



The Art of Sandra Bowden

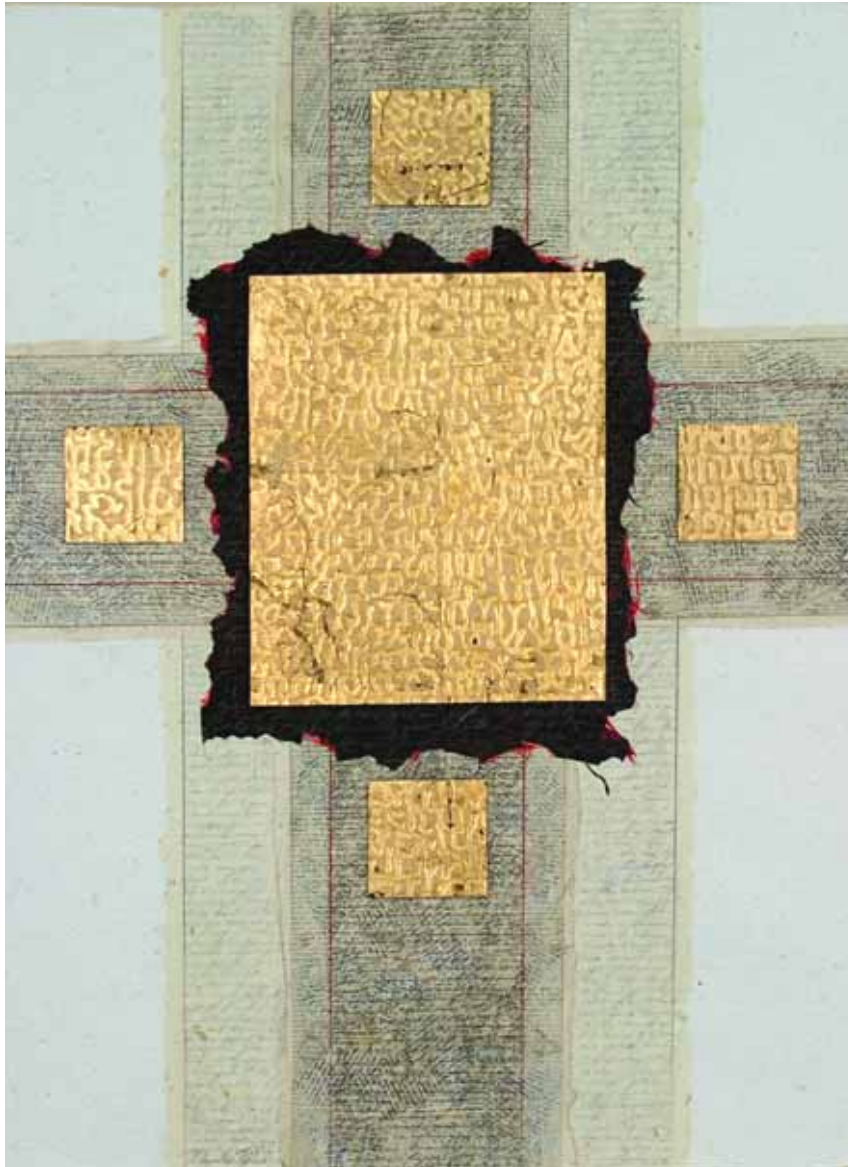


FIGURE 1  
**WAS THE WORD**  
Collage mixed media  
1996  
30 x 22

FIGURE 2  
(NEXT)  
**CORANTO**  
Collage mixed media  
with gold leafing  
2001  
14 x 11

