How Art Stimulates Theological Reflection in the Conversation Between a Work of Art, the Artist and the Viewer

By Leeanne Mallaby
(BA, GradDipEd, BD, MMin)

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Abstract

The question addressed in this supervised research project is how Art, particularly the visual arts, stimulates Theological Reflection and evokes meaning. The study developed an understanding of the distinctive impact of the visual culture in which the art is formed and viewed, and the ways in which people experience and express meaning in the conversation with art.

In particular this study explored conversations that took place between artists and viewers as they engaged with art, and developed an understanding of how Art creates an opportunity to reflect upon life questions. The research involved four artists presenting work to groups of viewers. The groups reflected varying involvement in Christian church life, from ministers in churches to people who have no connection with local church. Viewers were encouraged to engage with a work of art on their own, before entering a conversation with others in a group. The following week, each group had the opportunity for conversation with the artist. Qualitative Research methods were used to gather the data and draw themes. The primary method used was Phenomenological methodology, with an auxiliary process of Grounded Theory.

Themes reflecting the experience of the participants noted the group distinctives, the significance of art as a meeting place, the stimulus of imagination and the expression of experience in terms of metaphor. The experience of mystery and the openness to transformation were significant themes. The findings of the research affirm the engagement in the creative process to its point of communication as a stimulus for transformation and further engagement in the creative process itself. Within the conversation between art, artist and viewer a dynamic of understanding unfolds which has the potential to reveal something of the very nature of a creative God. Indeed, the conversation takes us to the heart of our very image of God.

The study has potential significance of affirming and stimulating more intentional valuing of the visual image amongst the churches and in the formation of ministers. People in the Christian community may develop an understanding and valuing of the image as a significant communicator of meaning.
Acknowledgements

The journey has been long, rich and rewarding and many people have been a part of the process as it has unfolded. Both in its concept and its outworking this project has been collaborative and I wish to acknowledge participants on the journey.

The keen interest, patient challenge and engaging conversation of my Supervisor, Rev Dr Frank Rees, has been a delight. The open conversations, and yet detailed and focused questions, have simulated the process in such a way as to keep the journey very much alive! Indeed, the creative unfolding of this project has been captured in those conversations and has nourished the journey to this point. I wish to offer him my deepest appreciation.

There are many, many artists who have spoken into the project, in the way they have formed the questions over many years. In particular the four presenting artists, Libby Byrne, Ben Winspear, Debbie Hill and John O’Loughlin openly, intelligently and bravely embraced the process and have been a part of the ongoing conversations about art as it enlarges our experience.

The seventeen viewer-participants offered so much of themselves and I very much value their participation and insights. The five scribes who worked hard to understand what was required of them and diligently embraced the task are very much a part of this journey. I have appreciated the robust and probing questions they offered and their natural curiosity about the project.

The Churches of Christ Theological College has been a base for me during this time, affirming the theological rigour alongside the creative outworking of art as a carrier of meaning. The faculty, particularly principal Merrill Kitchen, have been a wonderful support.

I am deeply indebted to the community of Box Hill Baptist Church who have engaged in their own creative journey in capturing the dream to create Chapel on Station Gallery as a place for artists to invite people to wonder. They have supported my endless ruminating about art from the pulpit, and most particularly they have entered the conversations between art and artists and viewers,
where they too have been open to a creative and creating God. This rich and open community to which I belong is a gift.

There has been a key and silent partner on this journey to whom I am deeply indebted, and that is my husband, Richard. His support has ranged from serving tea and biscuits on the evenings of the research stage to putting up with my endless banter about a new idea! In these past months he has set aside his own research to give me the space to complete and has even delved into the final read. He has taken on the cooking of meals and order of the house. Richard, along with my children, Lauren, Joe and Emily, have created a safe and loving place in which I can work. I appreciate them all for their love and support.
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Foreword

The painting, the place, the artist and the viewer

The Gallery was a-buzz with excitement at the opening of the second exhibition – the first independently organized exhibition by a solo artist. Libby Byrne had hung twelve paintings, large and bold, around the room. It was a collection that had grown from her own personal journey of grappling with God. She was exploring archetypal images of God, including the notion of God as vessel, a holding place for the emerging person. Such explorations took shape on canvas. The colour, the people, the wafting sound of melodic piano, the welcome of a cool drink served with a nibble of antipasto had transformed the once discarded room into a gallery, alive with expectation and delight.

As I sat and observed, delighted at the scene, a man with intent in his eyes made a bee-line towards me. His youthful face reflected anticipation and his eager demeaner led him to stammer as he blurted, “I need to buy that painting. How do I do that?” My answer about the functional details of purchase didn’t quench his yearning as he went searching for his credit card to secure his purpose, and fill his awakened need to possess the work.

After our encounter, I noticed he hovered near his acquisition, looking at it intently, examining its shape, trying to take it in. He was with some young women when I snapped him with the digital camera. He was a little taken aback by the click of the camera, and I realized I hadn’t asked his permission. I apologized. He paused. He asked to see the replay. I was not prepared for his response. He gasped a little, beamed, and said, “Please, will you take another photo, without me. I’d like to recall this moment. I want to remember where I found this painting… what it is like here, in this place.” The photo had captured a little of the painting, the people, and the
outline of the stained glass window, which introduces the ambience of ‘church’ into the gallery. Suddenly, there was a context.

I was left with many questions about the responses of this man, the viewer. What had actually happened? What was he trying to capture in the photo? Who were the partners in the conversation that had occurred? An artist, a work of art, a viewer, and a context were all important. All had played a part in triggering a response that had extended the horizon of this man enough to want to capture it, enough for him to be urgent in his approach to own the art – and to remember the moment. A yearning had been stimulated that was connected with all conversation partners. This ‘conversation’ allowed something significant to occur that shifted his experience a little, that invited him, and me, to wonder.

I wrote this little story one month after Chapel on Station Gallery opened in May 2005. It now sits among many such anecdotes gathered over the years – moments that have struck me as significant encounters, engaging with art. Something was happening, and that something needed to be explored.

At that time, a question emerged that sits in a rich bank of philosophical and theological theory, but which finds its expression in the day to day encounters of people with art.

The conversation that takes place between the artist, art and the viewer has the potential to challenge, shape and transform each of the conversation partners. Viewing a work of art is not something that happens in isolation, but rather develops within a dynamic relationship between the viewer, the art and the culture in which they live. This is referred to as visual culture. There is no such thing as looking without entanglement with that which is seen, to such an extent that what is seen becomes part of who I am. This is a subjective experience whereby the subject cannot be separated from the object, where the observer is changed in the interaction. Thus S Brent Plate suggests that “Seeing is always a two-way process ... whereby the observer is changed in the interaction.”

There is something of an entanglement between the art and the

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1 S. Brent Plate, Religion, Art & Visual Culture (New York: Palgrave, 2002)
viewer, the artist and the art, and possibly the artist and the viewer, where there is potential for transformation – a change in the perception or experience of the other. Huey-Peck relies on a definition of art as that which invites transformation. She argues, “What I want from art now is depth. I want it, like conversation and life itself, to go beyond the superficial. And like good conversation and life itself, I want art that has the potential to transform.”

In this conversation there is a blurring of the boundary between object and subject where a space in between emerges, a meeting place between supposed object-subject distinctions. In this place between, the objective observer evaporates and becomes entangled in the art. “I don’t really exist apart from the objects I see – what a strange thought. I am neither independent observer nor object in someone else’s eyes.”

This interaction between the object and the subject, in which both dissolve to some extent, is what seeing is about. Elkins speaks of this dynamic as having actual force: “it tears, it is sharp, it is an acid. In the end it corrodes the object and observer until they are lost in the field of vision. I was once solid, now I am dissolved: that is the voice of seeing.” As the viewer is lost in the moment of engagement with the painting there is a communion that takes place. That so-called viewers are not just stimulated or moved, but are changed in the encounter suggests a level of connection where the person becomes known at a level not previously experienced. Awareness of existence is heightened where the meeting in-between extends the horizon of understanding. The reality in which one lives is enlarged.

In the meeting place between artist and viewer with art, I suggest that we are taken beyond the boundaries of the individual into communion with one another – and perhaps the Other. Within the scope of this study, we encounter the theological realm of exploration. What actually goes on as people are drawn to reflect upon art? Does reflection upon questions of meaning unfold, and if

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3 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back (San Diego: Harvest, 1997) 45
4 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 45
so, is this reflection inherently theological? If the outcome of seeing is transformation, then how do theological factors affect the seeing? That is, what impact do the presuppositions, the prejudices, the doctrines, the Christian story have in seeing an image?

This study finds its source in the marriage of my roles in both the Theological Institution and the practice of local church ministry. I work directly with students, overseeing the specific area of ministry formation known as Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE). Listening to students describing and exploring experience has stimulated my own reflection upon the use of image for people as they seek to both express and understand life experience. Research by Colin Hunter, which invited creative responses to the experience of STFE, further challenged my interest in the use of the creative process to understand and express meaning.

My commitment to local church ministry is framed as an invitation for people to reflect upon life experience, and to create opportunities for people to wonder. Encouraging creative expression of faith experience has been an ongoing part of my ministry for many years, and has developed into a ministry where we have “created a space for artists to invite people to wonder” in the form of Chapel on Station Gallery in Box Hill. This Art Gallery operates as a formal gallery, where artists can book the space to exhibit their work. Members of the church community host the space, opening the space to the wider public on a daily basis. Within the development of that ministry I have had very many opportunities to meet with both artists and viewers and, indeed, to observe the conversations that take place between both, with art as a very important conversation partner.

The form of a book progresses linearly, and generally logically, from start to finish – unlike art itself, which whilst viewed within a time/space paradigm, has the capacity to be viewed in bits, randomly or wholly. The image within the frame offers a vision for the eye to scan, and then settle. Whilst there may be a focal point, a place of light or drama that seeks to arrest the viewer’s attention, the image can be viewed in its totality, that is, within its own frame.

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5 More detail about Chapel on Station Gallery, its history, theology and practice can be obtained from http://www.chapelonstationgallery.org.au
In preparing this study, I found myself exploring the *frame* of the report in a form that echoes the very nature of art as a creative process. Questions emerged from experience, questions that needed the space and time to form a shape. The first brush strokes of the process allowed the light of theological endeavour and the rigor of philosophical thought to illuminate the very nature of the emerging questions. The clarifying image of the conversation that emerges between art, artist and viewer found its shape in the research process itself. The resulting reflection upon what we come to *see* and *believe* in the conversation adds the depth layer to the picture. Finally, the picture of the study is indeed framed within the context of theological education and reflection for ministry. The study is formed within this unfolding creative process and hopefully outworks in transformative action in the creative life of ministry and theological endeavour of others on the journey.
Art within the
Theological Conversation

1.i  Art – the nature of the Canvas
1.ii Art – behind the Canvas
1.iii Art – looking beyond the Canvas
1.iv Art – transformation of the Canvas
1.1 Art - The Nature of the Canvas

“To be opened by the tears of art is to suffer a wound that never heals”
Mark Taylor 

When Nigel Spivey presented his BBC Documentary series, *How Art Made the World*, he was attempting to explore how art extends beyond the representation of an object to reflection upon that object, and even imagination beyond the object. Indeed, artistic expression infuses meaning for the community which gathers around the art. His argument is that art is one of the defining elements of humanity. Just as a human developed the capacity to walk on two legs, so “this capacity for visual symbolizing arrived at a certain stage in our prehistoric evolution”. He claims that “above all, and definitively, the art of humans consists in our singular capacity to use our imaginations.”6 We seek to both capture the experience of our world and extend beyond it.

Perhaps it is this seeking to name reality and reflect upon it that art and religion share. “Art was religious, or rather, ritualistic, and it remained so in the earliest civilizations…Christianity did not change art’s original purpose.”7 By its very nature art was religious. It sought to create patterns that captured experience, and extended that experience into a meaningful expression. Art historian James Elkins argues that “What we call art and what we call religion were inseparable…art has been basically religious or ritual in nature, even in times and places where there was no word for what we call religion or art”.8 Indeed, in terms of religious tradition the visual image is significant, not just because it augments or illustrates doctrine or belief, but because it both reflects and helps to construct the world in which people live and explore meaning. “Visual practices help fabricate the worlds in which people live and therefore present a promising way of deepening our understanding

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8 James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* 6
of how religions work." This is true both historically and in the contemporary visual culture, considering how the image offers clues into how religions and belief systems function and are expressed.

Elkins develops his understanding of the intimate relationship between Art and Religion, arguing that both operate in the realm of representation. That is, they seek to re-present an original presence. A painting can represent a scene, or a crucifixion. What happens when that image is re-presented again in the experience of the beholder? That representation will always be a transformation from the original.

> It must be emphasized, however, that re-presentation always involves an alteration of the original. The original presence is not represented on a point-by-point basis and there is no perfect translation process. Artists, of whatever medium, often challenge our accepted perceptions and enable us to see the world anew by representing a particular vision of reality.

The artist, then, is representing her vision of reality which is represented in the sight of the viewer. The artist’s representation may challenge the viewer’s perception of reality, but in turn may also be shaped by it. In this way a conversation takes place between the artist and the representation, the representation and the viewer, and the viewer and the artist.

Bernard Lonergan describes the process in which an artist creates a space on canvas, detached from the experience itself, whereby an insight arising from reflection on the experience is expanded and developed into the resulting work of art. The experience itself is then adjusted or altered as a result of the insight drawn from the experience, and it becomes an expression of meaning.

> There results an idealization of the original experiential pattern. Art is not autobiography ... It is grasping what is or seems significant, of moment, concern, import, to man. It is

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10 S.Brent Plate, Religion, Art & Visual Culture 21
truer than experience, leaner, more effective, more to the point. It is the central moment with its proper implications, and they unfold without the distortions, interferences, accidental intrusions of the original pattern.\textsuperscript{11}

Art, in this sense, does not seek to copy or replicate objects from a distance, but constantly interprets and re-interprets. Lonergan claims that art needs an interpretative significance, or else it simply becomes play, preoccupation with technique, or aesthetic appreciation. Art that is compelling is that which reflects ulterior presence.\textsuperscript{12} This suggests that the artist is open to that within their experience that extends them beyond, that is, an openness to Other. It is art which begins with a question that extends toward presence, rather than seeks to imitate or replicate an external object.

Charting the history of art from its roots which express the intrinsic relation between art and religion, Elkins arrives in our era with the argument that art and religion have gone their separate ways, creating a tension in the way we understand art and its expression of religious belief or experience.

The absence of openly religious art from modern art museums would seem to be due to the prejudices of a coterie of academic writers who have become unable to acknowledge what has always been apparent: art and religion are entwined.\textsuperscript{13}

There needs to be some distinction of terms used here, for when we speak of religion we are more closely referring to the religious quest, as opposed to religious systems. The quest for meaning is inherent within both art and religion, but it is from within the system of religion that the separation has developed. Similarly, terms like Spiritual, Religious, Theological and even Christian tend to be used

\textsuperscript{11} Bernard Lonergan \textit{Method in Theology} (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1971) 63
\textsuperscript{13} James Elkins, \textit{On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art} ix
interchangeably, and yet each brings its own distinctive voice into the conversation, as we shall explore.

Historically, art had served the Church by creating images that sought to connect worshippers with the sacred.\(^1\) The subject matter was most often interpretation of Biblical stories, particularly drawing on images of Christ. From the earliest days of the Christian church, art such as frescoes, mosaics and later, vessels, tapestries and stained glass windows, was accepted as an important expression of Christian tradition. Under the patronage of the Church artists explored what they imagined were the emotions of the subjects, and sought to create connections for people with the Biblical stories. There was a desire for elevation towards God, and transcendence was illustrated by images of cherubs and angels, Paradise and beatific bystanders. Architecture and incense also sought to create an experience of the transcendent God. The intent was for art to evoke religious response, that is, to express religious belief and make God accessible, not just representatively, but experientially for the believer.

With the Reformation the Catholic Church ceased to be sole patron of the arts. The rise of the gentry began to offer an extended financial base for patronage of the arts. What unfolded was a broadening of subject matter as landscapes, portraits and reflections of daily life replaced images of martyrs and saints and religious topical matter. Much of the Protestant movement was so opposed to the decoration of church buildings that the adornments of art, sculpture, sacred vessels and stained glass were not affirmed, and consequently many illuminated manuscripts were destroyed. Perhaps more significantly, the Protestant movement sought to connect the everyday experience of believers with faith rather than emphasize a theology of transcendence. The outworking of life and values became the subject of faith.

\(^1\) This report does not offer scope for a more thorough examination of the history of art, particularly religious art. There is a broader scholarly discussion around the place of art in religion. Margaret Miles and John Dillenberger, both referenced in this report, present a solid understanding of art within the historical context. James Elkins offers an alternative style of art history, as he maps the patterns within the history of art.
The invention of the printing press and the expansion of the printed word elevated mass publication of words as the most valid expression of belief. Reformers preached against an exaggerated focus on religious images. For Protestants and Catholics alike, the function of images to draw the worshipper to imitate and participate in the qualities and way of life as expressed within the religious image, was set aside. For Catholics, the visual was used to reinforce a system, whilst for Protestants language began to play a dominant role in the liturgy, engaging primarily the intellect. Margaret Miles argues,

_The messages received visually by Catholic worshippers reaffirmed and reinforced hierarchical ecclesiastical and, by implication, social arrangements. In sixteenth century Protestantism, the sacrifice of visual perceptions so central to the activity of worship and piety created a religious culture in which language use became pivotal._ 15

The suspicion of the visual arts was grounded also in the elevation of the word as the primary carrier of meaning.

_In the past a certain ‘logocentrism’ – preoccupation with the verbal, and especially the written word – has in general dominated the study of Christianity, both because of its own insistence on the normativity of the ‘word’ contained in the scriptures, and also because of the literary emphasis that is generally characteristic of Western intellectual culture and scholarship._ 16

Miles underlines this emphasis, citing Martin Luther’s emphasis on the verbal as the central expression of worship: “A right faith goes right on with its eyes closed; it clings to God’s Word; it follows that Word: It believes that Word.” 17 Viladesau 18 points to Augustine who saw the usefulness of song for raising the soul to God, but who also expressed the fear that its pleasures would entrap the soul in

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15 Margaret Miles, _Image as Insight_ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 127
17 Margaret Miles _Image as Insight_ 152
18 Richard Viladesau, _Theology and the Arts_ 28
what was considered the lower order of beauty. Tension grew around the use of art to express the transcendent.

There developed a dualism between spirituality and sensory experience, where the sensory was not to be trusted. This prejudice against art as a legitimate expression of religious truths is expressed by Frank Burch Brown.

Religious truth that is expressed beautifully, figuratively, and artistically has long had the reputation of being (at the very most) a vivid but less precise expression of what can be said more properly in systematic conceptual discourse …

Similarly, for the church’s ongoing interpretation of the truth as truth, the inquiry has looked not to its poetry and art or even to its liturgy (though these are acknowledged to have their own unique value) but rather to doctrinal statements and theological texts.¹⁹

And so the gap between sacred and secular grew as rhythm, art and literature extended beyond mere affirmation of a particular theological world view. Eventually the arts left behind a defined religious system, whose patterns and rituals were available only to those within.

