of fidelity in religious iconography, is crouched behind Elizabeth in a play posture, possibly indicating God’s joyful fidelity that extends to each of them and to all of mankind. Their gestures and postures mirroring those of Mary and the angel in the right panel connect the two events creating a dialogue between annunciation and affirmation. The clay vessels framed by their bodies link to those in the *Annunciation* and in *Mary at Cana* (left panel) in the *Second Adam* triptych, making clear that Mary is the vessel who carries the Christ, Container of the Uncontainable.

In the life of Mary the two pillars of Reformation theology—*sola gratia*, only through grace, and *sola fide*, only through faith—merge, perhaps more fully than in any other. The salvific victory is Christ’s

alone. The gilded domes of the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* panels serve as a reminder of the providential nature of these remarkable events. Yet Mary is to be regarded because she said “yes” to God, not once but throughout her life as her faith was tested time and again. She is indeed the one who “heard the word of God and kept it.” (Luke 11:28)

#### *Woman series*

One of the earliest types of representations of the Virgin Mary dating back to the mid-sixth century is Mary *Hodegetria*—meaning “she who shows the way.” It refers to an image of Mary holding the Christ-child in one arm while she points to him as the source of salvation with the other.<sup>v</sup> The term derives from the classical Greek *hodegéo*, meaning “to lead one upon his way or to lead the way” and *hodegos*, a guide. The concept “she who shows the way” is, however, multifaceted in its implications merging aspects of prophet and disciple. Mary not only directs our attention to the means of our salvation, Jesus Christ, but models the life of faith that each follower must embrace. In this way, she too, shows us the way, rejoicing and suffering as few may ever claim to do. As author Kathleen Norris puts it so well, “When I am called to answer ‘Yes’ to God, not knowing where this commitment will lead me, Mary gives me hope that it is enough to trust in God’s grace and promise of salvation.”<sup>vi</sup> And like Mary, we too are called to show the way.

When we look at Mary we are directed to her Son. And when we look at her Son we are directed to look toward each other. It is this truth that makes Herman’s *Woman* paintings so essential to this exhibit. Taking us through successive stages of a woman’s life from childhood to emerging adulthood, through marriage and maturity, these paintings ask us to contemplate the interior life of women, their common experiences and distinct particularity seen in the individuals represented here. In the painting *Girl* the young girl, her legs slightly askew as if she may at any moment stand up, looks out in active engagement with the life unfolding before her. The patchy surfaces that obscure and surround imply an emerging form—just beginning to take on the contours of the shape of the person

she will eventually become. The diagonal line piercing down through thick layers of paint creates a space for her; the reflected light in the gold and silver leaf above providing a metaphysical counterpoint to the very physical reality of the figure and the painting's surface. The painterly textures reveal and conceal the complexity of all that lies around and before the girl as she gazes toward the viewer. Breaks in the luminous blue provide glimpses of complex markings in somber tones of black and blue that reside beneath.

In *Daughter/Mother* the tenderness of the bond between the two figures reveals the special love of parent and child for one another and the longing each has to be in deep relationship where we can be vulnerable. This composition overturns expectations by presenting the mother resting her head on the lap of the daughter as the daughter comforts her, revealing the reciprocal nature of human relationship, and how we learn to love from those who have loved us well. The rich earthy palette and strong textural patterns of rust red and scoured gold suggest the depth of feeling as well as the tensions that so often arise within the relationships that matter most. Unknown forces of darkness threaten but the warmth of love and God's presence in it prevails.

*Betrothed* presents a woman, at a threshold of a whole new stage when she will join herself to her husband to forge a new life together. Dressed in a diaphanous white gown, the bride awaits her bridegroom lost in the realms of memory and anticipation. Set between planes that recede and press forward, the white light and fresh palette signal hope for her future etched with faint indications of what might be. The fullness of her thoughts are given tangible form in the complex pattern of colors surrounding her head, the rubbed and sanded patch above her reveals both emotional depth and pensive thought. In each image gilded passages indicate divine presence breaking in on life and into the woman's consciousness, as well as recalling her identity as image-bearer.

Informing the entire series and the exhibition as a whole, the painting entitled *Called* looks both forward and back, presenting a woman in maturity who has known both joy and suffering, yet retains a quiet dignity and poise. The architectural forms to her right are stripped bare of their external covering revealing the structures that provide strength and shape to an edifice. The forms are diagonal and arc downward penetrating the upright shaft of her person, vibrant and alive, vulnerable yet strong. The quiet green and silver leaf below seem to gird the figure as she rests in contemplation, at peace with her calling. Painted from the same model as the Marys in the two triptychs (Elisa Lardani of Orvieto, Italy), she is an ordinary woman but represents much more. In Herman's words, "Like Mary, she is strong yet humble, and though small and even frail, she is confident within her calling. I see the church of Christ in much the same way as I see this woman."

It is *because of* us and *for* us that the Incarnation and Passion of Christ were necessary. But just as importantly, it is then *through us* that the glory of the Lord is made known. Presented with a female subject in these paintings, we are confronted with yet another inversion of what we may commonly expect because they also direct us to consider the nature of human being as it is found in every woman and every man whose fundamental identity is found as the bride of Christ, ready, waiting, anticipating our completion in him. The smudged, splattered, and scarred surfaces of these paintings, sanded-through and glorious in their materiality, signal this "radical physicality" of the Christian gospel which is an embrace of our identity as corporeal creatures. In her essay "Mary and the Artistry of God" Cynthia L. Rigby invites us to consider the common experience of artists in the process of making art as analogous to the nature of our participation in the work of God.

A writer writes. The Word becomes flesh. Mary bears God. The writer writes because she is a writer. To write (for the writer) is to exist in consistency with essence. It is to be free, to be an artist. The Word becomes flesh because God, in the divine freedom, wills not to be without us but with us and for us....Mary bears God in freely acting out who she is as *theotokos*.... Mary reminds us of who we are as bearers of God, humbly submitting to and courageously claiming our place in relationship to the Art that overshadows us, lays claim to us, and continues both to grow in and remain distinct from us....In becoming a particular, finite being, God conveys that God is not only for humanity in general (*pro nobis*: "for us") but for each of us in particular (*pro me*: "for me"). As Mary is called, by name, to participate in the work of God, so we are also called by name.<sup>vii</sup>



When God calls, it is to something that is so compelling and consistent with who he has made each of us to be that, recognizing this, we can do nothing but respond, like Mary, with a resounding “yes”! This is perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from Mary. The painter paints, giving visible form to that which cannot be expressed in any other way.

#### BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS ESSAY

*Mary, Mother of God.* Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson, editors. Eerdmans, 2004.

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*Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture.* Jaroslav Pelikan. Yale University Press, 1996.

*The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians can Embrace the Mother of Jesus.* Scot McKnight. Paraclete Press, 2007.

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<sup>i</sup> From M. B. Goffstein, *An Artist* (Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>ii</sup> *Blessed One*, 56.

<sup>iii</sup> *Blessed One*, 141.

<sup>iv</sup> *Mary, Mother of God*, 49-57.

<sup>v</sup> I am indebted to Tanja Butler whose work reminded me of this concept.

<sup>vi</sup> *Blessed One*, p. x.

<sup>vii</sup> *Blessed One*, 154-55.