SABBATICAL REPORT

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It is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls....
Leviticus 16:31

As I approached my first sabbatical experience, I was eager to make the best use of the “gift of time” that I had been given. I was eager to fill my days with activity, yet rest from my multi-tasking labors. It was going to be a new experience, and I was eager to discover what might come from this refreshing perspective of focused time. I was very thankful that I had been given this opportunity, and I was well motivated to accomplish the details of the task that I had elected to pursue.

Briefly, my task was to delve deeper into the visual Christian metaphors that I had been exploring through my studies of a simple silver bowl. It has been the technical aspect of my exploration that has opened the doors to deeper, more reflective meditative thought, not only for this painter, but also for those who have viewed my paintings over the past five years. As I continue this exploration I am confident that this sabbatical experience will continue to nurture me as I resume my normal academic activities, and as I continue, once again, to wrestle with my artist growth within the confines of constricted time.

In my initial sabbatical proposal I noted the serious need for blocks of uninterrupted and focused time. I was eager to embrace the upcoming gift of time as a welcomed contribution to the enduring nature of this project, and I am pleased to report that the experience has been greater and deeper than I could have imagined. As with any task, there are always surprises and unanticipated serendipities that come without warning, and as I reflect on the specific circumstances of those manifestations, I marvel at what transpired because of them, and what effect those circumstances had on the purposefulness of my task. I attempt in this report, to share not only what happened with the artwork, but also what happened within the innermost part of my being.

THE TIME
As stated in my proposal, time has been both an enemy and a friend to my artistic endeavors. For these endeavors, time has been my enemy for many years because of the preponderance of educative tasks that have required a great deal of my attention. But with the gift of dedicated time, the feeling that overcame me as I embraced the activity of my creative endeavor, helped me realize once again, what a welcomed friend time was meant to be. To be able to live in the work day in and day out, to be motivated by the struggle, and to be at one with the struggle, was truly the gift I received during this sabbatical time. It was great to reacquaint myself and to refresh myself with sincere,
dedicated, artistic commitment. After so many years of piecing together anything that resembled quality time, I must admit, that the success of the sabbatical was overwhelmingly about the time. The time allowed me to rest...not the put-my-feet-up kind of rest, but the Sabbath kind of rest, resting for renewal, and receiving renewal for more connected resting. Stillness became an important ingredient in my endeavors, so much so that eight or ten hours would pass, and I would still be mesmerized and compelled by the image I was painting, and I would still be enveloped by the mystery that was unfolding before me. Stillness became my motivation. This attentive stillness allowed me to go deeper, to connect on a more intimate level, and discover what my images were striving to say. It was this restful solitude that allowed me to see how big God really was as I worked. I was delighted to have the luxury to listen as I worked, my mind freed from the requirements and responsibilities of my teaching and of my administrative duties. I was delighted to have the luxury to reconnect with myself as an artist, a journey that I have been so enjoying these past two years because of the stimulating subject matter that I have chosen to pursue. I believe these sensations are truly what a sabbatical experience is intended to reveal.

THE JOURNEY
A good part of my journey continues to respond to a statement I made in my initial sabbatical proposal, an issue that stays at the forefront of my thinking as I teach and as I paint. In today’s art world there is a disparity in the current evangelical definition of Christian art. This incongruity is one of the things that motivates me to create the images that I am compelled to create. Historically, Christian art was created to depict Biblical images, to tell visual stories for others to perceive, and most importantly, to glorify God. Today, in our postmodern world, most so-called “Christian Art” has lost this original definition, and as a result, the majority of imagery that is now considered “Christian” is bad art that has found its place as cute commercial artifacts and the banal fantasy of pretty, fairytale landscape that does little to articulate the realities, struggles, and realizations of the Christian faith in today’s world. My artistic intentions are specifically tied to bringing the viewer back into the interaction between the image and its conceptual Biblical message. Part of this purposeful intent is to give the viewer permission to find something personally relevant in the metaphorical relationships that are set before them, so that the images can be celebrated as relevant, personal insight can be gleaned from them, and the work can resonate as inspired. In this postmodern era, it is my desire to make my images enticing to Christian and non-Christian audiences alike, so that a newly realized or renewed definition of faith can be grasped as one spends time with the work. From the artist’s hand comes insight. This concept has been the essence of my sabbatical endeavor.