Whilst religion and the established art scene may sit either side of a divide for our era, particularly in the West, Plate argues for the intrinsic connection between belief and values systems with associated images and symbols. In his recent confronting publication, Blasphemy, he grapples with what it is that makes some art blasphemous. What is it that is being desecrated in a particular image? Symbols embody the values and beliefs, the convictions of meaning for a people. That artists are prepared to die for their art only serves to underline the power of the art in its connection with people’s desire to express that which is meaningful to them. “To understand the place and function of blasphemy, it is necessary to take stock of the power of images and the way they ‘call out’ to people.”²⁰ In their calling out images are striking at a depth of

¹⁹ Burch Brown is cited in Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 127
²⁰ S Brent Plate, Blasphemy: Art that offends (London: Black Dog, 2006)
connection of meaning that is seated within the questions of ultimate concern\textsuperscript{21} for people. The values nerve of the culture is pricked.

The nature of blasphemy sits in the investment of meaning by the viewer, the artist, the art and, indeed, the culture within which the image is placed. “Blasphemy emerges somewhere between the production and the reception of images.”\textsuperscript{22} It involves both the power of the image and the power of the authorities which make pronouncements over the images. Such pronouncements over images always embody power, either power to silence, power to challenge, or subversive power from the otherwise powerless minorities. So-called blasphemous art, then, creates a connection with religion and religious systems that is significant, because it stimulates the naming of values and beliefs implicit in the religious system. When Andres Serrano hung his infamous “Piss Christ” in the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997, it contained overtly religious symbology alongside a message that confronted notions of religious power. The overwhelming reaction of the public, including arrests for actual desecration of the art, meant that social taboos were being confronted and named. Taboos rise up in every society, often in a volatile way. Blasphemy names the forbidden symbols, and hence begins to order and define the structures and belief systems of our current dominant culture. We gain a fuller understanding of current cultural norms and beliefs.

Religious systems tend to contrast the sacred, or that which is holy, with the profane, that which is everyday. Religious rituals seek to create patterns that define and separate the sacred and the profane. Within the context of a religion, the sacred will refer to that which elevates, or moves toward transcendence. It can involve that which has the power to bless, cure, offer meaning or transform. The stories of religious traditions would suggest that the sacred also has the power to kill, destroy or cause illness. The patterns around the sacred that separate it from the profane involve rituals and behaviours, like foot-washing or ordination, or weekly worship services. Religious order is maintained in following such patterns. Into this system, “blasphemy is fundamentally about transgression,

\textsuperscript{21} Tillich’s term \textit{Ultimate Concern} will be explored more fully later.
\textsuperscript{22} S Brent Plate, \textit{Blasphemy} 28
about crossing the lines between the sacred and the profane in seemingly improper ways. Art, when assessed within a defined sacred-profane paradigm, has significant potential to either confront or affirm, and so separate itself from the defined religious order.

Steve Turner claims that this dualistic sacred-profane divide serves to cut off profound messages of meaning and to limit so-called Christian messages to those that conform to an acceptable pattern. He argues, "A key issue in the strained relationship between Christianity and the arts is the perceived division between secular and sacred. Christians have found it hard to appreciate art that deals with daily living, especially if it does not supply an obviously spiritual conclusion." This dualism serves to affirm art if it obviously serves Christian belief systems, and reject it if it doesn’t. Rather than offer a reflection or exploration of how belief interacts with the world, art is evaluated in terms of its message for the Church, or its evangelistic message for the world. Its capacity to deal with the questions of existence that rise up in the experience of the everyday is overlooked. So for example, within the music scene, music is defined as sacred if it uses particular language, or presents particular values, rather than if it expresses a dissonance between experience and faith or explores a questioning of reality, or even presents a counter message to the theological system. Contrast this notion, with the refreshing claim of Rohan Williams, whose claim is that a work of art “is Christian simply to the extent that ‘love is alive’ in it!”

More recently, given the complex relationship between religion and culture, there is a growing appreciation of art as it reveals attitudes, responses and understandings of existence as explored by religion. Margaret Miles, as an art historian and theologian, makes an argument for reading historic images as legitimate sources for understanding the experience of people.

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23 S Brent Plate, *Blasphemy* 40
While language necessarily begins with a universal expression of the particular and evokes the particular, images begin with an expression of the particular and evoke the universal, inviting the viewer to participation in a symbolic expression that gives universal significance to the particular experience of the human being.\textsuperscript{26}

Art is becoming a supplement and corrective to the more conceptual approach of history. By valuing the art of the religion, we develop a sense of the religion as it was lived, thought and imagined.

If one essential part of historical hermeneutics is entering into the ‘common sense’ of an era – what people believed, felt, took for granted in their lives – then the historical theologian must look not only to explicitly theological texts, but also to works of art, both secular and religious, that embody and partially express the context of the times.\textsuperscript{27}

So, art can serve as an aid to the history of theology.

As traditional historical religious art has begun to be taken more seriously as a source for understanding a particular age, the struggle remains to clarify the place of religion in art for our contemporary era. James Elkins outlines five possible ways religion is expressed in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{28} He is critical of the way Art and Religion fail to meet in any meaningful religious way or artistically meritorious way within the contemporary cultural context. Elkins concludes his study by trying to discover a language for the art work which endeavours to engage in the religious conversation. A search for indigenously religious words is difficult as the language is

\textsuperscript{26} Margaret Miles, Image as Insight 38
\textsuperscript{27} Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 127
\textsuperscript{28} James Elkins in On the strange place of Religion in Contemporary Art outlines the five ways as inadequate connection between art and religion, describing them as i. Conventional, often privately, spiritual work, that is sincere, yet naïve in form, ii. Loosely spiritual art, used as a quest to explore spiritual meaning outside of tradition, iii. Art that critiques religion, possibly using the symbols of religion from outside of religion itself, iv. Art that both burns away symbol, and yet seeks to re-discover symbol in abstraction, v. Art that seeks the sublime, transcendent experience from a secular context.
clouded by either the religious systemic or the pseudo-religious movements. However, he suggests two possibilities which I believe are helpful and will assist our study. The first is the word *numinous* as it captures the nonverbal experience of the transcendent. “It means the sudden, overwhelming, and nonverbal presence of the godhead, surpassing all comprehension or understanding; the immediate revelation of holiness.”

Similarly, the word *mysticism* is posed as a possibility to name that essence of religion explored in art. “Art is mystical, properly speaking when it involves an intimate, personal or private connection with something transcendental.”

The research project here undertaken may well learn from the struggle to define the *religious* as it is reflected upon in art. The quest to express meaning, that is, the desire to name that which is important in terms of values and beliefs, and thus to explore the human condition, is the broad arena in which this study is conducted. Such a quest for meaning, however, moves to religious when it seeks to transcend the immediate experience and place that experience in a larger horizon. That is, art is religious when it seeks to express experience beyond the immediate knowing into a connection with a transcendent meaning.

So then, we continue to struggle with this relationship between that which is both *Religious* and Art. Is it possible to rest on a definition that has at its heart concern for the human condition, a preoccupation with *ultimate concern*? For Paul Tillich, art expresses “the human situation in its depth of estrangement and despair.” A resonance occurs between the artist and the viewer as they connect with the very nature of the human condition. He claims:

> Art, the arts, artistic creation indirectly express, whether we like it or not an ultimate concern through their style. This means that every artistic expression is religious in the larger sense of religion. No artistic expression can escape the fact

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29 James Elkins, *On the strange place of Religion in Contemporary Art* 105
30 James Elkins, *On the strange place of Religion in Contemporary Art* 106
31 Paul Tillich is cited in Michael Palmer, *Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Art* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984) 6
that it expresses qualities of ultimate reality in the forms it shows.  

The artist expresses aspects of life’s experience that find resonance with the human predicament. In doing so, the artist is both captured by the imminent experience of reality and drawn to place this reality in a transcendent reality. The concrete experience and eternal reality find their meeting place. "Art is religious when it seeks to reveal, through the ordinarily encountered forms of reality, the transcendental reference of these forms to the eternal, to that which lies beyond the particularity of concrete things." Indeed, the concrete discovers its expression when its hidden meaning finds shape. This, then, is what renders art religious, rather than whether it conforms to a system of belief.

What distinguishes religious style from any other – what constitutes its expressiveness – is its perception of the ‘dimension of depth’, of the hidden ground and meaning of every situation and every object. It is this insight which determines both the subjects and method of religious art.

This fundamental definition of religious art as that which draws the viewer to consider ultimate concern is explored by Richard Kidd as he reflects upon Van Gogh’s work, Starry Night. Kidd selected this painting as the representative masterpiece of 19th Century religious art. Kidd reflects

If religion be defined as man’s ultimate concern for Ultimate Reality, all art which reflects, however partially and distortedly, this ultimate concern is at least implicitly religious, even if it makes no use whatever of a recognizable religious subject matter or any traditional religious symbols.

33 Paul Tillich cited in Michael Palmer, Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Art  21
34 Michael Palmer, Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Art  21
Thus, the capacity of the art to invite the viewer to transcend the image itself, so that questions of ultimate concern are reflected upon, sits at the heart of our understanding of religious art. Of *Starry Night* Tillich writes, “it has the character of going below the surface. It is a description of the creative powers of nature. It goes into the depths of reality where the forms are dynamically created… those depths in which the tension of the forces creates nature.” Inevitably, there will be unresolved tension concerning the experience of reality that emerges in such art, rather than neat resolutions of life’s questions. For when delving below the surface to grapple with questions of ultimate concern, that which appears resolvable rarely resonates with life experience.

Some scholars find it necessary to differentiate between religious and spiritual art. Alejandro Garcia-Rivera claims that Religious Art by its very nature is iconic. That is, it is specific to its religious subject, drawn from a religious tradition and its images are specific to this religion with the aim of activating faith within the viewer. He claims that spiritual art may not be specific to a religion, but does have the power to move the heart. He quotes Sister Wendy Beckett:

> Art effects what it signifies, but the mind may be aware only of the impact of some mysterious truth. This is the essence of spiritual art. We are taken into a realm that is potentially open to us, we are made more what we are meant to be.

Spiritual art seeks to enlarge the experience of the viewer and open to a window on mystery. Such art evokes a devotional response in the viewer, whereby their insight is extended and the possibility of transformation occurs.

> The theological dimension of art does not simply concern the spiritual or religious dimension in a work of art, but also its insights into the transformation of the human creature and

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36 Paul Tillich cited in Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*  199
The power of such art to evoke loyalty and devotion to one another and to the divine.\textsuperscript{38}

The terms theological, spiritual and religious tend to be used here in ways that all evoke movement in the experience of the viewer. The experience of the aesthetic, as philosopher John Dewey argues, “is a rhythmic development arising from the interaction of the organism and the object leading toward a sense of purpose, wholeness, and integration, closing in a pervasive sense of meaning.”\textsuperscript{39} The entire movement, whether we use the terms religious, spiritual or theological, tends toward an embodied sensory experience that exists within our lived reality and links us with religious insight. In this way, aesthetic experience leads somewhere. Its movement is toward insight, the moments of grasping life’s meaning.

This understanding of aesthetic awareness transcends any simplistic definition of beauty and considers a level of value and meaning that lies at the essence of human nature in relation to God.

\begin{quote}
The experience of beauty is to experience a deep-seated ‘yes’ to being – even it its finitude and tragedy; and such an affirmation is possible only if being is grounded, borne by a reality that is absolute in value and meaning. In short, the experience of finite beauty in a spiritual being implies the unavoidable co-affirmation of an infinite Beauty: the reality that we call God.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

There is an intrinsic connection between God and beauty. The entire human story of struggle, redemption and grace is also the story of God. Viladesau is suggesting that humans have a need for conversion of the aesthetic sense in order to be integrated. To see this connection is to be awakened to God. This definition of beauty extends beyond superficial notions of pretty and pleasing, which reflect the naivety of our age. Rather, beauty embraces the discord, the complex, the cyclic themes of existence as essential

\textsuperscript{38} Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, \textit{A Wounded Innocence} 31
\textsuperscript{39} John Dewey is cited in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, \textit{A Wounded Innocence} 32
\textsuperscript{40} Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theology and the Arts} 43
expressions of the whole." As Gadamer has observed, “The experience of the beautiful is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be.”

What place, then, does art have in expressing beauty such that it extends the horizon towards an experience of God?

The fact that God is the ‘horizon’ of every experience of beauty explains why even the tragic emotions can be experienced in art as beautiful, and why there is at the heart of every deep aesthetic experience an intense feeling of striving towards something beyond the moment.

Viladesau explores how art offers a reflection of the beauty of creation itself, in that it presents the Form, or organization. In this understanding, form is the organizing principle that gives shape to reality and differentiates one thing from another. What makes anything identifiable from any other thing is form. The identification of any form points beyond itself to a larger pattern of reality.

Intrinsic to the experience of finite beauty is the longing towards eternal beauty or perfection. Indeed, Aidan Nichols claims “it is only through form that the splendour of the everlasting Beauty of God can shine out.” The joy of any experience is never complete in itself, but rather points beyond itself to the final and ultimate goal - perfect, complete beauty - the divine beauty in which we participate. The role of art, then, is to lead to the experience of the sacred by “the manifestation of beauty as the sign of the transcendental goal

43 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 43
44 Aidan Nichols, Redeeming Beauty Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007) 128
of the human spirit.”

In this sense, creating a space for artists to invite people to wonder is indeed an invitation to extend towards the transcendent, to invite movement towards God. According to Miles,

Beautiful images, through participation in the absolute beauty of the divine, translate into a sensible medium the ubiquitous presence of divinity, thus making divinity continuously accessible through visible objects.

This movement transcends the bounds of religious tradition, and invites both believers and non-believers into such engagement. Viladesau uses the example of a non-believer listening to a Bach hymn. “For the act of aesthetic appreciation to take place, there must be a willing, if only momentary, suspension of disbelief: a willingness to see life, at least for this moment, as if the hearer shared Bach’s belief.” There exists in the listener an openness to faith as a genuine possibility, even whilst denying the propositional belief. The suspension of disbelief requires a fundamentally positive stance towards existence, whereby the art, in this case Bach’s music, evokes a belief in the beautiful as an affirmation of life and, by implication, it reaches towards an implicit acknowledgement of God as the source of such beauty.

What we are talking about is an experience of art that is always extending beyond itself to experiences and understandings of God that are not simplistic or kitsch, but rather experienced as good news for all. This is a consideration of art that transcends the mundane, and invites conversion or transformation; beauty that begins to be shaped by the numinous, the mystery in experience. Art, in this sense, becomes a means to experience of God.

The more art serves not merely to please but to present form, beauty, truth, the more it faces us with a transcendent value – with something to be admired and loved in and for

45 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 43
46 “Creating a space for artists to invite people to wonder” is the premise on which Chapel on Station Gallery was formed.
47 Margaret Miles, Image as Insight 142
48 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 45
itself, rather than for its usefulness or pleasantness to us. It thus already demands a certain level of conversion from our egotism toward a more ultimate good… Moreover, the experience of beauty may calm our hearts’ fears and allow us to enter with sympathy into worlds that might otherwise be simply alien to us…to see ourselves and the needy and frequently unattractive neighbours in the light of God’s love.49

What is curious in this argument is that art always extends beyond the egotistic feel-good experience of any individual, to enrich and connect the individual with the community that reflects the divine-human story.

Art becomes religious when it reveals such beauty. It is about encounter with the sacred, rather than propositional faith. Insofar as the art work is beautiful, it evokes God as the object of desire. “Explicitly religious art combines, in varying degrees and proportions, both the word as idea and the non-conceptual word of beauty, to produce in the properly receptive viewer an event of meeting with the sacred.”50 Indeed, art does not just echo the emotions of the felt religious experience, but rather, at its source its object is the beautiful, which itself is transcendent, and thus leads to God. The mediation of the spiritual in art resides in the capacity for implicit transcendental experience, that is, the numinous. This is ontologically identical with the actual object of the experience – God.

As a caution, however, Viladesau adds: “Divine beauty, the source and final cause of all that is beautiful, at the same time transcends all of its visible manifestations.”51 Such beauty can only be known from revelation itself. Whilst we have talked of aesthetics as sensory awareness, beauty is not simply about sensory pleasure. Rather, beauty suggests the reality of the ugly and alienating insofar as they are an expression of God’s transformative love. That is, sin meets forgiveness in beauty.

49 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 55
50 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 144
51 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 146
Human suffering and need are not beautiful in themselves, any more than they are blessed or happy in themselves; but for the Christian, the portrayal of suffering can be beautiful insofar as it makes us realize the truth of the human situation in need of salvation, evokes the beautiful vision of hope, and stirs up the beautiful moral response of compassion.  

In this way, art is beautiful in its evocation of response. This connection between art as that which grapples with the experience of the human condition, inviting insight and then movement or response is important to underline. Garcia-Rivera draws on the work of Josiah Royce to describe the dynamics of insight.

Insight is knowledge that makes us aware of the unity of many facts in one whole, and that at the same time brings us into intimate personal contact with these facts and with the whole wherein they are united. The three marks of insight are breadth of range, coherence and unity of view, and closeness of personal touch.

What is striking in this description of insight as we relate it to the experience of art, is the immediacy of the physical experience, the resonance that connects with the viewer, and the transcendent extension of the viewer. Potentially, art provides us with an expression of both the human struggle and the possibility of human self-transcendence, and offers an insight into the connection that exists between us as humans. In the movement toward God, the immediate and the transcendent meet as insight.

So then, why invite art into the theological endeavour, rather than leave the experience to be savoured by individual viewers seeking their own mystical or transformative experience? We return to Viladesau’s claim that art and theology need to discover a mutually valuing relationship. He claims,

Art reveals significant aspects of the particular human situations to which God’s word is addressed, and on which

52 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts  148
53 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera A Wounded Innocence  33
theology must therefore reflect if it is to be relevant and intellectually responsible. Art is also one of the means by which the message is presented in a way that is persuasive and attractive, giving a vision that can lead to moral conversion and action.\textsuperscript{54}

Scholars have struggled around these questions of definition, and tend to consider notions of aesthetics and creativity as more helpful than narrowing to the word Art. Viladesau attempts to embrace the arts in the broadest sense and hence develops a theology around the creative aesthetic that is transferable between expressions of the arts themselves. He works with the basic premise of an intrinsic connection between God and beauty, so that beauty is the heart of his definition of art, and artistic beauty is a "means for the mind's ascent to God...or as a medium of divine self-revelation".\textsuperscript{55} He argues that in the emerging theological paradigm, art and theology become significant partners. As an expression of the truth of existence, art is a significant reflective source.

Whilst personally I may be more at home at the piano, in the pulpit, or immersed in a poem, I have chosen to limit the parameters of this study to the visual arts, aware that the theological base may readily be extended to embrace music, dance, poetry and beyond. What might the reason for limiting the study to the visual arts be? There is an observed power of the image in my own experience within an art gallery, which offers a discrete frame in which we can explore. Also, an established body of study underlines the power of the image, which helps to affirm the parameters established within the project.