The Art of **Sandra Bowden**

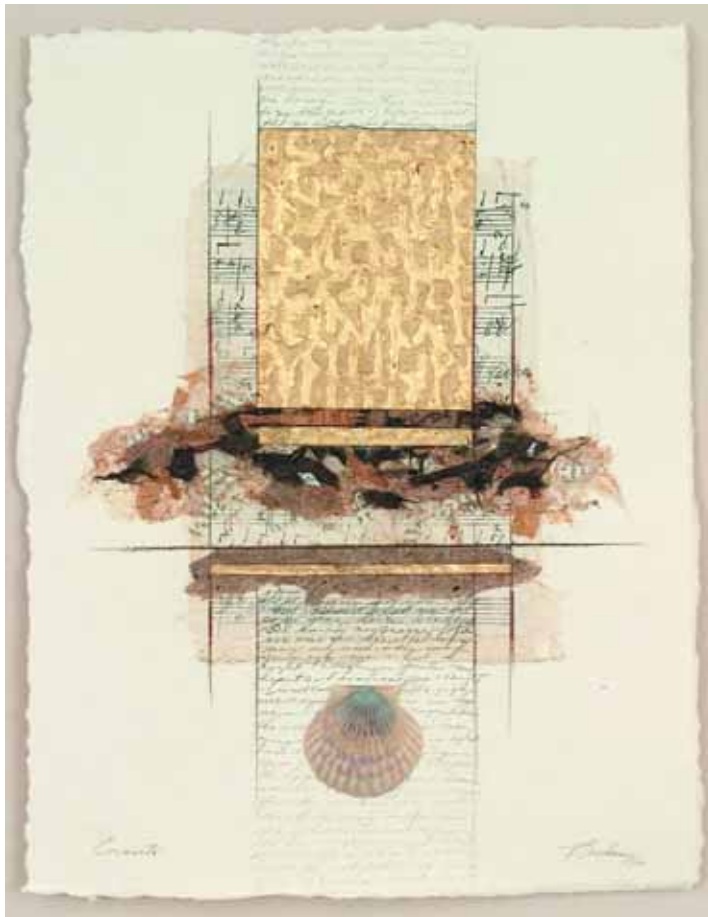
JAMES ROMAINE



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Square Halo Books

Go to [www.SandraBowden.com](http://www.SandraBowden.com) to see more of the artist's work.



*In Christian art, the square halo identified a living person presumed to be a saint. Square Halo Books is devoted to publishing works that present contextually sensitive biblical studies, and practical instruction consistent with the Doctrines of the Reformation. The goal of Square Halo Books is to provide materials useful for encouraging and equipping the saints.*

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# Contents

6	<b>FOREWORD:</b> Bruce Herman
10	<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> James Romaine
16	<b>CHRONOLOGY</b>
20	<b>EARLY EXPLORATIONS GALLERY</b>
24	<b>TEXTS GALLERY</b>
32	<b>LANGUAGE:</b> Wayne Roosa
40	<b>ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS GALLERY</b>
46	<b>GEOLOGICAL FORMS GALLERY</b>
52	<b>SOURCES:</b> Jean Bloch Rosensaft
60	<b>CRUCIFIXIONS GALLERY</b>
68	<b>CRUCIFIXIONS:</b> Edward Knippers
78	<b>THE BOWDEN COLLECTION</b>
84	<b>MUSIC NOTATIONS GALLERY</b>
88	<b>MATERIALS:</b> Karen Mulder
102	<b>ART HISTORY INTERPRETATIONS</b>
114	<b>COLLAGES GALLERY</b>
120	<b>COLLAGE:</b> James Romaine
128	<b>ILLUMINATIONS GALLERY</b>
134	<b>ILLUMINATIONS:</b> Ena Giurescu Heller
142	<b>ARTIST'S BOOKS GALLERY</b>
152	<b>BOOKS:</b> Terrence E. Dempsey
162	<b>ARTIST'S NOTEBOOK:</b> Sandra Bowden
185	<b>EXHIBITIONS/COLLECTIONS/COMMISSIONS</b>
192	<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>
194	<b>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</b>



# Foreword

BRUCE HERMAN

I have known Sandra Bowden and her work as artist and teacher for almost twenty years—only half of her active career. During this time I have been privileged to witness her impact on individuals, institutions, and whole systems of art and art patronage.

Simply put, Sandra Bowden is a *phenomenon*.