When a painter paints, she intends the painting to mean something. To generate something inspiring in the commonplace, and to see the relationship between the real and the symbolic, makes this artist look deeper. Since it has been the metaphorical aspects of the silver vessel that have become the focus of my endeavors as a painter, I have found great stimulation in the incredible possibilities that exist when I contemplate the sacred in this simple form. I see this silver vessel as a symbol of purity and refinement because it
has been tempered by fire, and now stands redeemed. What a testimony this declaration is to the hopefulness of Christian faith. What a beautiful and intriguing reminder that we can vicariously put ourselves in the place of this vessel, or gaze on the attributes it portrays, and receive in return, a significant gift of our own. It has been my intention from the start that these silver vessels stand as a connection between the natural and the supernatural. As the viewer looks at the humble elegance of these forms, they invite the viewer to look deeper, to transform matter into meaning, and seek some personal measure of transcendent understanding.

I have often been intrigued by darkness, not only because of its drama, but more importantly, because it anticipates the coming light. A place of darkness also compels us to listen. In my new works, the darkness of the space is intentional. In it, the darkness pulls the viewer deeper into this place of anticipation. This dark space is significant, because the forms are literally given life, and are made more beautiful, as they come to the light. In each image, the simple piece of white cloth and its relationship to the bowl is all that is needed to define the Christian truth that is present. In each painting, the consecrated object is placed slightly above eye level, giving the impression that it is being held up like an offering, or elevated to a place of reverent honor. The reflections in the surface of the bowls do not define specific forms; they merely imply where or what the space might be. The images, in this sense, are rather iconic in nature, and thus draw us nearer to the source of our beliefs. Silence, solitude, simplicity and mystery work together to make these images resonate, even if one has no verbal explanation for them. In these works, simplicity is the key to seeing things clearly, yet the silent dialogue between seen and unseen realities plays a significant role in moving us closer to the infinite.

"True art is made noble and religious by the mind producing it. For those who feel it, nothing makes the soul so religious and pure as the endeavor to create something perfect, for God is perfection, and whoever strives after perfection is striving for something divine."  

Michelangelo

THE WORK
What are these images? I don’t really know until I finish them; but as I work on them I know that the images in my mind have the power to mean something to anyone who takes the time to allow them to speak. If I were to define a personal sense of what these paintings are, I would have to say that they are devotions. They are thoughts, prayers, and channels to transcendence. They are windows to revelation. As meditations, these paintings entice us to come and rest for a while, and to contemplate what their messages might bring; for where there is revelation, explanation becomes superfluous. The paintings are thus much like prayer, for their beauty puts us in touch with the source of our beliefs. The paintings are also meant to be beautiful, because often, beauty brings most of us into communion with all that reminds us of God, the sacred, and the holy.
The images came about rather serendipitously. Initially, I started out with a different thematic intention, but due to some unexpected and influential personal circumstances, I allowed myself to be guided to a different path. It was this change of plan that became the substance of my sabbatical rest. In January, death suddenly took two of my extended family members. The contemplation of their lives brought me to paint the first image, *Intercession (28"x24")*. It reminded me that Christ intercedes for us through our prayers with “groanings too deep for words.” The second image, *Passage (22"x24")*, came easily as the next expression, for it reminded me that something had passed and yet something was yet to be. In March, death took two dear friends, both influential to my Christian walk. Thus, the third image, *Benediction (26"x30")*, developed as a tribute to their legacy; the image seemed appropriate as a final blessing. The fourth image, *Oblation (22"x26")*, was conceived as pure offering, for the sake of my need to make continuous offerings of worship and thanks to God for His goodness and faithfulness. The fifth image, *Invocation (20"x24")*, strives to depict the mystery of faith, that God’s perfect presence can be invited to fill us and dwell within us. Each image was created as an act of devotion. Each image defines a redemptive moment. The sixth image, yet to be named, remains unfinished, but sits on the easel as a testament to my continuing journey, for it too will one day translate a part of my Christian walk into devotional insight.

