

The Call of the Blank Canvas

Ric Stott

The source material for my painting of Merton, reproduced on the cover, is a still frame from the final film footage we have of him shortly before his death. Speaking at a conference in Bangkok, his final words heard on the tape as he finishes his talk are 'So, I will disappear from view and we can all have a coke or something.' There is something beautiful in the juxtaposition of the profound and prosaic in these words. Then, afterwards, as he walks from the podium through the assembled audience one of the final moments of the film has him turning away from the camera. This is the image in the painting: a turning away towards the void and the light.

The blank canvas is the void that contains multitudes. An emptiness that precedes creation. At the beginning of any piece of work as I stand in front of it I realise that all the paintings it is possible to paint are contained in the potential of its surface. This evokes feelings of both terror and joyful exhilaration. There is a fearful knowledge that with each brushstroke I can only mar the perfection of all that potential. And yet, for something to emerge in the act of creation that risk must be taken. However imperfect the mark that I make may be, it beckons something new into being from out of the void.

This courageous stance opens up a space where the Kingdom of God can break through. I remember years ago being invited to make some street art in the heart of an inner-city estate in Sheffield. For weeks I fretted in the privacy of my studio, experimenting with sketches of ideas that never seemed right. The studio felt safe and I could make my mistakes in private and without shame. But eventually I realised that for anything fruitful to occur I needed to step outside into the cool autumn air, to stand in front of the wall of the derelict cinema on the busy street and then pick up a can of spray paint to make a mark. When I made that move, standing in the risky space of unfolding creation, in the midst of the rubbish strewn weeds, with dirty hands, then a sacred space opened up.

The act of creation changed the nature of the place. I made marks tentatively as I felt vulnerable and exposed but as I did so passers-by would stop and talk. They would open up about their lives, my vulnerability enabling their vulnerability. Drivers passing by would honk their car horns and wave in support. The street space was transformed by the generous, creative spirit of God into a holy place of meeting.

And so the process of making art becomes a sacrament. The American painter Elizabeth Murray said this about the creative experience:

There is a kind of miracle involved with paint. It is just this stuff in a tube, you squeeze it out. It's this physical thing, yet you use it as a transforming agent.

This exercise in embodied spirituality is for me an act of prayer, a deep exploration of the unfolding relationship between me, God, the community and the world around me. The art that is most compelling is that which comes from a place of genuine openness and honesty, so the process of making is an excavation of the soul. At times this is painful and frustrating. The physical stuff of paint embodying a complex internal experience does so imperfectly. Paint is capricious and fluid, sometimes acting in surprising ways. But, if the artist can attune themselves to the nature of its physicality, to get to know the material quirks of the fluid and the way that colours relate to and interact with each other then we become seduced by the viscous pigment, slick oils and stains. There is a sensual beauty in the physical act of smearing paint. In these interactions a relationship forms between seen and unseen things with the artist as a conduit between the two.

As we kneel alone, so the great silence of contemplative prayer stands before us like that blank canvas, brimming with possibility and the potential of creation and re-creation. It beckons us and waits for us to move into that space of courageous openness. But gently so, never forcing us: this is invitation not imposition. We are invited into the space that is pregnant with creative energy, the space where our souls can unfold in all their complex beauty.

Revd Ric Stott is an artist and Methodist Minister based in Sheffield UK where he helped to found the 35 Chapel Walk art space, to explore creativity, community and spirituality. His ministry focuses on art making and contemplative prayer. More of his work can be found on the Facebook page 'Ric Stott Art'.