

*A Few Thoughts on Art and Prayer* – Josh Welker

The present body of work of mine showing in the *All Saints Virtual Gallery* is in the lineage of a group of works I've made based on and inspired by the Victorine monastic tradition. While not all of these works explicitly contain identifiable contemplative content, they have come out of such a conversation. The work *Lantern with Flowers* has as its boarder a meditation on the descending affirmations and ascending denials that the Victorine's derived from Pseudo-Dionysus. The Victorines were a prayerful monastic order that developed visual works and sermons full of "adequate imagery" (as Werner Herzog might say) for our very hungry imaginations.

Along these lines I want to share a few very brief connections between visual art and prayer that have come to my attention over the last few years. The three artists that I mention along with one monk can be loosely categorized as modernists. It's good to historically contextualize any conversation of prayer and visual art with noting that the reformation caused a chasm between visual art and prayer that the protestant church (and so a large portion of western culture) is still recovering from. This being the case the majority of western art still has a somewhat antagonistic relationship towards religion, and in particular Christianity. It's not necessary to say why this relationship continues to solidify with time.

The Judd foundation recently published a book of Donald Judd's Interviews. The endlessly decisive and articulate Judd feels more personal to me in these interviews than he does in his writing. Throughout the interviews the topic of contemplation comes up several times. In all of his writing, at least those essays of his that I've read, he doesn't bring up this topic. Judging from his responses to the interviewers it's clear that contemplation held no place in Judd's economy, nor did he want his work discussed in those terms. My sense is that he had some understanding of the history of the western church and the tie between contemplation and Christ. He also mentions contemplation in connection to painting and a sort of passivity. Judd, not liking things to be confused, perhaps didn't like a word so strongly tied with western art and religion used for his art. This would have added confusion to a world of clarity he constantly tried to create. As he said in an interview, "There's enough confusion in the world as it is, why add to it."

I like to think about the work and lives of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt in relation to this conversation. The two were good friends and Reinhardt's death seems to have contributed to a serious break for Martin and her subsequent move out of New York City. If you haven't read Agnes Martin I would highly recommend her to you. She reads like a desert mother: "Humanity isn't made for physical pleasure but for spiritual joy." I've always known Reinhardt was painting crosses and not just grids and sensed that they were 'sacred,' 'spiritual,' or even 'Christian.'

I few years ago I was reading Agnes Martin and came across her mentioning, in passing, the friendship between Ad Reinhardt and Thomas Merton, they were buddies at Columbia and corresponded somewhat frequently with one another. Reinhardt made a small black painting for Merton that he kept in his room at Gethsemane.

I've talked with friends about the fact that Reinhardt's writing doesn't come forward with clear connections between his work and any sort of spirituality. He writes very cleverly about painting as painting and art as art. After spending a lot of time with his work and writing I have the sense that writing about this connection for him would have been gauche.

Joseph Masheck has written and presented extensively on the friendship between Reinhardt and Merton. In an article from the Brooklyn Rail titled *An Editor's View of Reinhardt and Merton: A Generation Behind; a Generation Ahead*, Masheck expressed his exasperation when a different essay of his was published by the Church of England under the blurb *Joseph Masheck discusses the influence of Thomas Merton on the art of Ad Reinhardt*, he wrote that he was puzzled by this blurb but soon realized "my friends from the church side couldn't conceive of Reinhardt's influence as having anything to teach the spiritual writer!"

Even as a visual artist who puts the emphasis on the visual, I often find myself in the same corner as Masheck's friends "church side." I fall into my enlightenment training and place more stock in reason than in embodiment. The road is narrow. Balthasar raised a word of warning about those who make works towards an end of contemplation. He wrote that this process is one of photographing our own transcendence and when we are not careful our work can easily fall into cliché and a quest for self-knowledge. Neither of these are honoring the liturgy of the word but rather are "diverted into immanence of the finite spirit."

It's hard for me to get beyond myself and I know the same is true for all of us or we wouldn't need to engage in prayer and contemplation. I hope these works of mine that I've had the honor to share with you might act even a little as Windex on the dark glass we're looking through.