

essay

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AN EMPTY BOWL is a sign of expectation: it is made to be filled with good things. Curved around open space like cupped hands, its shape recalls what is fundamentally and familiarly human—a womb, a lap, the circle of an embrace. In the paintings featured in “Bearing Witness,” silver bowls open a space for reflection. Richly suggestive of both domestic and liturgical life, they invite allegory even as they resist it: silver bowls are beautiful objects in themselves, and the light that falls on them and the ambient colors that puddle and pool in their curves illumines them simply and beautifully as what they are.

When God first directed Moses to prepare a place of worship, he directed him to anoint all the vessels and consecrate them to the Lord (Exodus 40:10-11). The image of the consecrated vessel recurs throughout scripture; what bears the sacramental elements is set apart and lifted up as an image of our own role as temples of the Holy Spirit and vessels designed to receive divine energy and grace. In this series of paintings, Susan Savage has consecrated the silver bowl as a vessel that, filled with light, color, and quiet, may offer us an image of openness and readiness that reflects an essential attitude of faith.



“Bowls are humble objects,” she muses, reflecting on the how this project began. “I’ve always loved simple things, things that are often overlooked.” The simple objects of everyday life, she continues, are filled with metaphorical possibility. Set apart, they resonate with association. A bowl can recall and suggest a chalice, but also the domestic task of preparing a meal or occasions of hospitality. It is as an image of faith that the bowl is most clearly identified in these paintings; it speaks of receptivity, waiting and openness, beauty, simplicity, embrace, readiness, and a relationship to all that is around it as the colors of the room become part of its beauty. “It alters its world,” Susan observes. It holds and radiates what is inside it. And where they stand together, the silver vessels “reflect each other’s flaws and perfections.” In this respect, several of the compositions, *Offertory*, for instance, or *Grace Bestowed*, evoke reflection on what happens when two or three are gathered. Together, objects, like persons, alter one another. We see them differently, and their purpose shifts as well as their place in the visual landscape.

Other objects recur in successive paintings--fabrics, fruit, boxes, ribbon. All of them are depicted with a frankness and realism characteristic of Susan’s own understanding of what it is to represent the world honestly and of her vocation as an artist to help us see the ordinary in new terms. She describes her own calling as a commission to “stewardship of the image,” similar to the poet’s stewardship of language. The things of this world are given into our keeping and it is the task of the artist to “keep” them by retrieving them from the erosions that make our vision dull or trite or reductive. So each object, texture, shape, and color is honored by a quality of attention that invites us to recognize its loveliness and its possibilities as a part of the created order given for our delight and the delight of the Creator who “hath made all things well.”

Making things well matters to an artist for whom, as Wendell Berry put it, “work done gratefully and well is prayer.” The task of painting this series that so joyfully “bears witness” to the source of the light that falls and gathers around objects and to the exuberance of color that splays on

their surfaces has involved daily meditation and learning. “As I work,” Susan writes in her journal, “I learn something every day about the process, things that I can put into practice the next day... As I approach the canvas daily I desire to share the joy of discovery, the thrill of seeing the objects as if for the first time.” One measure of her successful completion is the clarity with which that hope has been fulfilled. The paintings surprise the viewer into a kind of revelry. The colors do far more than decorate; the shapes are not simply descriptive; the textures seem to celebrate the very fact of tangibility.

Although they are clearly thoughtful compositions, each painting also conveys a sense of the gratuitous, unplanned and unplannable interaction of line, color, form, and texture. In the fall of fabric in *Grace Bestowed*, in the echoing colors passed among silver surfaces in *Convocation*, in the way the colors of apples blend and enliven one another, in the comedy of Wonder Bread polka dots following the folds of wrapping paper in *Inside Out*, the eye receives a gift of grace by recognizing the playful physics of matter and energy merging in an ancient, ongoing dance.

But even as the faithful realism of these rendered objects insists on their literal, functional certainties they remind us just as emphatically of the sacramentality of everyday life. They invite contemplation. They ask us to set aside distraction and be present to the way blessing comes to us in the ordinary and to the symbolic possibilities available anywhere the eye is drawn to a world replenished and furnished by “the fruit of the vine and work of human hands.” In *Preparation*, the fruit of the apple tree lies ready—for what? To be sliced and served on a luncheon plate? To serve as a centerpiece? The idea invoked in this piece is preparation itself: that all things stand in readiness for use, for change, for transformation, and that we are called to prepare ourselves for the tasks given us, to prepare our hearts for worship, to prepare a place for the stranger, or a way for the Lord. The deep empty bowl, itself a rich image of preparedness, speaks like a prayer: “Fill me. Let me hold, contain, gather, protect, keep.” The walls of the room,



Inside Out • acrylic on canvas • 42 x 36 inches



the window, and beyond it the outdoors, mingle their colors and images in the bowl, open to the wider world, bodying forth the very shape of consent. Apples exchange their energies of color, reminding us that what is beautiful is most so when seen in relation.

In *Preparation* as also in *Convocation* multiple convergences involve the eye in contrast and paradox. Straight lines meet curves; what is open stands next to what is closed and contained in itself like the silver sphere. We can't see all the way inside the open vessels and even glass hides something the eye can't fully reach. The paintings are frank and mysterious, literal and suggestive, true to life and bold with the poetic license that revisits and revises the terms in which we touch and taste and see. In them distortion becomes design. There are slight optical illusions: we don't know for a moment whether a surface is concave or convex. In our not knowing, the limitation and malleability of our habits of perception are made apparent.

The artist herself recognizes those moments of not knowing as a valuable dimension of work done in trust and in the Spirit. "I am enjoying putting the paint on," Susan writes in her journal, "layer after layer, shape over shape, stroke over stroke in a playful and loose fashion. I am paying attention each day to what my playful strokes produce, and it amazes me." Like the artists she invokes as her teachers, she has learned that fidelity to and delight in the task for its own sake yields art that even the artist experiences as gift.

What is evident throughout this exhibit is the faith and fidelity of the artist who offers this gift. "In my attempt to develop the beauty I see," she writes, "I develop myself. In my attempt to paint the truth of the commonplace, I paint the sacred because I have put my heart into it." Of the viewer to whom these paintings are offered as a gift received and shared, she writes, "The viewer is not looking at the actual objects, but at an encounter with them. Hopefully the viewer is not observing from a distance, but is enticed to feel a closeness, an illusion of nearness. Something strange, yet familiar." This exhibit does indeed offer us an intimate encounter with things that are pure, that are lovely, that point beyond themselves to the mind and the faith and the love of the maker for her Maker who, in giving her eyes to see, blessed us all.