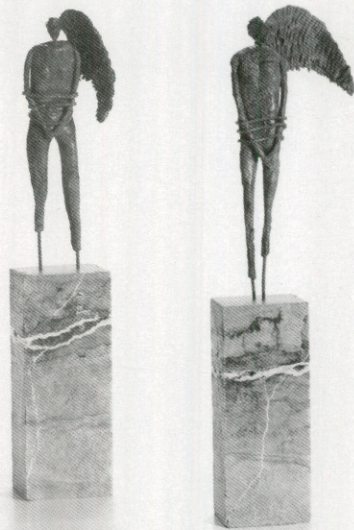


# Looking for Visual Truth:

At Play with the Aural and Visual in Adventism

*Sculpture and Words by John N. McDowell*



*If truth is that which lasts, then art has proved truer than any other human endeavour. What is certain is that pictures and poetry and music are not only marks in time but marks through time, of their own time and ours, not antique or historical, but living as they ever did, exuberantly, untired.*

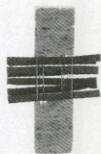
—Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*.<sup>1</sup>

**A**dventism, if nothing else, wants to be about truth. Not just any truth, but The Truth. Adventist understanding of truth, its very identity, theology, lifestyle, and worship, is bound up and intimately connected with understanding and communicating The Word, for we understand that the Word is Truth. Who we are, what we believe, how we live are tied to issues of language, of interpretation, of speaking, singing, living, and spreading the Word. Spreading the Truth and the Word are synonymous. We are a people of the book: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Almost all of our worship time is filled with listening to forms of the spoken word or to music. Sabbath mornings are occupied with two or more hours of listening, singing, and speaking. This, for most, constitutes worship.

As Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart point out in *Seeking A Sanctuary*.

The emphasis on sound is also particularly appropriate to Adventism, because it presupposes . . . a social context. The spoken word becomes audible only when there is shared language. Where worship is constituted through an exchange of sounds . . . a community of speakers and listeners is assumed. In contrast, those forms of Christianity in which visual or tactile expression is more important lend themselves more easily to individual spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

It is no accident that Adventists, from cradle roll on, are encouraged to acquire rhetorical skills—memory verses to sermons. Speaking, in the form of sermons, talks, and lesson studies is the most direct and least ambiguous art form. Music and musicianship is a close



second in Adventism. Music is a highly regarded form of expression. Silence, especially as part of corporate experience, soon makes us uncomfortable. As Adventists, we do not tolerate silence well. When no one is speaking we fill the gap with music.

Where we are known outside of the Church in the arts, it is almost exclusively in music—Herbert Blomstedt, the former conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, being perhaps the most notable. Larry Knopp, principal trumpet of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, is a raising star in classical music circles. Our schools emphasize choir and band participation far more than any other form of artistic expression. The New England Youth Ensemble is another well-known Adventist musical group.

Bull and Lockhart go on to point out that Adventists emphasize aural forms of expression not only because they are fond of a social community, but also because aural forms reflect their theology. Time is wound into Adventist thinking in all sorts of ways. Music and speech happen and function in time, not space:

The Adventist preference for sound as a means of expression is indicative of [a] particular sensitivity to the modalities of time, to beginnings and endings, speeds and rhythms. . . . Adventist theology is primarily concerned with time—with the time of the end, the correct timing of the Sabbath, the prophetic interpretations of time. To be an Adventist is to have an acute awareness of location in time.<sup>3</sup>

We mark our differences from other Christian groups in our understanding of time. We have a perception of history as a “sequence of prophetically bounded time packages.” Adventists “use time as the dimension of expression, for it is also their primary dimension of experience.”<sup>4</sup>

Visual art occupies space, not time. Given the concern with time, there is a significant thread in Adventism that tends to “disregard the significance of all that is extended in space. As the world is soon to perish, all that it contains is an irrelevance; only that which will travel through time to eternity is important.”<sup>5</sup> Art occupies space, a place for the eye to engage in a visual dialogue. Where Adventists are entirely comfortable with visual art is where it serves the text—preferably a biblical text. From Harry Anderson and the illustrated *Bible Stories* to the sculpture of the Good Samaritan at Loma Linda University, the art understood and appreciated by most Adventists is art that is clearly illustrative: illustrative of a known and accepted narrative. Which takes us back to the primacy of rhetoric.

Although we may sing with fervor and conviction, “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through,” the fact remains that we are



*Angel Required to Watch*  
cast bronze/corl travertine red jasper/copper wire  
Randal and Deanna Wisbey Collection



in the world, and we need to reach the world. Much in the forms of Adventist worship and belief coalesced in the time prior to and during the period when radio and printed text were the dominant cultural mediums—forms that fit well with the Adventist message. The Voice of Prophecy and the emphasis on publishing large quantities of text are examples of Adventist achievements that used (and still use) these forms of media.