*People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and*

\textsuperscript{54} Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* 124
\textsuperscript{55} Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* 4
fear. They have always responded in these ways; and they still do.\textsuperscript{56}

Visual Art expresses meaning in ways that words and action cannot. It invites the viewer into a process whereby a response is elicited. In his epic work, David Freedburg affirms the power of the image to transform, to invite experience in the viewer, to encounter the Other. At one level, we deny this power at our own peril, for denial always risks a more destructive impact. This is no new phenomenon. Freedberg draws on the words of an Italian writer in 1584, who claims that a painting

\begin{quote}
will cause the beholder to wonder when it wondreth, to desire a beautiful young woman for his wife when he seeth her painted naked; to have a fellow-feeling when it is afflicted; to have an appetite when he seeth it eating of dainties; to fall asleep at the sight of a sweete sleeping picture; to be moved and waxe furious when he beholdeth a battle most lively describd; and to be stirred with disdaine and wrath, at the sight of shameful and dishonest actions.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Perhaps this power is at the very source of the discomfort the Church experiences with images - the power to both corrupt and enlarge, seduce and stimulate. According to Lonergan, “The work of art is an invitation to participate, to try it, to see for oneself.”\textsuperscript{58} As such, it arouses in the viewer a response that is inevitably one of movement, and not always predictable in its expression.

Let us leave the final word to Margaret Miles, who sees the significance of art in its capacity to recognize and reflect reality.

\begin{quote}
Religion needs art to orient individuals and communities, not only conceptually but also affectively, to the reality that creates and nourishes human life.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} David Freedberg, \textit{The Power of Images} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 1
\textsuperscript{57} David Freedberg, \textit{The Power of Images} 1
\textsuperscript{58} Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology} (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1971) 64
\textsuperscript{59} Margaret Miles, \textit{Image as Insight} 4
Religion is a system of concepts about the world, self and God, offering relative meaning and value to the human experience of the world, and offering ways of responding. Religion involves the organization of experience, its intent is to extend ways of seeing and understanding. Miles argues that “Religion needs images to fulfil its formative role in human life.” In a reciprocal way, art needs religion to offer depth and meaning to the art. As they meet, the horizon of experience is extended.

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60 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* 150
1.ii Art - Behind the Canvas

“Art is a hermeneutic of human existence.” John Dixon

In 2005 the fast food chain, Burger King produced a wrapper for an ice-cream cone which had a swirling image on it. Within days, the swirl had created outrage as people drew connections with the Arabic script for Allah. The wrapper was withdrawn.

The swirl of ink elicited such a strong response because it connected with a word. Brent Plate clarifies the connection, saying, “in the practice of religion, the word of God is often written and thus made visible.” 61 That is, the words form a link between the divine and the earthly, the invisible and the visible, offering a connection between the divine and the human. Indeed, the written words are images, metaphors or symbols as we shall explore later, but are elevated to sacred status, so that an ice-cream wrapper with a potentially sacred word-image upon it blasphemes the sacred. “Because of the sacred status of the Word of God, Western traditions have developed a series of rules and regulations for how this Word might be portrayed.” 62 Transgressing the rules is a transgression of the sacred.

The art illuminating early texts and prayer books served to offer ways into the experience of the sacred through the visual image. The prayer books of the medieval times, particularly the various Books of Hours, were produced in order to create opportunity for private connection with God – the image pointing beyond the page to that which is symbolized. This complex connection between word and image incites strong reaction, both from those who believe the image desecrates and from those who believe it elevates.

The elevation of the word as the symbolic language in which theology can be explored is critiqued by John Dixon who argues, “Words have been thought to be not simply the most appropriate language for theology, but the only language in which theology is

61 S Brent Plate, Blasphemy 110
62 S Brent Plate, Blasphemy 115
This understanding is flawed for “A god described is a god subdued to the act of description.” When we describe God within the limits of religion, we limit the shape and size of God to the very words used. The very nature of word is embodied in our communication with one another, in talking, saying, asking, pleading, arguing, loving. Our language offers a shape to our perceptions and experiences. “We live according to our language; we experience the world according to the picture we have of it built up in words.” Words break into our experience to name our reality, and to describe our experience of life.

However, the experience of living itself is quite separate from words – it is sensory, seen, smelt, tasted, touched. That is, it is aesthetic in the purest definition of the word. It is experienced sensorily and emotionally. As Plate argues,

‘Aesthetics’ stems from the Greek term, aesthesis, which simply means ‘sense perception’. Thus, in its strictest form, aesthetics deals with taste, touch, hearing, seeing, and smelling. In other words, aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. Yet in common scholarly usage today, there is a tendency to equate aesthetics with a philosophy of art that ask questions about style, beauty and taste.

Whilst our experience of the world is mediated by the symbolic naming of experience of it in words, it is potentially limited by that same medium. “Our world is not a world of words, but a world of sound and colour, weight and textures, lines and surfaces, masses and volumes.”

Our life is lived in space and time with objects and people, connecting with that which is outside ourselves. We inject those objects outside ourselves with meaning.

63 John Dixon, Art and the Theological Imagination (New York: Crossroad, 1978) 2
64 John Dixon, Art and the Theological Imagination 2
65 John Dixon, Art and the Theological Imagination 3
66 S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual Culture 20
67 John Dixon, Art and the Theological Imagination 4
But if we simply look at them, look at the world we actually live in, or more than look, become aware of the whole sensory order of our world, we find all the elements of art—shape, mass, texture, colour, sound, rhythm, line, edge, weight, movement and all the many elements of our sensory world.  

As humans, we seek to describe the world in order to ascribe meaning to our experience of it. We discover universal themes that make sense of our experience and connect us with the experience of others, and those themes become metaphors that extend our subjective experience with the whole. Art is one such expression that discovers metaphoric connection. “The making of the work of art is basically a metaphoric activity, the penetration into the secret life of things to find the bonds between them.” Dixon goes further to posit that images, as metaphor, express the depth of life as it is lived. Life finds its shape in the form of art. He goes explains, “Art is not an ornament to an existing world, it is the primary means of forming that world.” He speaks of art, not as the objectification of a form set apart, but as an elemental activity of living. He echoes Kandinsky who claims, “Form-harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration of the human soul.” Art is the expression of living, rather than the entertainment of an exclusive desire to represent an objective reality.

Art presents us with metaphor. Art as poetry, art as visual image, art as music, all seek to deepen our experience of something otherwise difficult to name. At its simplest level,

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\text{a metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this’ so we use ‘that’, as a way of saying something about it ...Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events,}
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68 John Dixon, *Art and the Theological Imagination* 11
69 John Dixon, *Art and the Theological Imagination* 12
70 John Dixon, *Art and the Theological Imagination* 12
71 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover, 1977 Reprint) 29
or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.\textsuperscript{72}

We use metaphor to describe our experience of life, not just at an abstract or esoteric level, but our everyday experience. Metaphor is not simply about creating artistic patterns. Rather, metaphor functions as the naming of our experience of existence. Religious language is metaphoric in that it names the connections between reality and understanding, specifically in the way Jesus used parables for teaching. Metaphor lies at the heart of the construct of the text. For example, the phrase \textit{In the beginning was the Word (Logos)} provides us with a metaphor about which we can imagine or with which we can dialogue. Indeed, all abstract language rests upon metaphor, that is, a connection or similarity between experiences or patterns of reality. Our attempt to name experience is contained within the bounds of metaphoric language.

Rather than considering that understanding is \textit{contained} within the metaphor itself, we understand that metaphor opens up, or extends, understanding. There is a fluid dimension to metaphoric understanding that not only allows a particular understanding, but creates opportunity for further exploration and opening up of meaning. In outlining the intrinsic connection between metaphor and theology, McFague argues that such a theology "will emphasize personal, relational categories in its language about God, but not necessarily as the tradition has interpreted these categories."\textsuperscript{73} The metaphor extends the meaning into more relevant, liberated understandings. Through the validation of metaphor we discover ways in which truth can be said to be true without being contained by the literal; that is, we open up "ways which are meaningful to all peoples, the traditionally excluded as well as the included."\textsuperscript{74} The intent of metaphorical theology, then, is to acknowledge the archetypal metaphors that connect us as humans, and transform us as people – shared realities that both are embodied in religion and transcend its bounds.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[72] Sallie McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology} (London: SCM, 1983) 15
\item[73] Sallie McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology} 21
\item[74] Sallie McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology} 28
\end{footnotes}
McFague identifies three ways in which metaphor functions. Firstly, in poetic metaphor, “metaphor creates the new, it does not embellish the old, and it accomplishes this through seeing similarity in dissimilar.” Similarities are found in the midst of apparent dissimilarities. Resonances are discovered amidst dissonance. Indeed, how do we compare a mustard seed with the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:19), except by a means of discovering resonance?

Secondly, radical metaphor asserts that ordinary language is metaphorical. There is a radical relationship between metaphor and thought, whereby we look to discover a connection between our experience and the naming of our experience in words. “Reality is created through this incredibly complex process of metaphorical leaps, of seeing this as that; we use what we notice about one thing to ‘name’ (describe, call up, evoke, elicit) another thing where we notice something of the same, and hence for the first time we see it that new way.” When we describe the notion of seeing through a glass dimly (1Cor 13:12) we are drawing the connection between a tangible object through which we can generally see and an experience of not being able to understand clearly.

Finally, metaphor expresses human movement.

It is and can be the source for new insight because all human discovery is by metaphor. Metaphor unites us and our world at a level below subject-object, mind-body; it is the nexus of ‘man in the being of the world’, the intimation of our original unity with all that is. To see connections, to unite this with that, is the distinctive nature of human thought.

Metaphor allows us to name change, discovery and movement. It allows a dynamic in our experience of the world, inviting extension beyond the static to an ever growing and evolving understanding. Specifically, Jesus, in the telling of parables employs metaphor, comparing the sowing of the seeds with the reception of the good news. More subtly, the stories of the gospels become metaphor

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75 Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables: A study in Metaphor and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress 1975) 49
76 Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables 53
77 Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables 56
upon which we make sense of our own existence. We are invited to enter into the journey of the haemoraging woman (Mark 5:25), or we make the journey to the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14). We enter into the story in a way that connects us with the universal story.

Rohan Williams argues that metaphor actually extends reality; it is about things being more than they appear to be. That is, connections are made, extension of reality is discovered.

*Metaphor implies that diverse, sometimes very diverse, items in the perceptual field can be related as if they were on the same frequency: something about the life of this object in action shares the same style of action as is seen in something different… Metaphor suggests participation between different agencies.*

At its essence, metaphor rests upon connection, and affirms the connections and resonances that exist within the world. The relationship between the one experience of reality expands to the larger experience of reality.

McFague claims that metaphor is the way of human knowing rather than a tool or device used to explain or expand knowing. Theology tends to rely upon discursive language which designates, measures, analyses and systematizes, however it is possible to liberate theological understandings, if we claim the awareness that the quest for human knowledge rests also upon metaphor. Grasping metaphor as the foundation of language allows for interpretation that is more “tentative, relativistic, multilayered, dynamic, complex, sensuous, historical and participatory.” The language of the Bible is primarily metaphor, through story, parable, poem and confession. Our attempts to translate these dynamic movements of metaphor into measured systems have fixed and designated dogma around words, as if the words themselves are not metaphoric. This flawed notion rests on the assumption that words have a solid or static form, and are not simply representational or connected to a dynamic whole.

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78 Rohan Williams, *Grace and Necessity* 29
79 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* 62
Religious tradition has perhaps been more comfortable accepting the figurative or metaphoric quality of established symbols. Indeed, the symbols have become connected with the tradition itself. However, just as we have argued that metaphor points beyond itself to the core experience, even the transcendent or archetypal experience, religious symbols are understood as that which points beyond themselves to that which is symbolized. The symbol of the cross points to the crucifixion, with its resonant identification with the human condition as well as theological understandings.

Paul Tillich argued that “Man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate”.\textsuperscript{80} Symbols have a number of characteristics. The first and basic characteristic of the symbol is its figurative quality. This implies that the inner attitude which is oriented to the symbol does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolized in it. That which is symbolized points beyond itself to a larger reality. For example, the focus of an icon for the viewer is the figure the icon symbolizes.

“The second characteristic of the symbol is its perceptibility. This implies that something which is intrinsically invisible, ideal, or transcendent is made perceptible in the symbol and is in this way given objectivity,”\textsuperscript{81} That is, within the icon, something of the transcendent nature of God in Christ is made perceptible. However, the symbol is not merely a sign pointing towards the object. Rather, thirdly, the symbol has a potency in itself, in that it connects the viewer in a participatory experience. “This implies that the symbol has a power inherent within it that distinguishes it from the mere sign which is impotent in itself.”\textsuperscript{82} Tillich spoke of the power of a symbol to evoke such resonance or response, without which the symbol would be dead.

The symbol transcends itself, in that it expresses that which is beyond itself. Lonergan claims that “if one apprehends what is meant by the symbolic and the artistic, one has an apprehension of

\textsuperscript{80} Paul Tillich  \textit{Dynamics of Faith} (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 41
\textsuperscript{81} Frederick Dillistone, \textit{Myth and Symbol} (London: SPCK, 1966) 15
\textsuperscript{82} Frederick Dillistone, \textit{Myth and Symbol} 16
the reality behind the abstraction." His claim is that the experience of mystery is not contained by the image, but rather the image points toward, or may become a window to the Divine. The word symbols of the text, the movement symbols of the story or the visual symbols of the artist each have the potential to point beyond themselves to the divine.

Rohan Williams argues that art is always interpretive, and always symbolic. Indeed, it is useless if it seeks to replicate realism. “Things are not only what they are”, but they “give more than they have.” That is, the image always extends beyond to express a deeper relationship between reality and transcendence. Art is not just the embodiment of an idea, but rather an interpretation of an experience. It involves an intuitive response that extends beyond conventional boundaries of perception, and draws links to understand and explore. Williams affirms that artistic images carry with them a charge that “blurs the conventional boundaries of perception – not to dissolve them, but to bring out relations and dimensions that ordinary rational naming and analysing fail to represent.”

Within the context of this study, art becomes that metaphor which can both express the experience of the artist and point beyond itself, inviting connection with the viewer and, potentially, connecting the viewer also with that which the artist has experienced or perceived. The metaphor will serve to function on many levels, but at its richest, it invites a stir that allows the movement towards a deeper experience of God. In this way, art can influence the unfolding story of our lives. The narrative of our lives, that is the story that unfolds in the extended experience of time and space, is dealt with in a fundamental way through art. Art is shaped around ideas, emotions and experiences. Art does not illustrate the story of life, nor offer commentary upon it. Rather, it seeks to re-present the narrative to us in such a way as to stimulate response.

83 Bernard Lonergan, Collected works of Bernard Lonergan Vol 10 “Topics in Education” (Toronto: Lonergan Research Institute, Toronto Uni Press, 1993) 220
84 Rohan Williams, Grace and Necessity 26
85 Rohan Williams, Grace and Necessity 28
Art as a hermeneutic of narrative is the setting forth of the fullness of the human situation which is the narrative and which generated the story. It is the function of a hermeneutic to make the narrative present to us so that the work into which the narrative emerges, be it story or painting or symphony, can exert its full force on us. Thus, the primary function of a hermeneutic is not to elucidate or expound the particularities of a story, but to set out the structures which come to formal statement in the story.\textsuperscript{86}

Hence, art as hermeneutic transcends the detail of the story, but presents it in such a way as to stimulate connection with the other. Themes are revealed. Potentially, an archetypal connection is made that elucidates some aspect of reality. Art across the ages returns again and again to such universal themes, and yet places them within a particular spatio-temporal context. One of the significant contributions visual art makes to the narrative is its capacity to transcend the limitations of the time and space telling or experiencing of story, and express them as a completed whole. “Art can clarify an act beyond the possibilities of story because those things which must be set out in succession in the story can be shown, simultaneously, in a painting.”\textsuperscript{87} It takes the dynamic of story and captures it in such a way that it may be looked at as a whole.

Indeed, Dixon uses the word narrative to describe that which is expressed beyond the simple story of the art. “Underneath story, as underneath belief, there is a powerful, controlling sense of the order and purpose of life on earth... I chose narrative because 'image' is inevitably too static.”\textsuperscript{88} Into that narrative, we enact our own personal narrative and express it according to the symbols of the common expression. Dixon is using the word image here to identify the meeting point between the universal and personal narrative. The narrative of life, of either community or individual, is placed within a frame. The image suggests a larger reality, a hermeneutic that sits both beyond and within the framed image. Dixon’s work draws connections between the human experience of life and the metaphors we use to make sense of that experience. We seek to

\textsuperscript{86} John Dixon, \textit{Art and the Theological Imagination} 24
\textsuperscript{87} John Dixon, \textit{Art and the Theological Imagination} 29
\textsuperscript{88} John Dixon, \textit{Art and the Theological Imagination} 41
ascribe meaning by connecting with *archetypal themes* – darkness, storm, music, phallus, for example.

James Elkins,\(^8^9\) explores the relationship between the observer and the object within this hermeneutical dynamic whereby the whole context in which the visual interaction takes place must be considered. He argues that even within the context of an art gallery or museum, art is not viewed as an isolated object because the image will be affected by the world of the viewer. The image in a different context can only be interpreted within that context. The reality of viewing art, as in reading words, listening to music or entering the dance, is that nothing occurs in isolation. The background of the observers, their own context and narrative, is brought into the encounter, and the image is interpreted within the shape of their own potential meanings.

Meaning exists in the dynamic between the observer and object, not in either. It is in the meeting place of the two. This hermeneutical dynamic is focused on the encounter between object and observer. "Objects and observers alter one another, and meaning goes in both directions."\(^9^0\) Art is not static, just as words are not static; rather within the dynamic of engagement with art meaning unfolds. Elkins argues that

> seeing is always a two-way process, and that the observer is changed in the interaction. In this two-way interaction between observer and object, the sacred and profane are also oftentimes crossed, as are the differences between ‘high’ art and ‘low’ art.\(^9^1\)

The interpretation of images involves similar dynamics to the interpretation of texts. *Word or image* can only ever be interpreted through the discourse that occurs between the reader-viewer and the word-image. The discourse defines its significance, that is, its meaning. The meaning only ever exists in the discourse of context and image, just as it does with word. The perspective of the

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\(^8^9\) James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 13ff  
\(^9^0\) James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 43  
\(^9^1\) S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual Culture* 25
interpreter-viewer must be considered within that discourse, their personal narrative alongside the context of the art itself.\textsuperscript{92}

Hence, our exploration of the conversation which takes place between artist, viewer and art must take note of the context within which the art is experienced. Miles argues that interpretation of an image is dependent on viewer and context, and the openness to see. There is a certain \textit{universality} about images that rests “in its potential affective availability to everyone who contemplates it with generosity and self-reflection.”\textsuperscript{93} So, whether the image is received as threatening or life-giving “will be a function of the interest of the viewer.”\textsuperscript{94} What occurs, then, is the discovering of a resonance with the viewer which leads the viewer to choose from a range of possible interpretations in the image.