Though she has not, to my knowledge, held a formal teaching post at a college or university, she has infected countless people with a love of art and art discourse. As president of Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) she has acted as ambassador for the visual arts to hundreds of churches, colleges, and other institutions nationally and internationally.

As you will read in the eloquent essays within these pages, Bowden's work derives its inspiration and strength from a deep involvement in visual exegesis—that is, in a visual parsing of ancient biblical texts—forming an iconography that harkens back to the word and image of God in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Bowden's ministry—for that is what it must be called—is manifold.

As artist, she has birthed literally thousands of paintings, drawings, prints, collages, and art-books which deeply engage the viewer in a response relationship with ancient tradition as well as contemporary artistic issues. As informal teacher and mentor, she has encouraged and inspired countless others to address the perennial hopes and problems of human community and its historic connections with language and image in the biblical tradition. As

administrator and ambassador for CIVA, she has bequeathed a passionate visionary outreach with an immanently practical approach: she gets the job done whatever it may be, whether cultivating relationships with institutional leaders or stuffing envelopes to get the next brochure into the hands of CIVA's fifteen-hundred-plus membership (a phenomenon in itself, largely indebted to her efforts).

In the pages that follow, you will encounter representative images from each of Bowden's several themes, and you will read the careful interpretations of artist colleagues and historians. These critical texts are generated by the loving life work of this artist who is so deeply committed to the interrelationship of text and image. There is rich layering here—in both the secondary texts of critical appraisal and in the primary texts of Bowden's art.

Each of the essayists in this volume addresses a specific theme or genre of Bowden's *oeuvre*. Grouped according to either thematic foci or underlying inspiration, each chapter examines some important aspect of the artist's process—either from the standpoint of theory or of practice. For instance, in her essay on Bowden's sources, Jean Bloch Rosensaft, Exhibitions Director at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, discusses the artist's *visual midrash*—visual interpretations of ancient “texts, and time”—celebrating forty years of interaction with Jewish and Christian archeological relics.

Art historians Wayne Roosa and Karen

# Introduction

JAMES ROMAINE

Sandra Bowden may be one of the boldest artists of her generation. Her *oeuvre*, a record of an artistic and spiritual journey of more than forty years, tests the boundaries that define artistic expression. Most professional artists find their voice, some sooner than others, some stronger than others, and settle into a comfortable production of work based on a predictable set of visual vocabulary. We call this a “signature style,” and, for many artists, their style sets certain parameters on what their art can be, a Faustian exchange for the safety and marketability that such limits bring. Sandra Bowden never made that deal. Instead, she has plunged herself into exploring the systems and limits of vocabulary and language itself.

The central concern of Bowden’s art has been the intersections, correspondences and distinctions of textual and visual language. The viewer is meant to “read” her works, like *Ancient Writings* (Figure 21), in multiple ways at once, with each informing our understanding of the other, creating a textual layering of meaning. The exploration of language as a vehicle for communication and meaning is not particular to her art. Indeed, it has recently become fashionable for artists, especially painters, to critique their own vocabulary. The question of meaning, whether it exists at all or can be communicated through art, remains a contentiously fought battleground for various camps of art and literary critics. Bowden’s interest in language and meaning not only predates these trends but shares little in common with them.

Many of the artists and theorists engaged in deconstructing language have originated from an opinion that there are no absolutes, that the critique of language undermines communication itself. Their work, often a reflection of artistic “avant-garde” mannerism and religious relativism, becomes a vacant, unintelligible muttering. As doubt turns to despair, many artists have simply given up, concluding that meaning is a myth and that the author is dead.

Bowden’s interest in language is rooted in her faith in a living, personal, and creative God we can know, in part, through the veiled mysteries of the lingual systems, textual and visual, with which He has endowed us. She believes not only that communication is possible but also that it is vital, that we were created with a need for expression which is manifested in our urge to create. Her work is rooted in a history that extends to the beginning of time and space itself, to the Genesis event in which God revealed his creative nature. If being created in the image of God is the origin of human creativity, what could be more natural than becoming an artist?