The world has changed. Over the last forty years, with the emergence and then dominance of television, there has been a shift—the emphasis has shifted from the ear to the eye. Although radio and text publishing still have currency, the dominate cultural modes have changed from aural to visual presentation. Consider the huge popularity of TV (proliferation of channels), MTV, video, DVD, and movies. Computer software and the Internet are moving rapidly to greater reliance on visual images as the way of instruction and communication. The visual imagery of all these various forms of media is slick, sophisticated, and seductive. Text, where it is present, is often highly graphic, discontinuous, fragmented, and given in short “bites.” Even popular print magazines are now far more geared to the visual than they were ten, twenty years ago.

If what I have said is true about the character of the Adventist aesthetic, then we have some challenges. How are young people—geared to and raised on a visual diet and less adept at following long, sustained passages of oral discourse—going to relate to traditional forms of Adventist worship? How do the dynamic visual forms shape concepts of time and a traditional presentation of the Adventist message? How should our worship and teaching adapt? Should we not be teaching and preaching in ways that educate the visual cortex so that young people are able to deal with their world of visual information in critical and constructive ways? Can we, as Adventists, even come to an appreciation of what Jeanette Winterson means when she says that “art has proved truer than any other human endeavour”? Although there may not be full agreement, I think it is worth the effort to probe the possibilities for the enrichment and re-valuing of Adventist identity, theology, lifestyle, and worship.

I have no claim to be able to answer all these questions with definitive, text-based answers. I am also mindful of what the literary critic, Northrop Frye, writes in *The Great Code*: “To answer a question . . . is to consolidate the mental level on which the question is asked. Unless something is kept in reserve, suggesting the possibility of better and fuller questions, the student’s advance is blocked.”<sup>6</sup> It is also, however, too easy a cop-out not to suggest some pathways to follow enroute to better and fuller questions and to help one see that truth about who we are has a visual as well as a verbal reality.

The first, and obvious place to begin is by actually looking at art or the many other forms of visual images that one encounters and then to begin to dialogue about what one sees. Connected with this text, *Spectrum* has also published a number of images of various works of art—as it happens, my own art. This allows me the liberty to make some comments, which I hope will be helpful.

If what I have said about the character of the Adventist aesthetic is close to being on target, then these images may present a problem.

Although they have some recognizable form, they are not illustrative of a particular, known narrative. They do not appear to be in service of a text. There may then be a desire for the artist—in this case myself—to “explain” the works and to elucidate their illustrative nature. To say, as I would say, that I am unable to explain the pieces in terms of what they “mean” in the form of master narrative is not, you may well feel, particularly helpful. To go to the other extreme and say that the art “means whatever I want it to mean” does not really get one much further. You may assume that I am “playing games.” I assure you I am not. If one

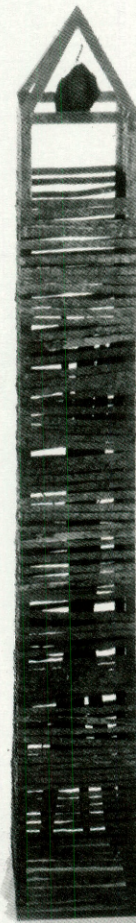
### The relationship of the creative act to the Creator is one that needs to be fully explored.

can get past the cliché that artists—particularly “modern” artists—are suspect because of their love of ambiguity, then we can begin.

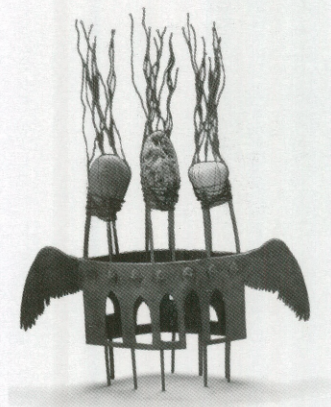
When one looks at art, my first suggestion is not to be afraid of the unfamiliar and to understand that art and other visual images can have a kind of power. In the March 25, 2001, edition of the *Washington Post*, David Freedberg in commenting on the Taliban’s destruction of art, in particular the two huge Buddhas in Bamian, Afganistan, speaks of the power of art, and hence the fear that many, particularly religious groups, have of art. Iconoclasm is a response to the power and resulting discomfort elicited by images. There is the impulse to avoid, deny, or even destroy visual images because they can and do have power. For many, art, particularly images of Christ or God, gets one too close to idolatry. In defence of art, the argument is made that the creative artist is inspired and creates as God creates. Freedberg notes that “the notion that an artist can create like God is at bottom a dangerous one” for it can create the kind of hubris for which Satan was cast out of heaven.<sup>7</sup> There is the belief—or at least suspicion—for some that a connection exists between a being and the image of that being. Freedberg goes on to note that:

It was no accident that during the Roman Empire it was asserted that “where the image is, there, too, is the emperor.” . . . By the light of this interpretation, it is no wonder that Byzantine iconoclasts felt that images of the emperor, at least, had to be destroyed. If you could destroy or damage his image, you somehow also impugned and mitigated his power. We see this same thinking in other instances where those who have a grudge against the representatives of a regime assault their images—whether of Lenin, or the Shah of Iran, or even Princess Diana, whose portrait in London’s National Gallery was slashed by an IRA sympathizer in 1981.<sup>8</sup>

To speak of iconoclasts is, perhaps, extreme. Still, the relationship of the creative act to the Creator is one that needs to be fully explored.<sup>9</sup> The point is that it should not come as a surprise to experience discomfort or unease when one views art, particularly new art. How one deals



*Obelisk One*  
steel/copper/wood/jasper/gold leaf



with that discomfort or unease of not knowing quite what to make of what one is viewing is the next step.

What is one to make of the image of the angel, for example, who is bound and has only one wing? (page 27). This breaks with the norm of typical, comfortable images or ideas of angels. Why is there only one wing? Is it to show, as the Italian poet, Luciano De Crescenzo wrote, "We are all Angels with only one wing/We can only fly while embracing each other"? Why is the angel bound? Is this an evil angel, cast out of heaven? Is the angel perhaps weighted with human concern? Is this an angel of the holocaust, witness to the frailties and weakness of humankind? Why does the angel have no feet? Does this suggest that angels hover and do not touch the ground? Does this angel present you with a disturbing image? Or is it a strangely comforting image—as some have found? I, clearly, cannot answer these questions for the viewer. Asking the questions, however, can open up paths for exploration.

Jeanette Winterson provides some helpful advice as she discusses her own struggle to come to appreciate art. She writes that looking at art is "equivalent to being dropped into a foreign city, where gradually, out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax make a clearing in the silence. Art, all art, not just painting, is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it familiar. . . . We have to recognize that the language of art, all art, is not our mother-tongue."<sup>10</sup> It takes a while to get orientated. The virtue of patience will be rewarded.

The next step is to realize, as Winterson explains, that the "sub-text of so much of our looking" at art or anything visual is really "admire me." She goes on to say that this is "the demand put on art that it should reflect the reality of the viewer."<sup>11</sup> True art resists this demand. What should one do now?

I return to the value of asking one's self about what one views. Like, I suspect, most other artists, I want my art to reward viewers on repeated viewing. For me, art that is understood and comprehended in a glance only gets a glance. Also for me, what a work means is a result of what the piece and the viewer bring to the relationship. For one show I had, I put it this way in my Artist Statement:

Art occupies space where something happens. What happens here is prayer. Not prayers of words, but prayers in the visual language of shape, volume, texture and color. The prayers are only completed, however, when the sculptures are viewed. Only when an object is viewed can there be communication and meaning. The interplay between the eye and the object provides "what happens." I try to leave enough room in the work for the viewer to create his or her own relationship with the piece. I want the pieces to be suggestive, not declarative: a thought or two for the soul—a prayer.

Taking this approach, how might this piece—which sort of looks like a church—with the title, *Mission Story*, be a prayer? What is going on here with a building with wings? What do the stones represent? Is that incense going up from the altar, or are they rocks of judgement coming down on the church? What do the faces suggest—

masks, emblems? Is this not just another form of the angel sculpture? What would change if the title of this piece were *First Church of the Angel of the Apocalypse*?

What about the helmet-like piece? Is this ancient or modern? Is it aggressive, as the angel is passive? What if you had a background in archaeology and could explain that this piece suggests a Miocene-looking helmet and that the round base with the stones is fire, and that the hearth is a central image in Miocene art and culture, that the hearth was important to defend for it was the heart of the home, civility, and