It was my responsibility to give life to these images, to enable them to exist, so that someone else could stand in the place where I once stood, and embrace or wrestle with the messages perceived. The artist now transfers ownership of the work to the viewer, and the images, in turn, invite the viewer to look beyond the reality of the surface, to listen in the darkness, and rest in the redemptive light.

**THE RESOLUTION**

It is my feeling that these images are reflections of a greater reality. Through this endeavor I was able to seek a Sabbath of solemn rest, and surrender to God’s presence, both physically and spiritually. In seeking to define these objects as consecrated, my sabbatical rest has inspired and nurtured me. It has refreshed my spirit. I am grateful, so very grateful, that I was able to take full advantage of this opportunity. Because of this experience I have become more confident in my role as artist. I could have selected anything to paint, and I would have been content to do so, but because my faith is now an integral part of my work, I am driven to continue the journey. I am a changed individual because of the purposefulness of this task. Still seeking the message, but so stimulated that the mode of this message is fresh, unique, and original, I am content and encouraged not only to paint to the faithful, but to strive to reach out to those who might need some enticement to look deeper into the renewing grace that God’s truth provides.
THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS
In my sabbatical proposal I listed several supportive goals for my endeavors. I am pleased to say that I accomplished all of them. Below is the list of the most significant of the semester’s accomplishments:

- I acquired gallery representation at the Louis Aranow Gallery in San Francisco and Sausalito, CA.
- During my sabbatical, the image *Intercession*, was selected for the national CIVA (Christians in Visual Arts) exhibition, entitled Embracing the Gift: 25 Years of Faith and Vision, at Azusa Pacific University, June 2005.
- I was invited to exhibit the body of new images October 21-November 4, 2005 at the Delphine Gallery in Santa Barbara. This exhibition will be considered official evidence of my sabbatical experience*.
- I wrote faithfully in my journal and addressed all that was significant and thoughtful along the journey.
- I am in the process of writing some devotional thoughts to accompany the individual paintings. A member of CIVA, a poet, is also interested in the same task. I do not yet have a resolution to this task.
- I utilized the accompanying $1,200 expense fund to purchase the needed supplies and framing costs for the culminating exhibit.
- I gave thanks every day for God’s presence and guidance in this endeavor, and I leave this sabbatical rest as a grateful and fulfilled individual.

*Copies of Images are attached

*Copy of Artist’s Statement attached
ARTIST'S STATEMENT  
Silent Dialogue  

Susan Savage

As a painter I am intrigued with the humble beauty and quiet simplicity found in common, ordinary objects. Over the past few years I have come to admire the beautiful elegance and refined delicacy that is associated with a simple silver bowl. The bowl intrigues me as a stimulating and technically challenging subject to paint. Unpretentious in design, yet complex in its appearance, I appreciate its historical tradition and symbolic evocation of purity and refinement. Crafted as a commemorative object, and often given as a trophy or prize for some notable accomplishment, its material existence has been tempered by fire, and its intrinsic value has withstood the test of time. As I gaze at this bowl I see in its distinctive physical and symbolic qualities, a compelling parallel to the characteristics of spiritual faith. The attributes of both are enduring and eternal, mysterious and joyful. The bowl waits to be used, and is filled with an indefinable presence.

My images strive to reproduce the look of the visible world, yet offer something beyond mere physical appearances in revealing deeper messages of spiritual truths. As I look deeper, I am motivated to reveal something inspiring in the commonplace as I perceive and comprehend the developing relationships between the real and the symbolic. By elevating the silver vessel to a place of intellectual contemplation, I attempt to portray something that isn’t visibly in place, but can become evident if one takes the time to ponder the relationships that are presented. In this context, the vessel stands as a witness to something larger than its temporary and finite physical form. Thus, as a source for the sacred, I desire that silence, solitude, and simplicity work together to reveal something mysterious and significant about these images, even if one has no verbal explanation for them.