Artists place themselves at risk in opening their work to interpretive possibility. The creator of an image may have had a particular intent, and this message may be more or less suggested to the viewer’s attention by a title or artist’s statement. However, such intent may be rejected by the viewer, who receives the work on the basis of their own resonance or dissonance with the work. As Elkins explains, the construction of the world in the work of art may or may not inform the way we construct our own world.

\begin{quote}
\textit{When I look at a picture I am also looking at myself, at a way I might be. I want the relationship between myself and my world to be like the relationship between the parts of a picture, and so I look to pictures for advice on the ways that might happen.}\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

Margaret Miles draws on some of these thoughts about context and viewer response when she explores what might be called the hermeneutic of the image. She claims that critical to an interpretation of image is not the theology that sits \textit{behind} the image, but the viewer’s interaction and interpretation in \textit{front} of the

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\textsuperscript{92} This will be explored more fully as we engage with Visual Culture in the next section.
\textsuperscript{93} Margaret Miles, \textit{Image as Insight} 30
\textsuperscript{94} Margaret Miles, \textit{Image as Insight} 30
\textsuperscript{95} James Elkins, \textit{The Object Stares Back} 85
\end{flushright}
image, or as she puts it, “the religious use of vision.”\textsuperscript{96} To illustrate her argument, she draws on the presentation of images of holy figures in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, where viewers were encouraged to engage with the image intimately. Sensory experience and response to the image was invited; that is, \textit{in front} of the image was the critical place. She would argue that it is the interaction between viewer and image that continues to be important for the religious use of images.

Viewer response is important to Viladesau also, as he grapples with the means by which art bears the theological message and mediates both the content and the attitude of faith. He acknowledges that religious art offers us ways of understanding the audience of the art in a particular era, but also communicates God’s word both cognitively and affectively to the viewers, potentially at any time. The intent of the art is not simply to express theological meaning, but to invite viewer response.

\textit{Moreover, in calling this mediation by art theological, I am implying that art’s transmission of faith-meaning can take place not only on the level of receiving or celebrating of some aspect of the Christian message, but also as part of the process of interpretation, understanding, formulation, affirmation, and appropriation of the viewer’s faith.}\textsuperscript{97}

An image offers an imaginative symbolic representation of the content of Christian faith or the spiritual world, but that representation of faith also transcends illustration as it seeks response. For example, Viladesau describes the frescoes as a “form of writing a scripture in its own right; a text whose spiritual message goes beyond any specific biblical content, even when the latter is the subject of the picture.”\textsuperscript{98} The content is secondary to the response elicited. According to Viladesau, the image always transcends scriptural content and extends theological content and seeks personal response. Similarly, Elkins argues that there is power in the act of looking and that all looking is connected with

\textsuperscript{96} Margaret Miles cited in S Brent Plate, ed. \textit{Religion, Art and Visual Culture} 58
\textsuperscript{97} Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theology and the Arts} 135
\textsuperscript{98} Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theology and the Arts} 140f
desire. He claims “an image is not a piece of data in an information system. It is a corrosive, something that has the potential to tunnel into me, to melt part of what I am and re-form it in another shape.”

How significant if that capacity to see an image finds its connection with a point of transcendence!

Essentially, just as we engage with a scriptural text, we come to the art-text as sympathetic listeners, desiring to hear what it has to say, and mindful of the experience we bring. As we grapple with it, our experience is challenged and our curiosity opens us to the text in new ways. There comes a merging of the horizons between the text and the reader, the art and the viewer, so that the perspective of each allows for fresh interpretation. McFague expands,

> In other words, the interpretation that results from this process is not the text alone, nor the intention of the speaker, nor any interpretation prior to the present hearer, but a new thing which has been influenced by all the foregoing, but is not reducible to any of them....a text is never ‘there’, pristine and absolute, but exists only in relation to its hearers and no interpretation can be final, for a text only has meaning in relationship to hearers.

Application of this understanding of metaphor frees us to consider the dynamic between the art as text and the sympathetic viewer where a new horizon may be arrived at with their experience. Revision of the viewer’s experience co-incides with revision of the art, and this process continues expanding and extending understanding. A whole new world deepens and enlarges beyond the canvas.

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99 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 42  
100 Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* 57
1.iii  Art – Looking Beyond the Canvas

Seeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable ...
   It is entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness;
   and it is soaked in effect –
   in pleasure and displeasure and in pain ...
   Seeing is a metamorphosis, not a mechanism.\textsuperscript{101}

What is it that our eyes do when we see something? And how is it that our eyes connect with our brains to make sense of the world? How does that which we see stimulate our perception of the world?
   Our perception of the world extends beyond the mere function of our eyes.

   Seeing is wonderfully complicated, and people who study it – art historians, art critics, artists, cognitive psychologists, neurobiologists – are just beginning to understand what it involves. We have arrived at the point where we can say what seeing is not: it is not merely taking in light, colour, shapes, and textures, and it is not simply a way of navigating through the world.\textsuperscript{102}

The very nature of seeing has been explored by the great Philosophers, and will be explored only briefly for the purposes of this project.

The capacity to see and the capacity to imagine are deeply connected. James Elkins considers our capacity to think and imagine as that which identifies us as humans. “Thinking is imagining – and as the word suggests, the imagination is a place inhabited by images.”\textsuperscript{103} That which makes us human is expressed in the images we create. That is, as we experience the world and reflect upon it, we have a capacity to extend beyond our current experience - to imagine. Humans have the capacity to capture an experience, reflect upon it and extend beyond it through art.

\textsuperscript{101} James Elkins, \textit{The Object Stares Back} 11
\textsuperscript{102} James Elkins, \textit{The Object Stares Back} 20
\textsuperscript{103} James Elkins, \textit{The Object Stares Back} 224
The metaphor of *seeing* extends our understanding beyond the literal sense of visual perception into a figurative depth of experience. As Elkins argues, we can apprehend more than the specific details of a situation: “It’s a question of trying to see *more* than the details, more than a fraction of the world.” Here, reality is not dissected into bits, as much as expanded in the imagination. Religion itself can be understood as one of these ways of seeing.

*Religious seeing implies perceiving a quality of the sensible world, a numinosity, a ‘certain slant of light’, in which other human beings, the natural world, and objects appear in their full beauty, transformed. The transient, intensely experienced occasions on which we experience ‘eyesight as insight’ have frequently been described as a clue to the nature and structure of reality and the first step toward realization of the ultimate fulfilment of human being.*

As we listen to the pondering reflection of an old man scratching his chin, saying “I see...” or a fresh insight from a teenage girl solving a problem, exclaiming “I see!”, we begin to see the fluid use of this word that connects our eyes, our imagination and a level of understanding that transcends superficiality and draws us to a different level of awareness.

The Philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that *seeing* is shaped by the entire dynamic of the visual experience itself. Indeed, his famous illustration of a rabbit-duck which flips in the eye of the beholder from one to the other, serves to open up the issue of how the subject perceives an object from his or her subjective reality. Another viewer may see the image differently from the primary beholder. From this point, Wittgenstein posits the notion that seeing is always a matter of *seeing as*. Seeing is always creating points of recognition in the experience of the beholder. In seeing, one only ever notices an aspect of an object, recognizes it and names it from his own experience. This aspect has the capacity to shift within the viewer as the viewer seeks to make sense of it. But this capacity itself arises from other connections within the visual field. “What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object,

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104 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 95
105 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* 2
but an internal relation between it and other objects. A connection is drawn pre-reflectively, between the objects around the initial object, as well as between the viewer and object. Indeed, the aspect is not able to change if the viewer is not conversant with other possible connections with the aspect. So, for example, if one has never seen a duck, the viewer cannot perceive the image as a duck. However, in the process of attending to the picture, a thinking faculty engages which has the capacity to extend the seeing beyond an aspect to a larger field.

Richard Gregory argues that during this process of seeing the mind tests hypotheses in order to identify some meaningful connection with that which is seen. “Seeing is an interpretive action that relies on memories and experiences of the observer as the world out there is represented in the mind.” What happens when we see is that we seek to understand from past experience. We begin a process of conversions and interpretations to make sense of the world as we receive it.

Drawing on the work of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Pattison explains perception as an interplay between human consciousness and vision. The world out there may be an unbounded, extended world, but in perceiving it there is some definition or patterning of that world. Pattison claims that there is

> a high degree of continuity between vision understood as a mode of perception and vision in the context of artistic activity: Pictorial expression assumes and transcends the patterning of the world which begins in perception...the painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible.

107 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 194ff
108 Richard Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The psychology of Seeing* in S Brent Plate *op.cit* 25
109 Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work is developed in George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 144
By making a line on a canvas, the world as it is being experienced by the artist is being defined. The line makes visible the world as it is experienced. Art does not imitate things themselves, but things as they may be seen.

Visual perception is not just a matter of refining an initial blur of raw sense data into a decipherable image to which we can then attach a concept and a word. Vision is of a piece with itself and always already stylized.110

There is an intimate connection between the self and the world behind or beyond the self which is expressed in art. Art expresses “the overlapping or intertwining of what is seen with the motor projects by which the subject launches himself out into the midst of a world of visible things.”111 We do not need extended explanations about visual art in order to make the art meaningful. Description does not validate the image. Rather, “Vision itself interprets vision. Vision occurs out in the open, in a shared visual world.”112 The integrity of the visual image itself, as a respected and authentic expression, needs to affirmed.

Historically, it was considered that a powerful connection existed between the viewer and the object seen. Augustine describes seeing whereby a fire within the body gathers behind the eye and forms into a ray. This ray focuses on the object, establishing a two-way channel along which the energy of the viewer travels to touch the object. A representation of the object returns to the eye and is bonded to the soul by being retained in the memory.113 The power of the connection between the viewer and the object became the grounds for covering one’s eyes at unsightly objects for fear that they become forever implanted on the soul! Positively, however, what Augustine understood, in common with Merleau-Ponty’s insight, is that seeing does indeed involve us bodily. Seeing is not some subsequent intellectual process after or beyond our physical apprehension. There is a primary connection with that which is seen.

110 George Pattison, Art, Modernity and Faith 144
111 George Pattison, Art, Modernity and Faith 145
112 George Pattison, Art, Modernity and Faith 146
113 Margaret Miles describes this process Image as Insight 7
The development of the discipline of Visual Culture has taken seriously this connection between object and viewer, and differentiates between vision and seeing. Vision is understood as the biochemical process of the eyes, and the neurological processes of the nerves as they transmit electrical signals between the eyes and the mind. “Vision, to give a simple definition, takes place along the biochemical processes of the eyes and nerves as they transmit information about the external world to the brain… it is the material process of sensing the world through the eyes and nerves.”\textsuperscript{114} This neurological transfer of light to electrical signals offers a technical description of the mechanics of vision.

On the other hand, the way we see is shaped by our experience. Our experience creates within us an expectation of what we will see, and interprets the object – the vision - as part the process of seeing itself.

\textit{Seeing in contrast, is what makes vision meaningful … Somewhere in the series of transfers from light to chemicals to electrical signals between the eye and the mind, a meaningful image of the world is produced…This image (which in the mind is merely a collection of electrical impulses and not a real image at all) is only fully understood by the mind when it is compared with other images and sensory experiences stored in the memory of the brain. In other words, seeing is impossible without memory and previous experiences…seeing is a meaningful, world constructing encounter.}\textsuperscript{115}

Seeing has its basis in the physiological sense of vision, but is always interpreted by experience. The physiological processes are transferred into meaning by connection with memory and previous experience. Recognition is more the process of understanding what is seen.

\textit{The world ‘out there’ is not identical to the world that is perceived and understood inside our mind: we cannot directly apprehend the outside world through our eyes or any}

\textsuperscript{114} S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual culture 23
\textsuperscript{115} S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual culture 23
other sense organ. Instead there is a series of conversion processes and interpretations that must take place before our conscious mind can understand the world around us.\textsuperscript{116}

So, for example, unless we are able to match the visual image with our visual memories, we are unable to recognize what we are looking at. This is considered to be one of the reasons why we have so few memories of infancy, because we have had little experience against which to match the visual images. We need more than ocular vision; we need to know what we are looking at. David Freedburg argues that the image stimulates an \textit{inward visual construction} which is always drawn from experience and memory.

\begin{quote}
\textit{We know that the construction is based on the deposits of experience, when we see the affective image before us, we respond to it in terms that to a greater or lesser extent can only be grasped on the basis of the kinds of lively reality that are layered in the imagination.}\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

So the interplay between apparent objective reality and imagination are connected in the experience of the visual.

For Immanuel Kant, the mind, through the capacity of imagination, provides a frame of reference for the image that offers a pattern, shape or form without which we cannot make sense of what we experience. Our imagination makes the connection with that which is perceived, and draws together our experience of life and the world, to creatively see. By this he means that we have an intuitive seeing beyond our rational attempts to explain or describe. He claims that the capacity to create a synthesis between experience and knowledge is the “result of the power of the imagination, a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious.”\textsuperscript{118} It is as broad as any mental process that seeks to make sense of the ways we interpret our experience of each other and the world. Imagination is the capacity by which raw sense-

\textsuperscript{116} S Brent Plate, ed. \textit{Religion, Art and Visual culture} 21
\textsuperscript{117} David Freedburg, \textit{The Power of Images} 191
\textsuperscript{118} Immanuel Kant, Norman Kemp Smith (trans) \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} (London: Macmillan, 1964) 112
perception and intellectual concepts come together to establish significance in what we see.

When Gough Whitlam purchased Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* for the Australian public in the early 1970s a furore erupted, not just because of the expense. People would stand before it and have no capacity to see it because they had no previous memory or experience of abstract art from which to draw. “Seeing is a learning process….most newborn human babies have sight, but it takes them some time to learn how to see.”\textsuperscript{119} Similarly the Australian public needed to have enough experience of contemporary, abstract art in order to be able to work out what was before their eyes.

Into this mix of vision and seeing, artists extend the invitation to encounter meaning in the images they offer. “For whatever reasons, biological or imaginative, artists provide a renewed view of the world and allow humans to generate new meanings.”\textsuperscript{120} That is, artists present images which seek to uncover the resonances that elicit meaningful responses in their viewers. In a Kantian sense, the artist appeals to, and further extends, our imaginative seeing.

The process of seeing is, in effect, a process of imagining, or seeing the world as something meaningful to the viewer. John McIntyre posits that “imagination is our mind working in ways that lead to perception, selection and integration; in ways that are creative and constructive, cognitive and interpretative, empathetic and sustaining and truly communicative”.\textsuperscript{121} Images are what the imagination uses when it functions. Those images are simply the ways of making meaning of what is seen by discovering the resonances or connections with the viewers.

Seeing is always connected with need, desire or intent. According to James Elkins, the phrase *just looking* is a fallacy, as there is always an entanglement with that which is looked at. “I am always looking out, looking for, even just looking around.”\textsuperscript{122} Everything

\textsuperscript{119} S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual culture* 23
\textsuperscript{120} S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual culture* 25
\textsuperscript{121} John McIntyre is cited in Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* (London: Equinox, 2005) 144
\textsuperscript{122} James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* op.cit 21
upon which our eyes gaze is of interest or possible gain to us. So if seeing occurs within a dynamic of passions, we become entangled with the object. Elkins suggests this may even apply to the extent that the object which is looked at becomes part of who I am. The engagement with the image is a subjective experience whereby the subject cannot be separated from the object. Indeed, art is wonderfully illustrative of the entanglement between seeing and the object being seen, for the viewer is potentially significantly shaped in the seeing. He argues paintings “have that effect - they are ways of thinking about something other than what I am.”

They become part of the extension beyond the boundaries of myself, to engagement with the world.

There is a larger field of vision which frames the seeing of the viewer. What we see concerns much more what is termed visual culture. Whereas traditional art history pays attention to the production of images, a “visual culture approach attempts to balance this view by looking at both sides of an image: its production and its reception, the makers and the viewers.” In relation to a work of art, what we see is connected with a whole range of factors. Those factors are considered to be the components of the field of vision:

* the image itself, its materials, shape, form, content, execution
* the choice of medium for the message expressed, and the relationship between the two – that is, the form and content of the image
* the artist, with ethnic, gendered, sexual, racial, religious identity
* the language that frames the image, that is, its title, artist’s statement, explanations or rhetoric endorsing or critiquing it
* the responses by viewers to the image – physical, verbal, reviews, etc
* the historical context of the image
* the identity of the viewers – cultural, historical, social, personal

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123 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 21
124 S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual culture* 9
* the particular cultural crossings that are constantly taking place
* the social, political and cultural institutions involved in the creation, sponsorship and reception of the art.\textsuperscript{125}

Seeing, as defined by the school of visual culture, is concerned with art in as much as art is received within its complexity of cultural settings and interpretations. In the context of visual culture an image is not simply critiqued in its formal dimensions, style or artistic merit, but in the environment into which the image is received. So the image changes within the context in which it is seen, and as the context shifts, the art shifts in meaning.

\textit{In this mode of analysis, gender, sex, race, nationality, religion, family, and other forces of identification come to play vital roles in the construction of the way we look, and are looked at. These components of identity affect the way images are produced and reproduced, and how such images are viewed, and by whom.}\textsuperscript{126}

Paul Tillich’s theological method of \textit{correlation} sought to create links between the questions implicit in the human situation of a particular era and the responses given by God’s revelation. He contended that the forms of human culture meet the \textit{ultimate concern} of humanity. Art then is a primary factor in the discernment of the human situation to which the Christian response may be addressed. The art occurs within a cultural climate which reflects back into that context. Viladesau draws on Tillich’s claims that

\textit{Art indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is: it does this more immediately and directly than do science and philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations. Its symbols have something of a revelatory character while scientific conceptualization must suppress the symbolical in favour of objective adequacy.}\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{125} S Brent Plate, ed. \textit{Religion, Art and Visual culture} 5
\textsuperscript{126} S Brent Plate, ed. \textit{Religion, Art and Visual culture} 9
\textsuperscript{127} Richard Viladesau, \textit{Theology and the Arts} 154
In effect art, either consciously or unconsciously, expresses the ultimate concern of its society. The artist betrays his or her own ultimate concern and that of the cultural period. That is, there is a world behind the work.

The theologian intent on presenting the Christian message in a way that is relevant to the thought forms of a particular age can find in its art a significant text, a concise embodiment of the spirit of the age, including, in Tillich’s terminology, the implicit ‘questions’ to which God’s revelation is the proposed answer.¹²⁸

In this sense, art expresses the spiritual situation of a cultural context, providing an expression of the climate into which a faith message may be shared.

This understanding of visual culture is at the heart of the questions I am asking in this research project. How does theological education, the awareness of biblical narrative, the inculturation of religious tradition, as well as personal background, impact upon our capacity to see and to recognize what we are seeing? And hence, how do these factors inform our capacity to see something as significant and meaningful to us?