If Bowden’s art commences from a sense of certainty regarding the origin of her creativity, it quickly moves into the realm of mystery. Through her innovative uses of languages, written and visual, she opens up possibilities and challenges that no single reading could fatigue. Although she often utilizes written text, a media that in the Protestant tradition has been associated with revealed and infallible truth, she has constantly



pursued mystery. She describes her art as a “veiled expression that doesn’t explain itself right away.” Balanced between decipherability and conjecture, her art, both individual works and her entire *oeuvre*, is about connections between seemingly disparate elements that connect or cross for fleeting moments in which we catch a glimpse of something, something true, that draws us deeper into complex narrative beyond cognitive logic into faith.

Sandra Bowden approaches her creativity as a natural extension of her faith, but this important fact does not make her unique in the history of art. Any study of art, visual and otherwise, from across

time and world cultures would find that a vast majority of it has very close connections with religious practice. In the Western tradition to which Bowden is an heir, Christianity has played a leading role in the development of the visual arts over the past two thousand years as one of its most prolific patrons. Indeed, it would be impossible, and certainly misleading, to discuss the history of the visual arts without includ-

ing the role the Church has played in providing financial, intellectual, and spiritual resources. As a result of its active support of the arts over two millennia, many of the most important artists, at least in the West, have been Christians or have worked in the service of the Church.

In *Art History 101: Icons of Western Art*, Bowden explores how artists from different historical periods and faith positions have continued to search for forms that make the invisible visible. She tests our recognition of such diverse works as Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* (Figure 6), Rogier van der Weyden’s *Deposition* (Figure 91), and Claude Monet’s *Rouen Cathedral* (Figure 93). These pieces’ gilded surfaces remind one of ancient icons, windows into the immaterial, while their roughly sketched forms alert us to the tactility of their material surface. She appropriates these forms from the past in order to explore their qualities of design that transcend the barriers of time; they challenge her to reinterpret them in ways that make them resonate in the present.

We live in an image-driven and multicultural context where the arts are one of the principal forums in which the values of a society are contested and promoted. Believing that as a Christian she has something unique and critical to contribute to the current dialogue, Bowden proposes what seems strikingly original, even controversial: that we can make sense of our present moment by seeing it rooted in history. Her art addresses issues that are both timeless and current; it calls us out of our daily routines to meditate on eternal things. Ancient forms of civilization are reflected in contemporary visual vocabulary. In *Walls of Stone* (Figure 31),