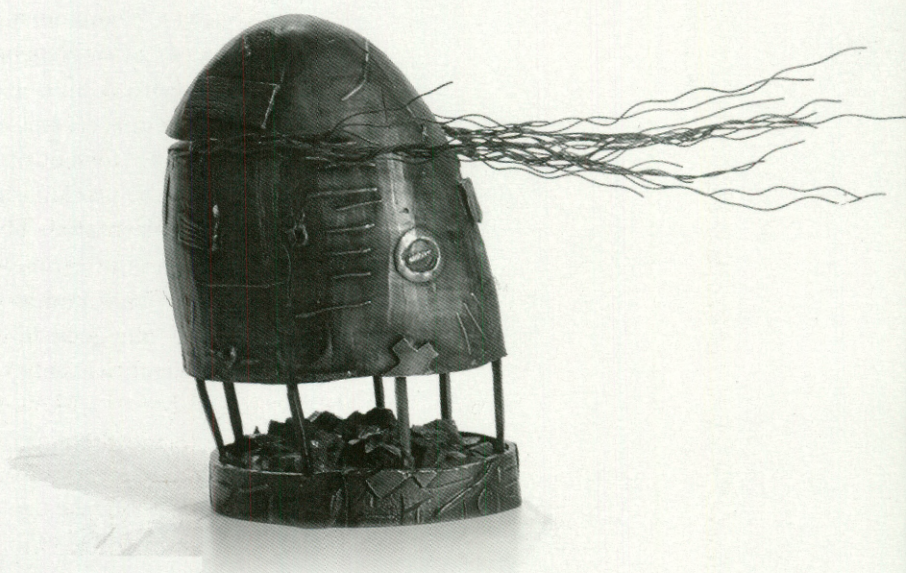
### Art that is understood and comprehended in a glance only gets a glance.

culture? What if I told you that the title for the piece is *Stealth*? What images does that create? What is with all the wheels—wagon wheels?—on this thing? What if I told you that the artist was somehow thinking of Kosovo and the war in the Balkans—an ancient land with ancient conflicts? What if it was mentioned that the artist had an image of the red roofs of burning buildings from the TV images of the war?

What about the other images? Could *Obelisk One* and *Surfacing* be different types of prayers? (pages 25 and 29). For me, the creative act is an act of worship. I am mindful here of the earlier charge of hubris. The creative process for me—whether writing a poem or creating a sculpture—involves the following: belief, courage, play, doubt, and ambiguity or mystery. All of these can also be understood as part of the experience of worship. If I do not believe that I can create; I can't and won't. Belief is basic to the creative process. The belief also has to be open. I have to believe that I can start and that I can write the poem, create the sculpture. I must also believe with openness that the result may be vastly different from what I conceived at the beginning of the process. Belief gives way to faith in the process of working with the materials, a trust in the spark of inspiration that started the process and in the materials and one's ability. The sculptures pictured with this article are all, in part, about belief.

Rollo May wrote the book *Courage to Create* in his belief that courage is the primary requirement for living a creative life.<sup>12</sup> Creating art involves trusting inspiration or intuition and plunging into the unknown with no guarantee of success. Failure is likely with every creative act. Living creatively—as with profound worship—often takes one out of one's "safety zone." Courage is needed. The bronze helmet, perhaps, in part, speaks to the idea of courage.

A sense of play, an openness to possibilities, not taking one's self too seriously, allowing for alternatives, cultivating curiosity—all are needed



*Stealth*  
glass/copper/stones  
Shell Canada Collection



to make connections and imaginative leaps. Play feeds; it keeps the imagination vibrant. Maybe our worship could use more play. Do any of the images in this issue of *Spectrum* suggest a sense of play or delight?

Along with play, I have also come to understand the value of doubt in the creative process, as well as in my spiritual life. Doubt keeps the eyes of belief watchful and alert. Doubt is a generator of questions that, when explored with belief, opens the door to insight. Belief without doubt opens the valve that balloons the ego to arrogance. Art becomes a statement of pride and fails. Doubt without belief opens the heart to depression and art dies. The bound angel may be, in part, about doubt.

In the end, art needs to have some ambiguity. There needs, I feel, to be some mystery, something unresolved that entices the viewer to return. There needs to be a space for the viewer to enter and create meaning from his or her interaction with the work of art. For art to have real power, the poem, the painting, the sculpture, the piece of music must be able to move from the orbit of the creator to the orbit of the viewer. There must be a room for the viewer to claim a dialogue, and in that sense own the work of art.

The art critic John Berger writes in his book *The Sense of Sight* that "Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply. . . . The transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer."<sup>13</sup> This way of creating art is, for me, an act of worship. The pleasure and value of art is part of what I understand John 10:10 to be about when Christ says that we "may have life and have it abundantly." This is good news. This is the truth we can experience. Enjoy art: it lasts.

## Notes and References

1. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996), front piece.
2. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 154-55.
3. *Ibid.*, 155.
4. *Ibid.*, 156.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), xv.
7. David Freedberg, "The Power of Wood and Stone: The Taliban Is Not the First to Fear the Mysterious Lure of Art," *Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 2001, B2.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, an acquaintance of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien and a writer of detective fiction, explores this issue in *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), where she makes the case that the pattern of human creative action is akin to divine creative action and that this is what is meant by being created in the image of God.
10. Winterson, *Art Objects*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: Norton, 1975).
13. John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Random House, 1993).

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When John McDowell wrote this article he was vice president for academic administration of Canadian University College. He has since accepted a position as professor of English at Pacific Union College.  
Jmcdowell@puc.edu