One’s religious world view intensely affects the operations of seeing. Religious awakening affects the capacity to notice, to interpret, to take in that which is before one. All that is seen is affected by that world view. The stories of our religious practice, myths, symbols, rituals also affect the way we perceive reality.

Seeing ‘religiously’ – whether in a museum or mosque – alters the way we see in general: one begins to notice things they haven’t noticed before; space enlarges or contracts; time moves slower or faster; and new ways of thinking are introduced into one’s conceptual world view. These effects are what continue to link religion to the visual arts, and this relationship is bound up with the operations of seeing.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts  155
¹²⁹ S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual Culture  22
Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes affirm the need for Christians to see as a critical ingredient of the capacity to reflect upon life’s journey. They claim that

*Western Christianity… has focused so strongly on words, creeds and doctrines, that many Christians have forgotten that the visual image is the primary human experience – we ‘look and see’ long before we ‘speak and hear with understanding’.*

Indeed, there is a correlation between the ability to see and the ability to engage in the spiritual quest. When one cultivates the capacity to see, the spiritual journey is deepened and enriched. Conversely, the spiritual journey has the capacity to heighten the capacity to see.

Kidd and Sparkes encourage both artists and viewers to pay attention to what they refer to as *effort of imagination*. That is, both artist and viewer should give expression to the genuine insight that is brought to bear in the work. Indeed, they go so far as to suggest that the *effort of imagination* experienced by the artist in her capacity to express her perception of the world in a visual form, is continued in the experience of the viewer,

*who, through a further imaginative leap, finds that the encounter opens other new ways of seeing. Sometimes the viewer sees what the artist saw, but often this is not the case. As viewers our seeing is shaped by our own context, and becomes significant in further shaping our own future.*

The capacity to sit with the questions that are raised by a work of art requires effort, attention or mindfulness – indeed, the challenge is to *suspend premature judgement*. The attentive response invites

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131 Please note throughout the report that where a non-specific singular artist is referred to then there is an interchanging of gender pronouns.
132 Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing* preface
133 The phrase is used by Whitehead and Whitehead in their explanation of the process of Theological Reflection. This is developed further in section 1d.
the reader to not leap to a decisive conclusion to the questions raised within or by the work. The discipline affirms that “significant insight, vision, does not arrive on a plate.” As with most spiritual disciplines, attention demands imagination and effort. There is an intrinsic link between the effort of both the artist and viewer that connects with the art of seeing and the art of spiritual journeying; they “are closely interconnected and feed each other along the way – so that the ‘seeing of art’ and the ‘art of seeing’ become potent resources for the journey of faith.” The use of the word potent is critical in this as it assumes a movement of dynamic intensity. It is the movement, or conversation, that creates opportunity for seeing to occur.

Elkins contends that each person sees differently from the other. Individually, we see differently from time to time, mood to mood. We are constantly changing, and inconsistent in our experience of seeing. And that is something to be welcomed and affirmed as part of an unfolding dynamic world view, rather than a fixed perception of the world. “I hope to be flexible, to think in as liquid a way as I can, and even to risk incoherence. And above all, I want to continue to change – I do not wish to remain the same jaded eye that I was a moment ago. Art is among the experiences I rely on to alter what I am.” The image is never a static, fixed object, but engages a dynamic of interaction. The Field of Vision is always in motion.

Imagination is always about movement - the shifting, enriching, deepening, extending of our horizon. It is the way we move in all areas of endeavour – scientific, religious, poetic, political. Plate argues that “seeing is a learning process”. Seeing involves being able to differentiate objects from each other, as well as recognizing and making connections between that which is seen. As humans we make connections within our own environment, and continue to be extended beyond it, working out what is meaningful within own context, in order to accommodate the new. In this way we begin to see with fresh eyes. The familiarity of the old environment is turned upside down, transformed into a new understanding. In this way

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134 Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, God and the Art of Seeing preface
135 Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, God and the Art of Seeing preface
136 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 41
137 S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual Culture 23
imagination leads to transformation - the reframing, or reshaping of reality.

We use what we have, who we are, where we are to grope toward what we dimly feel, think and envision we might have, who we might be, where we might be. We do this through a process in which the imagination is the chief mover, setting the familiar in an unfamiliar context so that new possibilities can be glimpsed. The future is never an abstraction totally unrelated to our particular and familiar presents and pasts.\textsuperscript{138}

This understanding of the experience of viewing art, whereby the art and the viewer are both transformed by the seeing, extends both the potential and complexity of meaningful encounter with the image. The effect, then, of seeing is to be transformed or shaped by that which is seen. At its simplest level, change is to take place in the seer, just as the thing that is seen is changed by the seer. And, if the intent of seeing is to be transformed, then how might we connect that transformation with religious experience?

\textsuperscript{138} Sallie McFague, \textit{Speaking in Parables} 57
1.iv  Art -Transformation of the Canvas

Art is among the experiences I rely on to alter what I am.\textsuperscript{139}

Many times during his life, Paul Tillich shared a most illuminating story of personal transformation experienced through a work of art. Quoted at length, his story offers clues into the dawning of awareness as it forms the basis of a transformative event. There are added parallels with an experience of art as a \textit{mystical experience}. His origins were within a family which had limited or constrained appreciation of the arts. His experience of trauma during the First World War was formative. He encountered a work of art as a moment of connection, described as a \textit{breakthrough} or \textit{insight}, which transformed his way of engaging with life thereafter. The story is captured as \textit{One Moment of Beauty}.\textsuperscript{140}

As the son of a Protestant minister in eastern Germany in the days before World War 1, I had grown up in the belief that visual beauty is unimportant... Strangely, I first found the existence of beauty in the trenches of World War 1. At 28, I became a chaplain in the German army, and served for five ugly years until the war ended. To take my mind off the mud, blood and death of the Western Front, I thumbed through the picture magazines at the field bookstores. In some of them I found reproductions of the great and moving paintings of the ages. At rest camps, and in the lulls in the better battles, especially at Verdun, I huddled in dugouts studying this new world by candle and lantern light.

\textsuperscript{139} James Elkins, \textit{The Object Stares Back} 41
\textsuperscript{140} John Dillenburger, \textit{Paul Tillich on Art and Architecture} (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 234
But at the end of the war I still had never seen the original paintings in all their glory. Going to Berlin, I hurried to the Kaiser Friederich Museum. There on the wall was a picture that had comforted me in battle: Madonna with singing Angels, painted by Sandro Botticelli in the fifteenth century.

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church.

As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.

That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion. I know that no artistic experience can match the moments in which prophets were grasped in the power of the Divine Presence, but I believe there is an analogy between revelation and what I felt. In both cases, the experience goes beyond the way we encounter reality in our daily lives. It opens up depths experienced in no other way.

What is evident in this story is the power of art both to express the presence of God and to transform human experience. Tillich’s exploration of the human condition is as one of living in a state of anxiety, based in an awareness of existence and non-existence. This crisis of existence he describes as existential anxiety, which opens us to our Ultimate Concern – an apprehension of the ‘ground’ of our being. His encounter with art stimulated a resonance between his experience of war, suffering, beauty and love, with the emerging meaning. Tillich claims that the reality of the dark experience, for him on the battle field, is necessary if art is to express the authentic quest of humanity for questions of meaning. In the painting, Tillich encountered some level of transformation that opened up an awareness that life could be beautiful, and the divine could be experienced through life in all its shadows. This encounter with an artistic image drew him to argue that art has the power to illicit an intuitive response that can otherwise be confused by words.
of more complex and abstract meaning. Ultimately this intuitive response leads to change.

This intuitive response concerns the deepening of the experience of existence in the embracing of so-called positive and negative life experiences. Garcia-Rivera argues that the notion of creative intuition is an awakening to the suffering in the world, and this is expressed in art. That is, human experience is complex; shadow sits alongside light. Engagement with the complexity of human experience allows creative intuition to unfold within the art, thus creating the possibility of a spiritual awakening. In such a circumstance, the expectations and assumptions of what life should look like are broken down and the depth of human experience is reached. He claims that

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\text{creativity reaches a dark but very creative place after all human substance is consumed; the depth of the human cave, the partition of the heart. It demands courage. One must find the courage to let go of the self and enter a mysterious but fertile place where something new and wondrous can happen.}^{141}
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It is in these darkest and deepest places that transformation discovers fertile soil.

In Tillich's story, transformation occurs for the viewer when connection is made between the art and the lived experience of the viewer. The connecting point is critical, for it validates the shared experience of humanity. Tillich explains how art does three things in seeking to reconnect the separation of humanity. Art

- Expresses: it expresses reality in a way that is not purely subjective, but puts the experience of the artist at a distance, allowing objective observation
- Transforms: it takes reality and transforms it into some symbolic representation
- Anticipates: it takes the human experience of separation and points toward a state of connection, a form

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\[141\] Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence* 114
which is perfect.\textsuperscript{142}

In this way art moves both artist and viewer on a journey toward reconnection with one another and with God. In expressing his reality, the artist creates the opportunity for connection with a viewer. In its very expression, art transforms the experience of reality into some symbolic representation. This re-presentation has the effect of reaching toward, or anticipating, connection with the other. Lonergan explains it as the authentic artist attending to life as

\begin{quote}
    rhythmic, one movement necessitating another and the other in turn necessitating the first. Tensions are built up to be resolved… the meaning of an experiential pattern is elemental. It is the conscious performing of a transformed subject in his transformed world.\textsuperscript{143}
\end{quote}

The transformed subject in responding authentically to his experience as artist expresses meaning in the art which has the potential to transform.

Richard Kidd recognized the transformative power of art as he invited the community of faith to reflect upon its own hopes and fears as it engaged with art. He invited people to consider the human condition within the art. He took a series of works, Munch’s \textit{Frieze}, and asked questions of three different groups: a group of ministers, a group of people in a church, and a group of students. Showing the pictures, he encouraged people to ask three questions of themselves.\textsuperscript{144}

- What are the stories suggested to you by this picture, the stories that might be behind the artist’s vision?
- Are there any points of resonance or connection with your own experience?
- What resources of scripture would you choose to connect with these stories and the people you meet in the pictures?

\textsuperscript{142} John Dillenburger, \textit{Paul Tillich on Art and Architecture} 18ff
\textsuperscript{143} Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology} 63
\textsuperscript{144} Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, \textit{God and the Art of Seeing} 37
He reflected that “on each occasion I have been amazed at the insights that are uncovered…Pictures like these have potential for genuinely theological reflection on matters of deep human and spiritual concern.” The basis of the unfolding conversation was about stories and discovering the resonances between stories, so that the experience of both artist and viewer is more readily honoured.

Inherent within Kidd & Sparkes’ exploration of art is the idea that the work of art is not a closed or completed object. Rather, art is an open canvas inviting the viewer on a journey. Movement is inherent in the work of both creating and engaging with art. Graham Sparkes argues that our spiritual journey is one in which we are constantly being challenged to change.

In a dynamic way, art engages both artist and viewer in exploration and reflection upon the human condition that has the potential to transform and connect humans, and draw them on a journey toward God. This journey transcends borders of theology or doctrine; instead, it moves toward engagement and connection with a larger reality. This connection between faith and the image is a frame in which such transformation can occur. Richard Viladesau claims, “The combination of the Christian message with the aesthetic power of beauty constitutes a new way of communicating – through the evocation of ideas and feelings that reach beyond the merely conceptual level and touch the core of the person.” The viewer is drawn into the presence of what is presented and invited to make a personal response to it in its connection with the human condition. In so doing, the viewer is brought out of separateness, or some illusory objective reality, into an awareness that we engage in the world. As Rohan Williams describes it,

> The ‘presence’ in art is not some looming romantic/creative genius in the background, but a presence within what is made that generates difference, self-questioning, in the perceiving subject. It makes us present to ourselves in a

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145  Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, God and the Art of Seeing 38
146  Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, God and the Art of Seeing 175
147  Richard Viladesau, Theology of the Arts  151
fresh way, and so engages us in dialogue with ourselves as well as the object and with the artist and with what the artist is responding to.\footnote{Rohan Williams, \textit{Grace and Necessity} 150}

This interplay of subjective-objective experience both defines the other and self, and creates a communion between the two on the canvas itself. “To act with intention with the other, and on or against the other, is to be aware of the other as other. To be aware of the other is to be aware of the self. The metaphoric image is the beginning of the consciousness of the self.”\footnote{John Dixon, \textit{Images of Truth} 15}

In the terms we have been using, a work of art is not simply an object, a completed 	extit{piece} that is external to the artist, but an expression that has been reflected upon internally which has then unfolded in visual form. The process involved in the art’s creation as an expression of reflected experience is critical to the final outcome. It is within the very unfolding of the process that opportunity for transformation occurs. Indeed, the intention of a work of art is not to replicate the experience of the artist, for that is impossible, but rather to suggest or invite people beyond their limited horizon. Art in this sense is not so much concerned with offering information about the world, but transforming the experience of the world; not so much about illustrating a landscape, if you like, but expressing the essence of a landscape that may transform the experience of it, for both the artist and the viewer. In Lonergan’s terms “it is truer than the experience, leaner, more effective, more to the point”, allowing the experience to be expressed in the work of art.\footnote{Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Collected works of Bernard Lonergan}} The core of the experience is grasped and given shape, expressed symbolically. It is an expression of life distilled. In so doing, Lonergan contends, ultimately art creates “a break from the ready-made world (that) heads on to God.”\footnote{Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology} 224}

Affirming art within the discipline of Visual Culture offers an important clue here, for this discipline is most concerned with the connection between \textit{how we see} and \textit{how we live}. That is, the journey of transformation is connected with the ongoing receipt of

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\item \footnotemark[148] Rohan Williams, \textit{Grace and Necessity} 150
\item \footnotemark[149] John Dixon, \textit{Images of Truth} 15
\item \footnotemark[150] Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Collected works of Bernard Lonergan}
\item \footnotemark[151] Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology} 224
\end{enumerate}
the art into the community. “Visual culture is not simply interested in the formal dimension of an image, nor merely in the historical background and setting for the original production of the image, but rather the ongoing environment and life of images.” In these ways, images play a critical part in the ongoing process in the “construction of the way we look, and are looked at.” That is, society is both shaped by and shaping of images, creating an ongoing mirroring of itself to itself.

In terms of the discipline of Theological Reflection there is a frame whereby this transformational process can be understood, in the dynamic of the conversation that takes place. Theological Reflection is the intentional reflection upon the experience of life and ministry, so that it may be understood within its multiplicity of meanings. The intent is to reflect upon both the implicit and explicit values and beliefs expressed within an experience, so that they may be understood within the context of the Christian tradition. According to Patricia Killen and John deBeer “reflection is the act of deliberately slowing down our habitual processes of interpreting our lives to take a closer look at the experience and at our frameworks for interpretation.” Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE) explores that process of action and reflection in a formal way within the theological institution. However, the capacity to engage in a dynamic of action and reflection is not limited to the bounds of formal Christian ministry, but occurs within the actions and everyday life experience of people. In the process of action and reflection the intent is to reflect upon experience to a point of deepening understanding and transforming the experience of ministry practice. Within the context of the Theological institution, the intent is to understand experience in all its complexity of meanings, bringing to bear the cultural, personal, Biblical, theological and traditional understandings.

The starting point for Theological Reflection is lived experience which enters a process of examination. Precisely how that dynamic takes place has been the work of a number of theologians who, in particular, draw on the work of James and Evelyn Whitehead. They

152 S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual culture 9
153 S Brent Plate, ed. Religion, Art and Visual culture 9
154 Patricia Killen and John deBeer, The Art of Theological Reflection (New York: Crossroad, 1999) x
posit a model and a method of reflection which rests upon an awareness of the interaction between various conversation partners. They propose a model whereby the immediate and concrete experience of ministry is placed within the broader context of theology, whereby the three conversation partners are Culture, Tradition and Experience. The conviction is that all experience is located in time and place, and yet may be extended and understood within the broader theological, and even sociological framework. Tradition refers to the religious heritage of the Scriptures and the Spirit of God, working within the life of the church historically, and dynamically carrying the church forward. Culture refers to the convictions, values and world views expressed within the social setting in which the experience takes place. The third conversation partner is the Experience of the individual. This experience is brought into the mix of the conversation, with the awareness that it does not come from an isolated place, but rather is informed by prior experience, and the experience of the larger group involved in the experience itself.

The metaphor of conversation offers a significant contribution to describing the interaction between artist, art and viewer. Conversation presupposes a communal exercise, rather than a static monologue, where each of the conversation partners contributes so that experience is brought to deepened meaning within the conversation. Conversation meanders. It does not presuppose an end goal, with some arbitrary purpose or intended resolution or agreement. Indeed, “the conversation is our life together. Such a community dialogue is a habit, both pleasurable and painful, in which our faith is tested and matures.” Conversation implies that each of the conversation partners is valuable, and each has the potential to be enriched by the conversation. Conversation implies an openness to the other and to possible insight.

Conversation between art, artist and viewer presupposes this same dynamic of respect and mutual valuing. Indeed, the unfolding of conversation follows a method, a process of unfolding. This method

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156 James Whitehead & Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*
moves the participants from listening, to asserting, to responding. The initial engagement in the conversation is that of listening, that is, attending to the other. This necessitates suspending premature judgement.\textsuperscript{157} This refers to the capacity to attend to the data at hand, to become aware of personal motives, emotional reactions, biases, convictions, values. It presupposes a level of personal awareness. The participant enters the conversation in an open way, and “opening ourselves to new information leaves us vulnerable to challenge and even change.”\textsuperscript{158} In a parallel visual conversation, the artist sits with the question before her, before responding with brush. Once painted, the art pauses, waiting to offer its images as a reflection back to the artist, and as an invitation to the viewer. Indeed, the viewer pauses before the art, allowing questions to arise as to who they are in relation to this art, and what the art is in relation to them.

As the conversation unfolds, the possibility of deepening meaning begins to emerge. The conversation moves to assertion. The Whiteheads suggest an image to describe the dynamic:

\begin{quote}
A crucible: the diverse information is poured into a single container, where insights and convictions are allowed to interact with one another. A crucible suggests the transformation that often occurs at this stage – if we handle the volatile components with care.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

In the conversation between art, artist and viewers, there occurs a meeting place, a point at which an insight may occur. The insight may be named or suggested, but the possibility of a shared truth can emerge from the conversation.

From this place of insight, an action is implied. One does not receive insight and remain static. There is a response. Whilst the Whitehead method anticipates a pastoral response out of the conversation, the conversations around a work of art stimulate a response that potentially affects all three conversation partners. The art itself will be enlarged, re-shaped, re-interpreted. The viewer is

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\textsuperscript{157} James Whitehead & Evelyn Whitehead, \textit{Method in Ministry} 13
\textsuperscript{158} James Whitehead & Evelyn Whitehead, \textit{Method in Ministry} 14
\textsuperscript{159} James Whitehead & Evelyn Whitehead, \textit{Method in Ministry} 15
\end{flushright}
enriched by the experience of the work, and the artist is enlarged by
the receipt of the work and insight of another. The conversation has
extended the experience of the work. And that reflection of the art
by both viewer and artist creates the possibility of deepening
engagement with God. The dynamic of the conversation which
attends, asserts and responds enriches the experience of God.