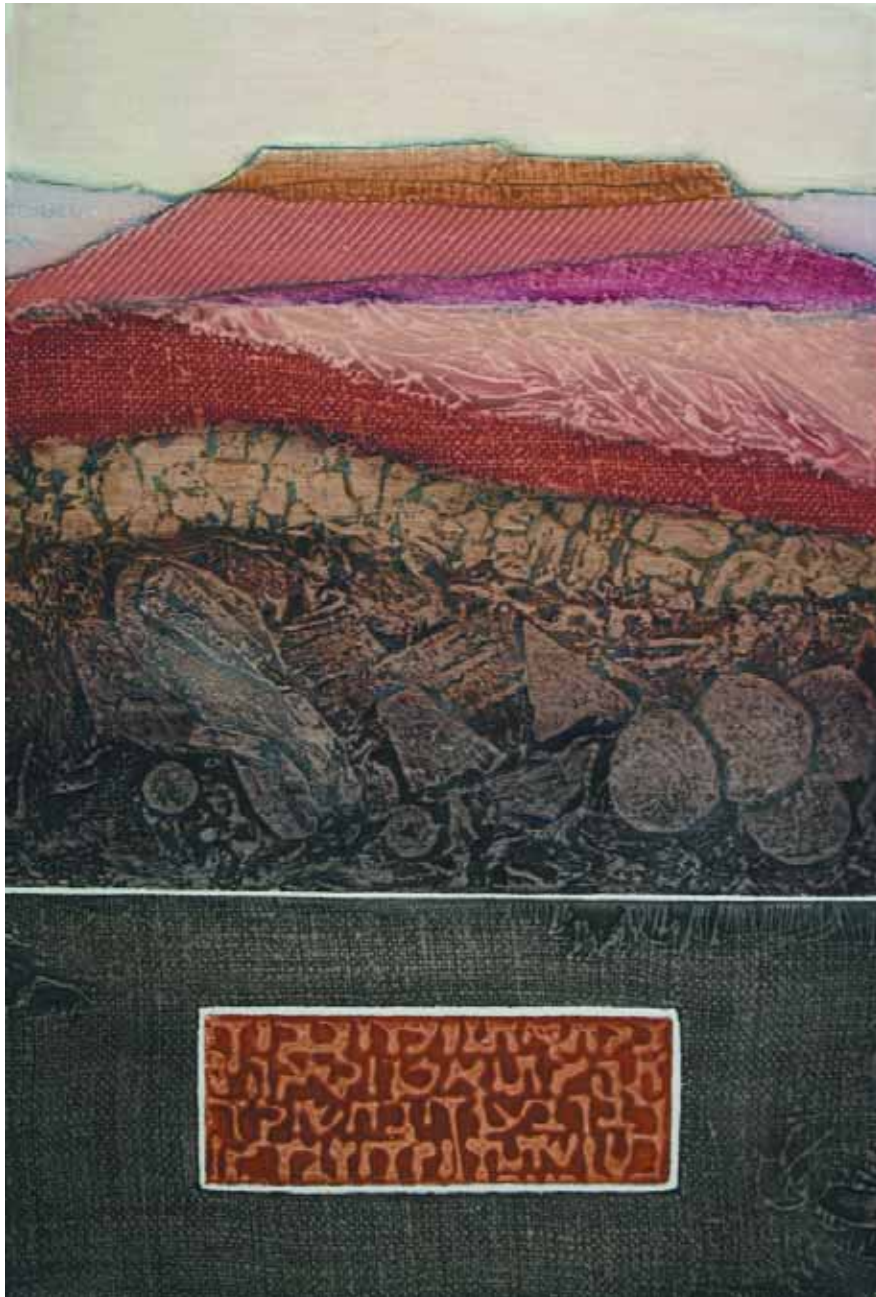


FIGURE 28  
**FORTRESS FINDS**  
Collagraph  
1983  
30 x 22



FIGURE 36  
(OPPOSITE LEFT)  
**HEAVENS DECLARE  
THE GLORY OF GOD**  
Oil painting  
1975  
34 x 16

FIGURE 37  
**MOON RISING**  
Collagraph  
1980  
16 x 16

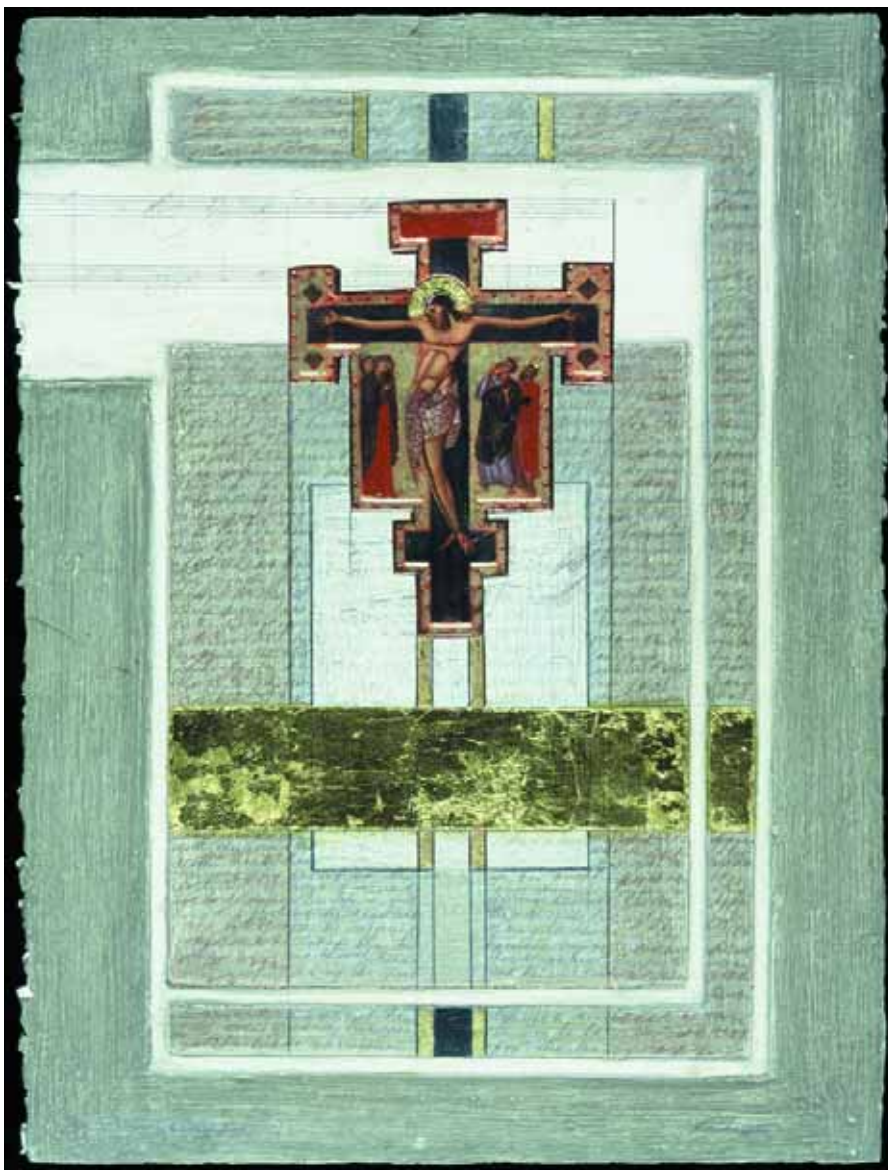


FIGURE 46  
**HE WAS WOUNDED  
FOR OUR  
TRANSGRESSIONS**  
Collagraph  
mixed media  
1992  
30 x 22



symbolism of the *kenosis* of *Crucifixion*. The thrust of the arrow shape carries us to the inscription at the side of Christ's head proclaiming him to be "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The red shape, instead of penetrating the figure as in the 1972 painting, gently nudges Christ's body with the elegance of an Ellsworth Kelly form in space while the cross is implied rather than stated.

This work merges the presence of a public work with the intimacy of a portable icon. In the mind's eye, one can't help but see *It Is Finished* as an altar painting for one of the many small stone chapels that dot the countryside of France and Spain's El Camino. As one enters such spaces on a hot day, the coolness inside calms and refreshes one. Such a painting as this



would be quite at home in one of those ancient sacred places. Here we begin to have the synthesis of new form and old beliefs. In this painting the bones of the modernist pictorial vocabulary begin to allow us to unlock the mysteries of our salvation history.

A series of collagraphs beginning in 1988 recasts Bowden's images of the Crucifixion. In works such as *Sanctus* (Figure 58), *Sanctus* (Figure 61), *Seven Last Words* (Figure 52) and *He Was Wounded for Our Transgressions* (Figure 46), she juxtaposes text with photo images lifted from masterpieces of the Middle Ages. One text that is recurrent in these works is Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, written for the dedication of the new Cathedral at Coventry which was resurrected in a new incarnation on a site beside the ruins of the bombed-out Gothic church. The rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral served to aid the healing process of war-ravaged England. Its glorious resurrection as it rose phoenix-like from the rubble of hostility served as a defiant witness to the world that war was not to be the last word—that all was not lost.

