



Square Halo Books

Conversation with Sandra Bowden

October 2001

JAMES ROMAINE: I WANT TO BEGIN BY READING A STATEMENT THAT PUTS THINGS PRETTY BOLDLY, "WESTERN ART WAS CHRISTIAN, IS CHRISTIAN AND FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, CAN BE ONLY CHRISTIAN, WE CANNOT EVADE THE GOSPEL'S CONTINUING PRESENCE IN OUR CULTURE. THEIR MEANINGS, THEIR IMAGERY, HAVE DETERMINED THE WAY WE THINK, THE WAY WE CREATE." LET'S DISCUSS THE LAST SENTENCE FIRST; HOW HAS YOUR FAITH DETERMINED THE WAY YOU CREATE?

Sandra Bowden: My faith affects who I am; it governs my whole thought world and imagination. I believe we were created with a need to communicate which is manifested in the impulse to create. I can't fathom not being an artist, or what my life would be without the presence of art to enrich every corner of my existence. I have never felt that my faith stripped me of the freedom I needed to pursue being an artist. As an artist, my faith has given me the freedom to search and to explore. This rich spiritual life has enhanced my work as an artist. Many Christian artists struggle with the question, "Is what I am doing worthwhile?" This was never a problem for me. Being created in God's image, as a creative being, what could be more natural than to be an artist? Art is an extension of Creation, what the Russian philosopher, Nicolas Berdyaev, called "the eighth day of Creation."

THE STATEMENT I BEGAN BY READING WAS BY BRYAN APPELYARD IN THE *SUNDAY TIMES* OF LONDON IN A REVIEW OF THE EXHIBITION *SEEING SALVATION: THE IMAGE OF CHRIST* AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THAT SHOW?



TRINITY BOOK
1993, mixed-media acrylic,
9" x 6"x11/4"

SB: Although I wasn't able to get to see the show, I have read the catalogs. What struck me most profoundly was why the show was conceived. Neil MacGregor, Director of the National Gallery, found that visitors to the museum, most of whom were not believers, were nevertheless gripped by the imagery of Christianity. Their interest in the work was not in the formal elements, those qualities that the Modern critics have focused on, but rather in the stories behind the images. He found that many of the visitors did not know the Biblical narrative, even the story of Christ's baptism, and therefore struggled to understand the meaning of a work such as Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*. Since about one third of the works in the National Gallery represent Christian subjects, MacGregor wanted an exhibition that would emphasize the narrative aspects of these works. Initially, he had resistance to mounting a show of this



nature; however, the exhibition proved to be a blockbuster. I think that demonstrates our culture's hunger for more than just "the spiritual" but a substantive source of meaning which Christianity offers.

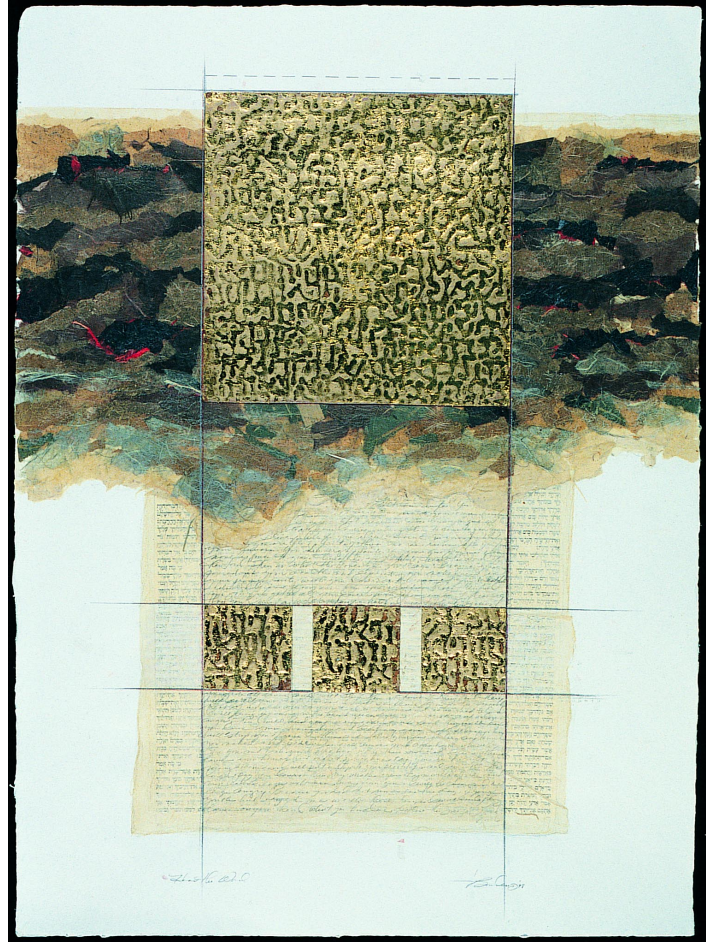
THE EXHIBITION SEEMS TO HAVE MADE THE CASE THAT, AS APPELYARD NOTED, WESTERN ART HAS BEEN DOMINATED FOR THE LAST TWO MILLENNIA BY CHRISTIANITY. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT ASSESSMENT OF ART HISTORY?

SB: Well, I'd love to agree with that. I know that there are many who would be irate at Appleyard's statement. Some would point to Greek and Roman culture, certainly two important forces, as the foundation of Western art. However, no one can dispute that Christianity has influenced the visual arts over the last two millennia more than any other single paradigm. The Christian tradition has provided artists with compelling subject matter and a strong patronage base. What I think Appleyard is getting at in this pronouncement is that Christianity has framed and guided Western culture, our values, our traditions, our social and legal structures. We rediscovered this profound influence again after September 11th, 2001 when it became politically correct to pray and talk about God. It was evident that Christianity still existed at the deepest core of our society.

OBSERVING THE LONG HISTORY OF ART AND CHRISTIANITY THAT *SEEING SALVATION* REPRESENTS, APPELYARD CONCLUDES, "FROM THE PERSISTENCE OF THE IMAGES, ONE CAN ONLY CONCLUDE EITHER THAT CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE OR THAT IT POSSESSED SOME SPECIAL GENIUS. NO OTHER RELIGION IS SO HUMANLY ACCESSIBLE AND SO IMAGINATIVELY AVAILABLE." OUTSIDE THE QUESTION OF PATRONAGE BY THE CHURCH, WHICH WE CAN DISCUSS LATER, WHY DO YOU THINK THAT CHRISTIANITY HAS BEEN SO COMPELLING FOR ARTISTS OVER THE PAST TWO THOUSAND YEARS?

SB: Maybe it is the narrative element. Christianity is a compelling story of God's interaction with those he loves. The Old Testament begins with the story of creation and continues with the history of God's people. The New Testament portrays the life of Christ and chronicles the beginning of the church. Some of this special genius has to do with how these powerful stories carry and create images in the mind; if you listen to a story, you recreate it in your imagination, you internalize it. Therefore, the Biblical narrative has driven two thousand years of art. The church, for centuries, has commis-

sioned works of art as a way of telling the story. The narratives and characters of the Bible carry meaning which can be applied to every generation anew. The artist reinterprets these stories in ways that reflect their present resonance. Herein lies the challenge for contemporary artists.



HEAR THE WORD
1998, collage with
collagraph mixed media
30" x 22"