Engagement with art as a mediator of theological meaning
acknowledges the artist, viewer and art as the partners in the
exploration of that meaning. Indeed, this matrix of conversation
acknowledges that both the artist and viewer have their own
experience, their own cultural and religious traditional story. They
are products of their own reflected experience, and bring that to the
correspondence. Interestingly, the art itself assumes the cultural
context of the place in which it is viewed. A painting of a tree shifts
within the context of a Botanical Exhibition, a personal collection, a
Rotary Art Show or a church hall. The context directs the viewer
toward something significant within that context. Presenting art to
theological students places the work in a religious context, where
the presupposition is that they are meant to draw religious
meaning. Elkins argues that the almost shrine-like positioning of the Mona
Lisa, where people queue to look at the image as though at an altar,
makes the work somehow sacred. He risks heresy to the art-lover
by suggesting “the Mona Lisa would turn into a diva if she were
hung in the Paris opera, and if she were hung in the Paris Metro she
would look like a homeless person.”

In effect, art unconsciously expresses the ultimate concern of its
society. The artist betrays his own ultimate concern and that of his
cultural period. The world behind the work is present. It is important
to acknowledge that historically we may or may not have any
accurate way of understanding the intent of any artists’ expression;
it may be political, devotional or otherwise. But we do need to
“identify the ‘media’ of the cultures with which we work, the modes
and the content of public communication and exchange of verbal
and visual ideas.” In placing the art within the world, albeit in
limited ways, we understand the concerns of that culture as they are
expressed, and we have the possibility of responding.

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160 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 35
161 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* 28
This understanding of Theological Reflection relies upon the authentic subject responding to their experience of reality authentically. That is, the artist as subject being aware of herself, expresses herself authentically in the objectification of that experience in her art. The subject is extended, so that the boundaries between object and subject become fused within the art itself. To separate an artist from her art seems a nonsense, just as to separate the experience of a viewer from the art is flawed. Perhaps, at its simplest level, that rich connection between artist and viewer is anecdotally the biggest factor in viewers attaching to, and then purchasing, art.

Rohan Williams argues it this way:

*To be aware of self is to be aware of something that bears the marks of otherness, not of a pristine, independent subjectivity… the innocent receptacle of the disinterested mind and the un-interpreted data of external reality. The mind is itself already an agency with a shape, a tendency to respond thus and not otherwise; it makes patterns of what it confronts according to the patterning it has received in its primordial contact with God’s agency. The artist’s knowledge is a kind of self-knowledge.*

What is seen and experienced by the artist discovers its pattern in the creative outworking of her art. According to Williams, art always extends toward a further horizon, reaches toward an expression of a fuller more profound experience of life. Hence, at the heart of the art, there is a dimension that the artist is always concerned with things as they are in relation to something more and other than the artist. The artist perceives the material of the world as offering more than can appear in one moment of encounter and so begins to

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162 Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental precepts, be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, both ground the authentic subject in their experience as an act of transcendence and are developed in *Method in Theology*

163 Rohan Williams, *Grace and Necessity* 25
produce a further thing in the world that will allow that unseen or unheard life to continue itself in another mode.\textsuperscript{164}

Hence, within the art there is that which is ontologically an expression of the artist, and an extension beyond the artist to existence itself. There is a presence that calls out of the viewer a response, that is not simply a result of the creative skill of the artist behind the canvas, but a presence that exists in the dynamic between the two.

The ‘presence’ in art is not some looming romantic/creative genius in the background, but a presence within what is made that generates difference, self-questioning, in the perceiving subject. It makes us present to ourselves in a fresh way, and so engages us in dialogue with ourselves as well as the object and with the artist and with what the artist is responding to.\textsuperscript{165}

The conversation between the artist, art and viewer evolves. As any one of the conversation partners continues to shift in experience, insight or understanding, so the conversation with the art moves or shifts. I have observed in artists themselves that as their experience deepens, it bids them return to the art to change, add, modify - to heighten that hint of light or flatten that shadow, and so accentuate or even shift the focus of the work for themselves.

Like every meaningful conversation, there is a starting point. In the process of Theological Reflection, that conversation always begins with a question emerging from experience. For the artist it exists before the brush touches the canvas, the hands form the clay or the chisel touches the timber. It may be as simple as \textit{What might this look like?} For the viewer coming to a work of art, the subtle question emerges: \textit{How can I make sense of this? What does it tell me?} Crudely, that question is sometimes shaped as \textit{Do I like it?} before the viewer either hurries away or lingers a while to ponder. The invitation to pause and enter the conversation allows the reflective process to continue, whereby it has the potential to deepen and enrich understanding.

\textsuperscript{164} Rohan Williams, \textit{Grace and Necessity} 150
\textsuperscript{165} Rohan Williams, \textit{Grace and Necessity} 150
Art, then, is concerned with movement. This creative process is not static, and it involves a spiritual openness to God working in the activity of reflection. Lois Robbins outlines this movement as a creative process in six stages: preparation, frustration, incubation, illumination, elaboration, communication. In the first stage, preparation, a problem is raised, a question emerges wherein the artist needs to gather the data of her experience. The second stage is one of ambiguity and frustration, where there is the temptation to abandon or prematurely solve the problem and an uncertainty as to where the question is leading. The third stage is one of incubation at which point the artist “lives in the mystery of the question, trusting that at an appropriate moment, insight will break forth.” At this point the artist is raising awareness of her own experience and reflecting upon it in relation to the question. At some point, uncertainty gives way to insight. From this moment of insight, the artist enters the elaboration stage, where the outworking of the inspiration takes shape on the canvas. This requires the discipline of bringing the image into being and it almost certainly involves disciplined effort in its outworking.

The final stage, communication, is not often validated within the creative process because of the risk of preoccupation with communication of results. That is, considering how the viewer might receive the work has the potential to inhibit or manipulate the creative impulse. Focussing on the artistic endeavour in terms of object or product affects the capacity of the artist to authentically engage with her own experience and hence, the creative process. Whilst being conscious of what she is doing, she is not overly pre-occupied with the outcome. This caution, however, does not diminish the value of communication as a valid stage within the creative process. Robbins argues that communication is what the creative process is all about.

A love poem that is never read by the beloved is incomplete; a painting seen only by the artist or a song heard only by the performer is an unfinished art work. A life dedicated to

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166 Lois Robbins, *Waking up the Age of Creativity* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1985) 20
167 Lois Robbins, *Waking up the Age of Creativity* 21
prayer that never touches or liberates another is a selfish life. Communication completes the creative process.\textsuperscript{168}

In this explanation, Robbins affirms the connection with the other in the form of the viewer, and an awareness of the artist that she is not alone – but rather intrinsically connected with an experience that is beyond her own. The connection between the artist and viewer in this final communication stage is critical in order to understand how art has the capacity to transform. Robbins claims that “in it we are transformed out of our former beliefs about our nature and the world, into a larger understanding and experience of God’s love and the nature of reality.”\textsuperscript{169}

In this connection between the artist and viewer the world is enlarged to embrace and accept an experience of God in connection with one another. There is both a reaching out to connect with the world as it is experienced personally, and an awareness that in such an experience there is a connection with the whole. “To be complete, a work of art must – sooner or later – reach out again into the real world from which it has sprung, and touch the feelings of at least someone somewhere.”\textsuperscript{170} This touching of another is seated in discovering the connections between the stories that awaken an awareness of the whole.

From this point of communication, there emerges the potential for a responsive creativity. That is, an ongoing movement of creativity invites a creative response within the viewer. This creative dynamic, beginning with the original creator as the source of creativity, moves the viewer in a creative response to the world. Vanstone argues that a work of art has the capacity to elicit a creative response, which is based in the recognition of the creative activity of God. He argues

\begin{quote}
A work of art creates the possibility of what we may call a responsive creativity... Responsive creativity may, at its best, bear all the marks of original creativity; it may respond...as Keats responded to Chapman’s version of Homer, as
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{168} Lois Robbins, \textit{Waking up the Age of Creativity} 22
\textsuperscript{169} Lois Robbins, \textit{Waking up the Age of Creativity} 28
\textsuperscript{170} This assertion reflects the work of Stephenson & Phelps in Anthony Monti \textit{op.cit} 78
Wordsworth to the architecture of King’s College chapel in Cambridge... It celebrates original creativity: and this celebration is itself a work of art... responsive creativity is the coming-to-be of one's own recognition of the blessing conferred by original creativity.\textsuperscript{171}

Thus, the movement of art is both an inward and outward movement. The movement inward is toward reflection of the authentic subject as artist, and outward toward the expression of that experience to connect beyond oneself.

The transformational power of art is evident to Suzie Gablic, who claims “vision that is truly engaged with the world is not purely cognitive, or purely aesthetic, but is opened up to the body as a whole and must issue forth social practices that take to heart what is seen.”\textsuperscript{172} Connections are to be made that have the power to transform. Let us leave the final word with Padovano who asks the question

\textit{How do we change the vision of people? It is love that art and religion have most in common. The artist convinces us of the truth of dealing with us holistically. Artists try to make us feel the truth. Good art gets the truth inside us on a level deeper than the surface of our minds. On this level, truth is most irresistible. The mind may not only resist the truth but may even accept it and keep it at a personal distance. Logical convictions are not necessarily existential imperatives. The artist makes us nostalgic for the beauty we have missed, the life we have forfeited, the meaning which somehow eluded our grasp. Art haunts us with the spectre of a lost humanity and bids us return to paradise.}\textsuperscript{173}

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\textsuperscript{171} This creative dialogue is voiced by Vanstone to support Monti’s argument. \textit{Ibid.} 137
\textsuperscript{172} Suzie Gablik cited in S Brent Plate, \textit{Religion, Art and Visual Culture} 9
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The Frame

2.i Methodology

2.ii The Research Process
2.1 Methodology

This research project draws on Qualitative Research Methodologies in order to explore the richness, depth and complexity of the phenomena being explored. Using a process of observation, reflection and a number of styles of conversation, the researcher is seeking to gain insights and improve our comprehension of the whole dynamic taking place in the conversation between art, artist and viewer.

The project design attempts to match the experiential nature of the questions being asked of participants, whilst allowing flexibility to modify and develop the process. Since the questions being asked are essentially, What is the experience of the artist/viewer? and What takes place in the dynamic of the conversation? a phenomenological approach most clearly fits.

The research question emerged as I observed encounters between artists, viewers and works of art in the Gallery run by my community. I was able to observe questions and insights arising for both artists and viewers, and I began to wonder about the experience of the artist and viewer, and the nature of the insights that were occurring. I was curious as to the engagement that occurred when the two came into conversation, and what impact the story of both viewer and artist had on their experience of the art. A genuine curiosity about how art as a carrier of meaning may enrich the experience of the church community, the theological community as well as the wider community, led me to ask questions as to the theological nature of this phenomena. Considering the interface between Art and Theological Reflection as a means to reflect upon experience became a significant factor in the development of the research area.

I found the principles of Strauss and Corbin helpful, that “one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge.”174 There was no hypothesis or projected outcome, but rather a desire to name and describe the experience. The method

174 Anselm Strauss & Juliet Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research (California: Sage, 1990) 27
allowed space to identify and then examine the emerging themes. There was no sense of testing viewer's experience alongside the expectation of the artist's intent.

Qualitative research methodology rests on the assumption that the whole needs to be examined in order to understand the phenomena. This is contrasted with a positivist, or quantitative research methodology, where data is collected and analyzed as measurable parts of a phenomenon, with the risk of missing the significance of understanding the whole. In qualitative research the data is not subject to true-false analysis, nor is it measurable in a quantitative framework. The process names experience and explores trends that describe such experience. The research explores the nature of the experience itself.

The methodology asserts that the experience of the participants in the project is multiple and unique to time and place. The limit of this form of research is that the intent is not to prove a contention, but rather to gather thick data and suggest themes around the experience of viewing art, particularly in terms of the questions that emerge. The enquiry is set within a framework that gives enough opportunity for viewers to express their experience of the art and to build upon that in exploring the emerging questions with other viewers and with the artists themselves.

The art itself is both an object within the research and a stimulus for the subjective experience of both viewer and artist. The question emerged as to whether the personal experience of the artist and viewer draws them toward theological reflection. Describing the experience of viewers and artists becomes a way of considering this question, rather than using technical or religious terms. What are the resonances and dissonances for artist and viewer? What are the distinctives? Is the artist or viewer able to discover something meaningful within the art? Is there some connection with faith experience and faith tradition in the responses to the art? And finally, does the experience of and reflection on the art enlarge their understanding of God?

In summary, the research methodology allowed both individual and collaborative reflection upon artworks, describing the discrete experience as well as the communal engagement with art. These
responses were then analyzed for themes and meta-themes describing the overall experience of engaging with a work of art.

With this in mind, there are two distinct phases of the research project. Initially, the research employs Phenomenological methodology. An auxiliary process, using Grounded Theory, is implemented as a second stage, in order to draw the emergent themes into a facilitated conversation with each artist. I will briefly outline the theory behind each of these phases, as a basis for explaining the process actually undertaken.

**Phenomenological Enquiry**

Phenomenological Enquiry explores the experience of individuals and groups. This form of research seeks understanding through description of lived experience using any of a variety of methods including written responses, interviews, discussion and participant observation. “Everything I want to study is studied through the analysis of how it was experienced.” That is, the attention of the participants is directed toward their experience itself. According to Van Manen, lived experience is the “breathing of meaning. In the flow of life, consciousness breathes meaning in a ‘to and fro’ movement.” The objective is to gain rich descriptions of the experience under review, being as faithful as possible to the meanings attributed to the experience by the participants themselves. The role of the principal researcher is to assist the participants to explore their experience, without imposing her own biases and interpretations on the data. The researcher then seeks to identify core themes within the material gathered. This requires a sufficient degree of self-awareness on the part of the researcher to be able to bracket out personal biases and preconceptions with which she comes to the research.

In this case, the subject’s written description of their experience of a work of art and the transcript of the conversation of the group, is

175 An interview with Armedio Giorgi, in *Impuls. Tidsskrift for Psykologi* No 2 Oslo, 1998
followed by a process of reduction, the drawing together of emerging themes. At the core of phenomenology is the conviction of intentionality, in that attention, whether conscious or not, is directed to objects that are not consciousness itself. That is, “experience is always open to something that is not the experience itself.” Identifying or describing that experience is part of the process of reduction. In this process an essence can be communicated from the experience itself. Amedeo Giorgi suggests that from such a methodology, there is “a reduction, that it was a descriptive approach, and that some essential findings came out.”

The phenomenological process is particular in its response, in that it is vulnerable to replication. That is, the replication of the protocol may not result in replicated responses. However, in as much as the methodology embraces reduction and seeks essences, it seeks to make knowledge as certain as possible.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory allows the research process to unfold in its own shape, without manipulating the data that emerges from the interviews and responses. The researcher allows the emerging data to shape the next stage of the process. According to Barney Glasser, two key questions underpin grounded theory:

*What is the chief concern or problem in the substantive area, and what accounts for most of the variation in processing the problem? What category, or what property of what category, does this incident indicate?*

This approach assumes that the process will emerge from the data. That is, the process itself is inductively derived from the phenomenon. The experience of the participants reveals themes, rather than follow concepts imposed by the researcher. This form of research is designed to facilitate the identification of thematic responses, as well as the building of a framework in order to test and interpret such responses. The researcher moves close to the

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177 Amedeo Giorgi, in *Impuls. Tidsskrift for Psykologi*
178 Amedeo Giorgi, in *Impuls. Tidsskrift for Psykologi*
participants in order to understand their interactions, and their construction of experience.

Analysis begins at the first point of observation, which then guides the ongoing process. The collection of *Thick Data*\(^{180}\), that is, rich in description of the experience, is gathered then into a process of reflection and analysis.

**The Process**

Specifically, the research project followed the following process, which was repeated four times, involving four different artists each submitting one work of art.

**Step 1: Phenomenological Enquiry**

On Week 1, Individuals recorded written responses to each art work based on an open questionnaire exploring their responses to the art (Appendix iii). The questionnaire lead people to reflect upon their experience and was based upon the questions Richard Kidd used with communities which invited reflection upon resonances and connections in the art with their experience and the religious tradition.\(^{181}\) Participants were invited to describe their experience at different stages of viewing the work.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses that encouraged a combination of clarifying, reflection and development of the expression of participants’ responses. These questions drew on Lincoln and Guba’s techniques, as well as on a range of theological practitioners.\(^{182}\) They included:

- avoid standard ways of thinking about phenomena.\(^{183}\)
- stimulate the inductive process.

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\(^{181}\) Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing* 38

\(^{182}\) Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*

• focus on what is before participants, so the immediacy of the data is affirmed.\textsuperscript{184}
• allow for clarification or challenge of assumptions during the process.
• invite a response from a modality other than analytical thought.

Groups of three participants then discussed responses to the work, specifically exploring resonances and dissonances. They were invited to name a common theme, that is, to create an essence statement. As Giorgi argues, “Essence is simply a way of communicating what is true about a phenomena in a short-hand way. It is not meant to be the only result of a phenomenological analysis, it is simply one step towards organizing many diverse experiences.”\textsuperscript{185} These conversations were transcribed.

**Step 2 : Grounded Theory Component**

During the week between these two meetings, the researcher dwelt in the data of the questionnaires and transcripts. There are four key concepts of Grounded Theory that concern the collection and evaluation of data: “Fit...understanding...generality...control.”\textsuperscript{186} These concepts shaped the process of sitting with the data between the two meetings.

*Fit* refers to the connection between the experience of the participant as it relates to the subject area, in this case the experience of the art. This allows the study to have credibility as there is a direct relationship to the subjects’ experience. In this study the subjects name their experience of the art from within their own story, *(What stories, events or thoughts from your own experience does the work stimulate, if any?)* as well as within the grouped context of their theological experience, as it is grouped as minister, student minister, lay people, non-churched people, other artists. *(What stories, values or concepts from your belief system or religious tradition does the art remind you of, if any?)* The fit affirms

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\textsuperscript{184} James Whitehead & Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*
\textsuperscript{185} Arnedio Giorgi, *Impuls. Tidsskrift for Psykologi*
\textsuperscript{186} Anselm Strauss & Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* 23
the connection between the experience of the art and the context of the viewer. The starting point is to describe the experience, and then begin to reflect upon familiar and recognizable themes or images from experience which add meaning to the experience.

Understanding connected the emerging theme or essence statement with the participants. This occurred as each group of three met with the artist for a period of 30 minutes to explore the questions that had emerged from the data. The conversation was recorded and later transcribed.

Generality sought to draw general connecting lines between the data that had emerged. This began in a preliminary way after Step 1, and was tested for control in the form of the question asked at the beginning of Step 2.