There is a restoration of sorts also in this



FIGURE 56  
(OPPOSITE)  
**IT IS FINISHED II**  
Oil collage  
1976  
48 x 36

FIGURE 57 (LEFT)  
**IT IS FINISHED**  
Pencil on canvas  
1976  
48 x 36

FIGURE 58 (RIGHT)  
**SANCTUS**  
Acrylic mixed media  
1988  
36 x 26





FIGURE 59  
(BOTH PAGES)  
**LAW AND GOSPEL**  
Collagraph  
mixed media  
1994  
Two 18 x 14 panels



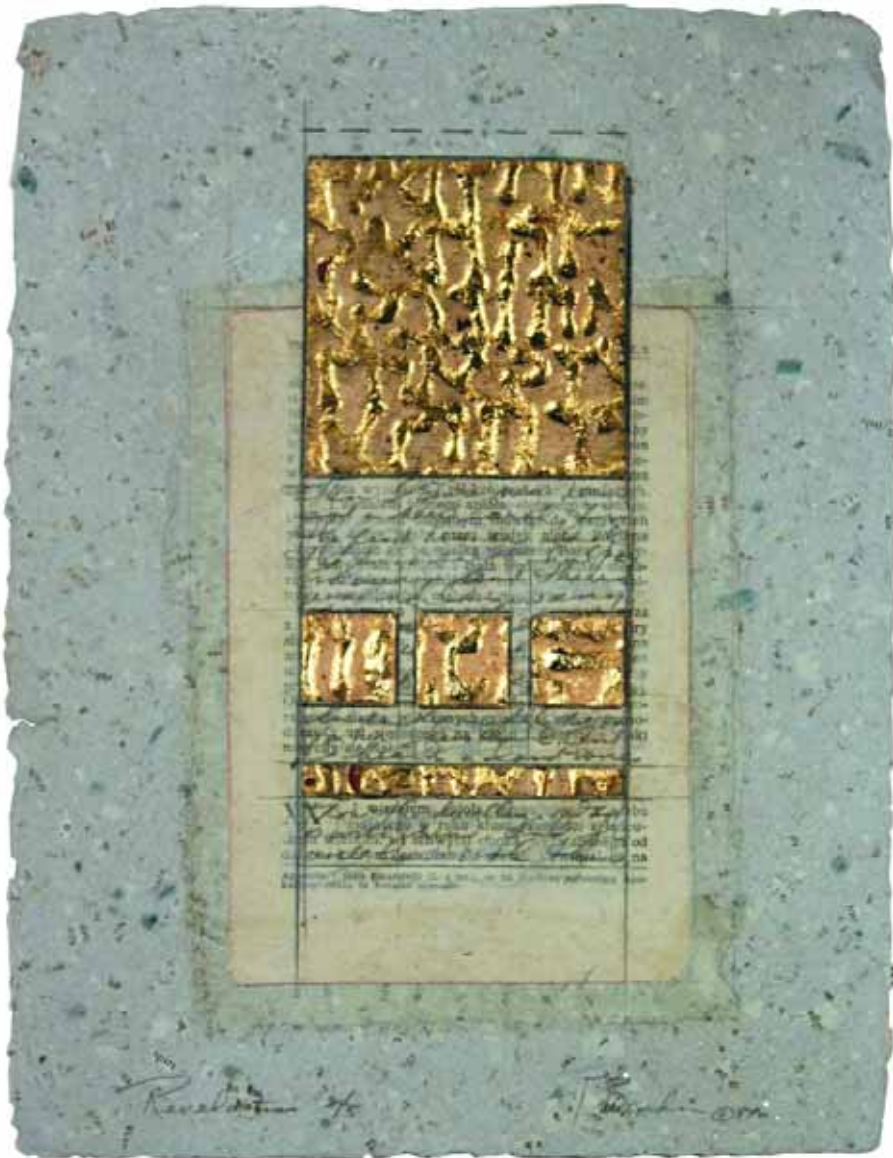


FIGURE 98  
(OPPOSITE)  
**A TIME TO . . .**  
Collage mixed media  
1999  
21 x 15

FIGURE 99  
**REVELATIONS**  
Collage mixed media  
1997  
11 x 8 1/2





FIGURE 123  
(OPPOSITE)  
**BOOK FOR THE  
LAW AND GOSPEL**  
Mixed media  
2003  
13 x 9 1/2 x 2

FIGURE 124  
**BOOK OF NAILS**  
Mixed media acrylic  
2003  
9 x 6 x 1 1/4