At the heart of this Grounded Theory Component between Step 1 and 2 was the preliminary gathering of themes from the data. Specifically, this process followed the following steps:

- Read the individual responses to gain a broad appreciation of experiences of each of the participants on the presented work.
- Note the places where insights into the phenomena of meaning and reflection emerged in the data. What understandings or meaning statements are expressed?
- Read the group transcripts noting the dissonant and resonant themes.
- Synthesize all of the meaning statements discerning links within each grouping of viewers.
- Consider the broad themes that exist between the viewers’ responses.

That is, having considered the individual responses, and more particularly, the emerging themes, essence statements and questions from the transcriptions of conversations, the researcher framed a question as a stimulus for the conversation between artists and participants.

For example, a question was formed for the group of ministers from their individual responses to the questionnaire and the transcribed conversation. This was read and checked for fit: There is an
awareness of the ‘eye’ of light and a wondering about the source of that… You ask what is the cascading curtain on the right side of the canvas about? Is it something invading or tearing the scene? After reading the question, the group was then asked to reflect upon whether that was a fit with their conversation about the experience. This checking with the participants took seriously the control element of data collection.

This process of data analysis was done more extensively after the fourth round of interviews, drawing on all the data from both steps in the entire four-round process.

**Dealing with the Data**

The outcome of this four round process entailing two steps in each round, was the accumulation of an enormous amount of data in the form of responses to questionnaires, transcribed conversations and digitally recorded transcripts. I rested on the work of Giorgi, who developed a method for working with and drawing interpretation from phenomenological research process.  

This process involved:

1. **Read the entire response in order to get a general sense of the whole statement of experience.** This step involved transcribing the recorded conversations between artists and viewers, which provided the opportunity to become very familiar with the material, and gain a broad appreciation of its content and meaning. In this research project, Reading the transcripts, questionnaires and transcribed conversations in their entirety offered a sense of the whole process.

2. **Read the material again to discern meaning units or themes.** On second reading, key words were discerned as repeating themselves throughout all the rounds of interviews and across the groups. Themes or concepts began to

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emerge as possibilities. These were listed as possible meaning units.

3. **Analyse the meaning units.** At this point, as researcher I was looking for insights into the nuances of the phenomena under scrutiny. Given that the focus was on theological reflection and the experience of meaning, I was looking for insights into questions of meaning and reflection that may have emerged in the phenomena. What understandings or meaningful insights were expressed either in the form of questions or statements?

4. **Synthesize all of the meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subjects’ experience.** As principal researcher, I identified the meaning units. Tesch sees this as exploration of emerging themes. She argues that qualitative research embodies a process whereby the data is in-dwelt repeatedly, in a cyclic type motion, where the emerging themes are suggested and then tested, to be affirmed. The original process discerned more than 25 significant meaning units, at which point the process was repeated until clarity allowed a synthesizing of the meaning units to several significant statements.

At the end of the entire research process, an exhibition was held of all the artists’ work, and a formal presentation was made by the researcher to all people present. At that event all the themes and meaning units were outlined clearly. The many people present were invited to offer input.

**Researcher as participant**

Qualitative enquiry challenges the nature of the subjective-objective experience. There is a dynamic interplay between the objective and subjective when engaging in interpretative research. Indeed,

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the word ‘objective’ becomes quite quietly obsolete; and the
word ‘subjective’, which normally confines you within your
skin, disappears as well... the world is no longer out there in
quite the way it used to be... there is a combining or
marriage between an objectivity that is passive to the
outside world and a creative subjectivity, neither pure
solipsism nor its opposite.\textsuperscript{189}

The choice of research topic, the methodology and the recording of
results, along with the interpretation of those results, are all shaped
by the experience of the researcher. That is not to say that the
researcher’s critical faculties are to be suspended, but that they are
framed within a primary subjective reality. Naïve subjectivity, that is,
the raw expression of the experience, is likely to distort the whole,
and needs to be reflected upon with some principles of rigour.

This research project rested upon a co-operative relationship with
the participants. Reason and Heron argue that in co-operative
inquiry a dialogue takes place where both the researcher and
subject are involved. This presupposes that “persons can only
properly study persons when they are in active relationship with
each other, where the behavior being researched is self-generated
by the researchers in a context of co-operation.”\textsuperscript{190} The process of
exploring the conversation between art-artist-viewer becomes
dialogical in itself. Whilst the structure is present, the content and
shape of the conversation is given freedom to unfold.

The participant researcher will have \textit{hunches} about the emerging
themes. Although there is a need for the researcher to be careful
not to presuppose themes, it is possible for intuition to be a
legitimate stimulus for reflection.

\textit{The use of intuition might be important in recognizing
significant factors in situations and making connections
between seemingly logically unrelated experiences. This
reaffirms the artistry of professional practice involved in the

\textsuperscript{189} Jonathon Smith, Rom Harre & Luk Van Langenhove (eds) \textit{Rethinking
Methods in Psychology} (London: Sage, 1995) 125
\textsuperscript{190} Peter Reason and John Heron in Jonathon Smith, Rom Harre & Luk
Van Langenhove, \textit{Rethinking Methods in Psychology} 235
The researcher’s ability to reflectively approach the research will not only direct understandings of the data, but may reveal particular practices and theoretical assumptions implicit in the work. Awareness then becomes the tool in understanding a deeper picture of the implications of the study. For example, it became apparent that two viewers had a more complex response to one of the artist’s work which led to threads within the conversation between artist and viewer that were difficult to follow. As a researcher, my intuitive response was to reflect upon the robust engagement carefully, and to attend to my feelings of discomfort. I was able to offer a follow-up conversation with the artist primarily, and one of the viewers later. In the following week, my intuitive response was affirmed as both viewers disclosed their previous experience of that particular artist and work. The following of this intuitive response as researcher revealed the notion of risk in the experience of both exhibiting and viewing art. This was acknowledged in the findings.

The key factor seems to be the level of engagement by the researcher and the balance of participation in the conversation that ensues with the participants. The detachment that is needed to assess results can only be artificial or limited, as the researcher is involved within the conversation itself. The researcher has been present in the conversation between artist and viewer, and has even been involved in the process of choosing the art that is to be presented. As Lincoln and Guba comment, the researcher comes with “an extensive background of training and exposure”, from which she is expected to function appropriately as an instrument within the research process.192

However, strategies for effective evaluation of the data, including a built-in professional accountability network through supervisory processes, enable an acknowledgement of the overlapping


192 Yvonna Lincoln & Egon Guba, Naturalistic Inquiry 195
participant-researcher dynamic. Following a disciplined technique for evaluation and writing contribute to a conclusion that has integrity within the research process. As Grbich notes, “the risk of reliability is addressed by systematic self-introspection and interactive introspection, so as to produce a layered account that reflects multiple themes.” These processes of reflection, through both fortnightly professional supervision and monthly research supervision, were critical to remaining open to the data presented, and consequently reflecting upon the process with integrity.

Let us turn now to meet the participants and to describe how the actual process unfolded.

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193 Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Research in Health* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999) 130
2.ii The Research Process

The Research Project unfolded between April and November 2007. It began with invitations to individuals to participate and concluded with a joint exhibition and presentation of preliminary findings. The research was conducted in a quiet room in a hall at the rear of Box Hill Baptist Church. The following is a description of the process during those 7 months.

Selection of the Art:

The selection of the art rested on elements that had been discerned as significant from the literature survey. Bernard Lonergan’s notion that art draws us to ulterior presence, Margaret Miles’ affirmation of religious meaning in art as an expression of the human experience of the world, along with Richard Viladesau’s appreciation of the aesthetic all contributed to the following criteria.

1. It is compelling. By this I mean that the viewer is drawn to return to the work again and again. As it does this, the work continues to speak to the viewer.

2. There is resonance with the human condition. The experience of humans resonates with other humans when it has been reflected upon. I am concerned with the artist who draws upon his or her experience and is intending to connect that with the experience of others.

3. There is an invitation to the viewer of both an immediate experience and a drawing beyond. The experience of the viewer is of the immediate image before them, and at the same time there is the potential extension of the horizon of experience, a suggestion of Transcendence or Wonder.

The artistic style at the core of this study is also a consideration. Whilst I do not wish to elevate a particular style as more inviting of reflection or expressive of meaning, the intent was to limit the project to contemporary art which has been strongly influenced by Expressionism. In such art, the naive notion of objective reality is avoided, and the subjective/objective dynamic is more consciously
held by the artist within the art. Graham Sparkes and Richard Kidd affirm the development of Expressionism as artists stylized and distorted surface realism, and sought to

reach inside the objects of their study (in order to) disclose something of the depth within themselves, which in turn disclosed something of genuine significance in the objects of their study. In so doing, they offered to the viewing public a stunning new way of seeing the world.\textsuperscript{194}

The movement toward Expressionism allowed departure from a naturalistic attention to coherence and unity. Rather, tension, contradiction, elusiveness and uncertainty sit within the work. The Expressionists were moving to express the heart of the human condition, which is never clear-cut, clean-lined and unambiguous, but rather is muddled, obscure and deeply paradoxical.

Exploring reality using an Expressionist style, the artists were seeking to deal with reality in the way Richard Kidd has described the work of Edvard Munch:

\begin{quote}
In particular he was convinced that, by facing full square the undeniable reality of personal suffering he could express for himself and his viewers, a truth which all need to see.\textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

Art that seeks to move beyond naturalism offers a time frame, or a mode of understanding, in which suffering can be explored. Such artists express a concern for the anxiety of the human condition. Using a semi-expressionist style facilitates an open interpretation by the viewers, and stimulates the possibility of raising such questions about the tensions and contradictions within the art itself.

The art work explored within this research project did not demand that the artist have a particular religious or doctrinal understanding, but it did expect that there is a grappling of the human condition and an awareness of what Lonergan calls \textit{ulterior presence}. This is summed up by George Pattison, who argues that:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{194} Richard Kidd \& Graham Sparkes, \textit{God and the Art of Seeing} 27
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\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{195} Richard Kidd \& Graham Sparkes, \textit{God and the Art of Seeing} 28
\end{flushright}
The theology of art does not require artists to become overtly religious in their work (though it does not exclude this). Rather it points them back into their own work, back to the figural space of desire and the play within it of its dance and travail with the world. It does not demand the surrender of artistic autonomy but declares the seriousness of art—though seriousness here does not of course, mean ponderousness: there is a serious humour, a serious tenderness, a serious play and a serious joy as well as a serious doubt and a serious despair.  

The participants:

Meet the artists:

Four artists were offered invitations to be presenting artists in the project (Appendix vi). Each had a current exhibition history and extensive resume of experience. They were each confident and competent in their capacity to be articulate about their work, and saw their art as an expression of that which is meaningful to them. I had come to know each of the artists through their submission to Religious Art Prize exhibitions. They had a range of religious backgrounds, and spoke of their art in terms of their own reflection upon their faith experience. They had known I was curious about exploring the conversations that take place between artists, art and viewers, and had expressed interest in being involved.

There were two male and two female artists. Three traveled from regional towns to participate in the process. There was a range of artistic genre and media within the work which included one sculpture, two oil paintings, and one charcoal drawing.

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Ben Winspear is from Bendigo, and has worked as a professional artist for ten years, and also works with children in schools. He works hard to maintain his two days each week in the Studio. He has exhibited widely in regional towns, and more recently in Melbourne. He was selected for the Robert Jack’s drawing prize. Ben was schooled in the traditional art method, and realist art forms the base of his work. His ‘bread and butter’ has been portraits of people and animals, and his paintings of nature have been widely collected. More recently, he has been developing these more formal skills into an increasingly abstract style. He is trying out a new format, blending detail with abstraction.

Ben had grown up in a religiously conservative Catholic family. He had been home schooled for much of his childhood, in order to preserve carefully the tenets of his parents’ religious tradition. Having moved away from the traditional church in his late teens, he found himself in the last few years rediscovering faith in God through a Pentecostal church.

Whilst he has experienced the liberation of contemporary forms of worship, he has been on a journey of questioning and wondering about theological concepts, and what it means to engage with God in a holistic way. I met Ben when he presented a work for the Religious Art Prize, “In the Beginning…” The work Ben presented for the project was titled “Guidance”. He did not submit an artist statement or explanation with the work.
Libby Byrne is an artist and art therapist from Melbourne. She completed a Masters in Art Therapy several years ago, and has worked part-time as a Pastoral Care worker in Palliative Care, using art therapy processes. Libby is currently working part time in a church setting as a Creative Arts Minister and at a University in the Art Therapy school. She treasures her one day each week in the studio. Her early years were spent teaching Art to primary students, but in more recent years she has run art workshops, open studios and has lectured at tertiary level. Libby is very keen to explore the creative process. She is very aware that her work is reflective of her current journey, and she is a significant voice in encouraging other artists to be aware of their own creative process.

Libby’s spiritual journey began within the Anglican tradition, in which she held many leadership positions. She is currently studying Theology with the Melbourne College of Divinity, and is keen to embrace the wider church as a home during her spiritual journey. I met Libby when I was first involved in the opening of Chapel on Station Gallery, and approached her to do an early exhibition. She has since submitted to several Religious Art Prizes, and has been part of a judging panel on several occasions.

Libby works in oils, and the work she presented for this process was entitled “Light of the world”. Libby included a reflective poem as the artist’s statement.
John O’Loughlin is our presenting sculptor. During his recently completed Masters in Fine Arts at Ballarat University, John explored his journey within and without the church. In his early years, John studied in a Catholic Seminary, before leaving to explore and experience the world more widely. He worked and raised a family, dabbling in pottery for many years, and being an active participant in his local Catholic parish.

His love of pottery finally found space for development on his retirement from the formal work-place. He has both the luxury and the challenge of working hard to refine his pottery each day. He found himself studying art and leaving the church at the same time. In his studies he’s been challenged to work with not only ‘how’ to do art, but ‘why’ it is that this is important to him. I met John when he presented work for the Religious Art Prize, “the light of life...” He won the Student Prize in that exhibition.

John works with clay, and has been exploring the ‘reliquary’ as his expressed reflection upon life. His work was entitled “Reliquary no 7”, and he included a detailed artist’s statement.
**Debbie Hill** is a professional artist working in Ballarat. She works mainly in charcoal, and loves exploring script as a base element in her work. She has an extensive exhibition history in Ballarat and Melbourne, and has been selected for various prize exhibitions. She works part-time in both secondary and tertiary levels of education but manages to preserve at least two days per week in her studio.

Debbie grew up within no particular religious tradition, but was curious about the many experiences of church she had with friends. She sees herself as sitting outside the formal church, and yet her eclectic experience of various religious traditions has led her to be passionate about the nature of ‘faith’. This continues to be the theme she explores within her work.

I met Debbie when she presented for the Religious Art Prize, “In the beginning…” at which she received second prize. The work she presented for this project was entitled ‘Light of Life’, and did not include an artist statement.
Meet the viewers:

There were eighteen viewers who agreed to participate in the process. The viewers can be loosely grouped into five areas. The size of the groups themselves varied in line with the numbers. The project was looking for trends and conversations, so whilst some groups may have had fewer participants, the conversation between the art, artist and viewer remained dynamic.

Four ordained ministers were involved in the process. Each had at least five years ministry experience, and came from different traditions. Baptist, Salvation Army, Uniting Church and Churches of Christ were represented. There was one woman in this group. They had been invited into the process after recommendations by other colleagues.

Three student ministers were involved in the process, however one withdrew before the process began. This left a man and woman from Churches of Christ and Uniting Church backgrounds. They had each been in Theological formation for a number of years. They were currently studying in a Theological College, and had completed at least one unit of Supervised Theological Field Education.

There were four artists who participated in the process as viewers. Three women and one man, each with extensive art experience, agreed to reflect on the presenting artist’s work. I had known them from their casual involvement in the Chapel on Station Gallery, and they were invited by letter because of their expressed interest in the art of others (Appendix vi). They also had significant current church involvement in various Protestant traditions.

There were three lay church viewers, who were regular attenders in a church community and also women. Lutheran, Baptist and Churches of Christ were represented. These participants were referred by a colleague, or heard about the project and sought to be involved.

There were four participants, one male and three female, who did not regularly attend church. These people were referred by colleagues. One of the women volunteers on a regular basis in the Chapel on Station Gallery and expressed interest in the research to
another volunteer. One of the women withdrew after the first round because of other commitments. All of them, after referral, were invited into the process by letter.

The commitment of the participants!

The research process demanded a large time commitment from the viewers, which meant that only those viewers who were interested in exploring art were involved. Most people did not know one another.

The majority of people lived outside the immediate area of Box Hill where the research was conducted. Some people traveled more than 20 km in peak hour traffic for one half hour interview with the artist. They came from areas as far away as Mulgrave and Essendon, Pascoe-Vale and Boronia.

The commitment of participants to the process is to be noted. Of the seventeen people involved as viewers, thirteen people attended all four rounds. Three people missed a round because of other commitments or health. One person withdrew after the first round.

The research was conducted through the coldest & wettest three months of Melbourne’s weather, in the dark of the evenings. Four of the evenings were severe weather warnings, and one was on the evening of the heaviest snow falls recorded in Melbourne.

On the night!

Having received letters of introduction and explanation (Appendix vii), people arrived at The Barn at 7:20pm. The Barn is a timber building, resonant of a traditional church hall, but is now a multi-purpose open area and office space. There is a registered kitchen, and on arrival the participants were served refreshments and freshly baked cake and biscuits. Coffee was brewing, and a pleasant table was set. Each evening of the process, I personally ensured fresh food was prepared and cooked by myself, with the intention of creating a welcoming environment, and to express my personal appreciation of their participation.

Richard, my husband, was also present each evening to enable a second face of welcome, and to provide hospitality if I were otherwise engaged in the process.
After a casual time of greeting and refreshment, the participants were invited into a quiet room. This warm room does not have overtly religious symbolism, and offered enough space for all participants to sit comfortably and move if they wished. The art-work was presented in the room, with chairs placed to offer the most appreciable viewing of the work. There was a light directed to the work and, for the second to fourth rounds, the art was covered in black fabric until after the introductory remarks. This was at the request of a participant on the first evening.

Participants were invited to take a seat, and were given a pen and questionnaire (Appendix iii), with a clip board to lean on. I formally welcomed them to the room, and an introductory speech was repeated each week. Participants were reminded of confidentiality, and of the validity of all their responses. It was affirmed that there are no right or wrong responses to the work. They were asked not to talk with one another. I then announced the artist’s name and the title of the work, encouraged them to move around to see the work clearly and from different angles, and left the room. The participants were encouraged to fill in the questionnaire in the next 35 – 40 minutes.

After the participants completed this process they left the room, and were introduced to five people who were to act as host-scribes for the next part of the process. Five people had agreed to scribe the conversations of a group of people. They had received guidelines as to their task and role (Appendix iix). They ushered the participants to five different rooms to take notes on the conversation that unfolded. This conversation went for approximately 30 minutes. If the conversation became stuck the scribes were encouraged to ask the participants about the resonances or dissonances that they experienced, and the questions the art work had raised.

One of the limitations of the research process was the diverse quality of the transcribed notes of the group conversations on the first stage of each round. The notes obtained from these conversations varied from word-for-word transcriptions to broad brush-strokes of the scribe’s interpretation of the conversations. Their presence became as participant at one level or another. Some scribes attempted to be objective observers, others became creatively involved, suggesting ways forward in the conversation if the interaction stalled.
This two part process formed Stage 1 of the process, and was following the principles of phenomenological enquiry. The emphasis was upon the viewer's experience of the art. At the end of the evening, a time was negotiated for each group to meet with the artist the following week. Interview times ranged in half hour slots from 7:00 to 9:30 pm, and over the process the groups had the opportunity to vary their time slots.

During the week that followed, drawing on Grounded Theory principles, I spent time reviewing and considering the questionnaires and the notes from the scribed conversations. From that data, I gathered a sense of the conversation and discerned a key area that could be explored in the conversation between the artist and a group of viewers the following week, and framed that as a question.

**The next week**

As the group met with the artist the following week, the conversations were digitally recorded. The researcher's presence in the room was named and addressed as part of the experience of the group. The conversation was framed in terms of open interaction, where every person's input was valued without the weight of right-wrong possible responses.

After being welcomed with refreshments, the participants were ushered into the quiet room where they were introduced to the artist. As they arrived, there was a sense of excited anticipation for the viewers, and a degree of initial nervousness for the artist. Greetings and introductions took place. I welcomed the people, and reminded them of confidentiality guidelines and the need for us to be open to no rights or wrongs in looking at art. I then asked whether there was anything from the previous week that had continued to stir that they felt the need to raise. At times, comments were made. After these were named or briefly explored, I suggested that I read the question or key area that had arisen from the data. I carefully read the statement and asked whether that resonated with them and reflected their experience of the previous week. On every occasion, the participants affirmed the accuracy of the statement as reflecting their experience as a group. The participants were then invited to respond to the statement and enter the conversation with the artists. In all cases, the conversation flowed naturally, with a
general sense of openness to one another. This conversation was recorded both digitally and on cassette tape and continued for 30 minutes.

At the end of each conversation the group left the room, and the next group was welcomed. After all five groups, each artist was both exhilarated and exhausted and spent some time with me reviewing the evening. This second stage completed a round of research. At this point the recorded conversations were transcribed. This process was repeated four times over the three month period, involving eight evenings for the viewing participants.

A final step in the process was the invitation for participants to offer feedback in the form of a questionnaire (Appendix iv). There was a significant response to the questionnaires (Appendix v), which served to provide a check to the process and development of themes.

From this process of indwelling the data, as outlined in the methodology section, more than thirty areas of exploration emerged. These were indwelt repeatedly, to allow clarity and opportunity for insight. Actual recorded quotes were gathered to theme and re-theme the words and responses of the viewers and artists. Finally, the process focused into significant thematic areas.

An introductory question was raised about the process, and is outlined in

First Reactions

And then six key areas emerged for exploration:

Inter-subjectivity – Art as Meeting place
Group Distinctives
The Creative Process
Exploring the Numinous
Metaphor
Seeing as...imagination
These themes are developed in the following section as an analysis of the process.

**A final word on process**

As researcher, I was aware of the significant commitment of the participant viewers and artists involved in the process. Conversations with participants curious about the process and **findings** stimulated me, in consultation with my supervisor, to invite the four presenting artists to a joint exhibition at which a presentation of preliminary findings was offered. Having **indwelt** the materials, and worked intensively with the data and emerging themes, it was decided that an earlier than anticipated date for that exhibition would be preferable. The intent was to maintain the interest and connection of the participants, and to **check out** informally the responses to the presenting themes.

Fourteen of the participants responded to the invitation to attend the presentation of Preliminary Findings exhibition in November, three months after the final research evening. The artists were all in attendance. There were many other guests, including my supervisor. The presentation of the emerging themes was made (Appendix ii), which achieved, informally, a significant resonance among the participants. Whilst this was not part of the formal research design and findings, it offered a further validation of the process and findings.

Indeed, the overwhelmingly positive response of viewers and artists to the process of entering a process of intentional conversation and reflection between art, artist and viewer served as a great encouragement within my process as researcher and stimulus to follow through with the affirmation of the significance of this conversation within the broader theological endeavour.
The emerging picture

3.i First Reactions
3.ii Group Distinctives
3.iii Art as Meeting place
3.iv Creative Process
3.v Seeing as... imagination
3.vi Metaphor
3.vii Exploring the numinous
3.i First Reactions

I don’t like it!

Is it possible to look at a work of art and refrain from asking the question *Do I like it?* with its consequent emotive response of attraction or repulsion, *Yes or No?* Indeed, our raw response to anything in life may be the most primal response, but need not remain static. It is human to be either attracted or repelled from any experience, and viewing art is no different. In the context of the research, the question *Do I like it?* was possibly muted in some ways. It took on different guises from participants, like *Would I hang it on my wall?* or *Would I pay money for it?* or even *Would it go in my house?*

Many people, in viewing art, never move beyond this primary response. *I like it or I don’t like it* becomes the dominant motif of response. This limits the potential for the viewer to respond to the invitation to engage with the work at a level that might inform their experience, and from which they may draw meaning.

The research attempted to address this potential limitation by asking the question, *What is your immediate reaction to the work?* and then move the viewers to the second question, *How does this change when you sit with the work for a while?*

Interestingly, most viewers in the actual process of recording a response to the first question were already grappling with some construction of meaning. And interpretation. Considering John’s work, some people would respond with *Old, Rustic, Ancient,* probably as a way of finding descriptive ways to make sense of what was before them. Other people, however, would allow the moment to capture them, either in confusion, *I don’t know how to react!* or clarity, with words like *Amused, Surprised, Delighted.* Similarly, as people recorded their first reactions to Ben, Libby or Debbie’s work, they would either allow the raw response to unfold with *Wow! surprised, peaceful, dark, brooding, uncomfortable,* or begin to interpret with lines like *A body lying on its side or Light impacting Desolation.*
Let us consider one viewer’s response as it offers some insight into the deepening process, from immediacy of response to insight and wonder. In this case, the questions took the viewer on that journey from primary reaction to exploration and reflection. Looking at John’s Reliquary, this viewer responded to question 1 with Amused — it looks like a funny little church in mid-air. Asked question 2, she responded with I notice the detail, the beauty of the collars and the sparkling roof, and the intricate cross, and the curved fleur de lis. She went on to describe what she saw, and then was stimulated to name the questions that had emerged for her. Why the animal feet? Am I inside looking out, or outside looking in? She moved on in a journey of reflecting on her own experience of church and her current experience of faith, and finally recalled the childhood finger poem, Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and here are the people. At this point she began to reflect upon the experience of tension between the nature of faith and the death of Christendom. Whether she liked the work or not became irrelevant. She had formed a connection with the work that had enlarged her experience and extended her understanding. The process of question had taken her on that journey.

This illustration offers one example of the critical ingredient of time and intention within the process of reflection. Whilst there are moments of spontaneous response, time creates the opportunity for the deepening of insight. Similarly, engaging with art as an intentional process is critical in extending beyond a glance to seeing. James Elkins wonders about the use of terms to describe these ways of looking. He considers the term glance almost as an expression of blindness, claiming “intense interest and intense disinterest both result in quick looks that see relatively little.” He contrasts this with the word glimpse, “because in a glance we see only for a second, and in a glimpse the object shows itself only for a second.” The notion is that when we glance at something, our eyes may fix only for a moment before we are distracted. Similarly, staring is a form of malfunction of looking. “Perhaps staring is a sign that an artwork has malfunctioned: it has arrested my thinking,

197 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back (San Diego: Harvest, 1997) 206
198 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 207
slowed me down, paralysed me so I can barely move.” He offers an alternative, the invitation to gaze, claiming “a gaze challenges, it inquires, it takes pleasure, and it asks for a response.” Attention is captured, so that the process of reflective engagement can unfold.

However we understand the language around seeing and looking, this discussion suggests the value of time and intention within the process of seeing, offering the opportunity for reflection and meaningful engagement. It affirms the anecdotal understanding that artists have but a few seconds to capture the attention of the passing viewer, and slowing down that process has the potential of deepening the possibility of encountering the art in a meaningful way.

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199 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 209
200 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 210
3.ii Group Distinctives

What is the source of light?
It encouraged that question in all of us, I think.

One of the questions explored within the research project was the effect our prior experience, in particular our theological frame of reference, has on our experience of seeing art. Does our theological base enlarge our understanding of art, and extend our capacity to experience insights and discover meaning? This question proved to be most challenging, given that defining background and assigning levels of meaning is fraught. It is possible, however, to provide some broad brush strokes in considering this question of the impact of theological grounding on the experience of seeing.

Primarily, in viewing the art, all viewers come with their own expectation of what they will see and how they will see it. And all look for some resonances within the work that point them toward considering the work as meaningful. The starting place is their own experience, from which they discover their own connection with the work. However, in this project they arrived assuming that my selection of the work had some meaningful basis. Each week, at each stage of the process, the conversation was prefaced with “there is no right or wrong way to view this art. All your responses are valid.” It took time for people to trust this premise, and judgments about not getting it were slipped in by nervous viewers from time to time.

Each of the viewers was encouraged to view the work from the place where they were at in their own experience regardless of religious affiliation. Sally\(^{201}\), who has no regular church connection, and who described herself as only enjoying what she terms realist art, said of one of the works: “I think that light symbolizes, and it does here too, the hope… or the passing of the storm… or whatever.” She went on in an animated way to recall her own experience: “I used to work in Box Hill, and you get a fabulous view

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\(^{201}\) Names used in this report are not the actual names of the viewers.
in various directions, and I have seen the sky in Melbourne, where there are heavy, dark, purple clouds, and then there will be streaks of sunlight coming. OH!” Her memory was triggered to relive a positive, almost ecstatic experience that she then transferred into her experience of Ben’s work, and in that connection she discovered meaning. She went on to describe not just the beauty of the scene, but the coming of hope.

Similarly, Clive reflected upon Libby’s work, and drew upon a recent story to reference his understanding. “Light being like a piece of hope… like you were trapped in a cave, you know, if that wasn’t there, your mental state would be somewhat more bleak… like those two guys in Tassie.” Both of these people, whilst they wouldn’t infuse the notion of light within a religious frame-work, adopted with ease the symbolism of light as an archetypal image of hope202, and thus drew meaning from the work.

Memory triggers were often the immediate response for people, serving to draw them into a larger reflection upon the work. Jane, a student minister in her final stages before ordination, reflected upon John’s work:

One of my first impressions was (chuckling) here is where I was first Christened… my grandmother, it is like…oh! I liked it because it was my childhood, and I still return there when I’m at home… but if this is where I’ll be every day, then, is that what I’m being confronted with!

The work stimulated a warm childhood memory, but moved her to reflect upon the nature of the church in which she is currently engaged.

Graham, an ordained minister, was also transported into childhood memories of church in looking at John’s piece. “I first thought this is a bit like the little country wooden church I went to as a small child.” Quite predictably these were the stories of their childhood, and they were what resonated positively. For others, however, John’s work stimulated different stories, even sinister stories from childhood - Hansel and Gretel and Grimm’s fairy tales. They weren’t always

202 See also section 3vi Metaphor
seen as positive memories. “Hansel and Gretel is a pretty nasty piece of work. When you think about it… a witch in the forest cooking up kids!” exclaims Clive. John responded and affirmed the connection with memory for the viewers, saying,

I didn't think about fairy stories until somebody mentioned it through your reflections, and immediately I thought Ah! For me, in my youth, fairy stories were the stories of the Saints, as well as Hansel and Gretel and others.

The work itself which drew on overtly religious symbolism, and which had a distinctly religious title, extended people into their own stories so that they could discover something meaningful from their frame of thought. Regardless of whether childhood stories echoed traditional fairy stories, or stories from a specific religious tradition, they 'saw' what they could connect with in their experience.

John’s work, whilst prompting memory for all viewers, resonated keenly with those who had a similar story of church. One of the viewers, also an artist, recognized the work as a protest piece, identifying in it the frustration with the Church. Most particularly, the group of ministers jumped straight into recognizing the artist’s frustration with the church. One of the ministers voiced this for the group.

There is that discontent with that established doctrine of everlasting life or whatever we might have thought, and that, in whatever way, came through and touched our stuff too… we are also wrestling with this concept of what church should be and maybe isn’t!

When I framed the question for the second week from the group of ministers, it resonated as:

You explored many of the symbols within the work, including the notion of ashes and coffin, and the simplicity of the country church. You were then led to wonder about the tensions of the institutional church and tradition, and where the life is within the church? Is it in the mirror?

The ministers had clearly connected with the symbols and the questions being raised by the artist, particularly in terms of the critique of the church and how it meets the sacred. The student ministers also projected into the piece a framework of religious
overlay, and yet expressed it in terms of both a fresh excitement of ministry, and an uncertainty about how their engagement with the church would unfold. They were keen to explore an open, transitioning church, and spent a lot of time thinking about the movement.

The group of artist-viewers addressed John’s work both reflectively and technically. Paul was aware that they were analyzing it technically, as well as wanting the work to take them further. “Artistically, from design and balance and colour and all that sort of thing, it really makes it. But what was the message for us inside of it?” Their heightened awareness of process led them to make the links between technical ability and the meaning that was expressed in the work.

Similarly, as Paul engaged with Ben’s work, it was the technical aspect that excited him - “That lovely spontaneity that you get in it that comes through with the message!” he exclaimed. He went on to express frustration with his own technique, and his desire to discover that spontaneity and freedom to explore. Susan exclaimed, “It’s the way you apply the Paint!” There was much discussion about Ben’s patched canvas, and the possible reasons for the joins, either as symbolic of being a poor artist, or an error. Susan tentatively explored it with him, wondering if “It was meant to be a practice piece but it turned out to be a really good painting and…” Whilst the technique was the immediate pull for the group of artists, they readily played with the idea of light and darkness, and how the technique matched the desired communication.

The types of questions explored in each group’s discussion around Debbie’s art work offered a hint at the backgrounds from which they came. Student ministers looked for overtly religious meaning and symbolism in the work: “The word steadfast resonated for you, as you explored the notion of faith as the backdrop for this sturdy tree.” Lay people were aware of the symbols, but did not project overtly religious content into them. Rather, they were keen to allow the artist to interpret. They “were very curious about the spaces, or windows, and wondered what you meant by them.” The ministers tended to look for the overlay of larger faith issues, in the question of how “the background of faith became a question for you, and what it means as both background and foreground of the work.”
The lay non-church group wondered about the tree and the light, and allowed the imagery to work freely on them. “You explored the nature of the tree in the work, and wondered about the source of light – finally considering a back-lit moon as the source of the shadowy image.” The group of artist-viewers added technical curiosity to their questions. “You discussed the technical process to create a subtle almost velvety feel, and explored the notion of the interplay between tree/paper/charcoal as medium. You wondered at the process she underwent, in terms of the incredible control to sustain this work balanced with your surrender to the creative process.”

Despite the subtle differences between them, all of the groups experienced a curiosity about the work that drew them to reflect meaningfully on the images. Apart from the ease with which those with formal theological training skip to traditional religious metaphor and interpretation, and artists itch to understand the technique applied, there was a surprising resonance between all the viewers as they sat with each work, and listened to the questions that emerged both personally and within the group conversation.

Certainly, both technical and meaning intent were a part of all conversations. Time and again, the artistic technique arose as a question for all viewers, as did their curiosity about the artist’s intent. Viewers were all drawn on that search to understand and engage and wonder. “What is the source of light? It encouraged that question in all of us, I think.” Curiosity unfolded in the dialogue and the conversation was rich for all participants.203

Indeed, given that all the viewers sought to understand and reflect meaningfully upon the work, it remains a question for those of us engaged in religious education, both in the theological institution and the church, as to whether the urge to leap to theological interpretation is a helpful thing or a limiting thing. Is it any more or less significant to be taken to a story of Hansel and Gretel or to the stories of the saints by the art? Given that such childhood stories of church or fairytale both contain a consequent message of good and

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203 See Appendix v as a summary of people’s responses to the process.
evil, perhaps it is enough that the work stimulates memory in such a way as to extend toward a meaningful reflection upon the world.

This project simply reveals the impact of our religious education on our religious interpretation of images, in that it provides a strong impetus to interpret using religious language and symbol. It remains to question whether this limits ways of seeing, or extends them. The interpretation using religious language is not measured in terms of depth of understanding, as much as in language and symbol. Indeed, as lay non-church people also discover resonance and meaning within the work without the overtly religious overlay, the influence of our religious frame for engaging with art meaningfully is perhaps not as significant as our openness to see. The jury is out.
3.iii Art as Meeting Place

This is probably why I paint.
It is exploring what is beneath the narrative…
what is common ground.
The ground that I walk on that other people share,
and how do we connect in that…

A striking experience of connection unfolded in the conversations between artist and viewers. It began as the viewers were invited to take time with the work - to sit with it long enough for questions to emerge, and it certainly developed as the viewers met with the artist a week later. The art became a meeting-place for the two. By meeting place, I am not simply referring to the art as the topic of conversation, or object for a dialogue. Rather, I am referring to meeting-place as a place of encounter, a communion between one and the other, a genuine connection that is embodied in the art piece itself, but transcends the frame of the canvas. This notion of ‘inter-subjectivity’ draws upon Buber’s concept of the I-Thou relationship. According to Martin Buber, “all real living is meeting in an I-Thou encounter.” That is, life discovers meaning in relationships, and ultimately with God, as the eternal Thou. These relationships are subject to subject. The relationship of I-it occurs when we make ourself the subject and perceive others as object. Real meeting occurs as humans interact on a journey of communion with each other as thou. In the meeting place between artist and viewer with Art, I suggest that we are taken beyond the boundaries of the individual into communion with one another – and hence the Other. Rather than encounter the art as an object, the viewer has the potential to form a relationship with it that meets both the art and the artist in such an I-Thou encounter.

This dynamic unfolds on a number of levels: in the relationship between the artist and the subject of the art, in the relationship between the viewer and the art, and in the relationship between the artist and the viewer. In so forming these relationships, the artist

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204 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Collins, 1979) 50
meets herself, the viewer meets herself and the viewer meets the artist. Subject meets subject. This meeting place may embody words or story, but in the artistic encounter the meeting place transcends the boundary of words or detail of story. The image itself becomes the meeting place. Let us explore this at a number of levels.

Firstly, each of the artists made reference not only to their own description of what they thought they were doing, but also to the awareness that they are in relationship with the object that they are exploring in their creative medium. It is as if the subject of the art – place, person and environment – has a life of its own that speaks to the artist. After Libby arrived at the Devil’s Marbles\footnote{\textsuperscript{205}} she reflected on the awareness that the place had been the source of her art, in colour and form, for many years. She said, “We had found this place where I felt like all the shapes that I connect to were in this place… I knew this is where my painting comes from.” On the day she arrived, she described the impact of the landscape as a mirroring of her own journey. Indeed, a series of work evolved and was exhibited. She described her connection with the place: “When I go and look at something that is coming external to me, I have to find an internal reference point.” Clearly the play with light, shape and colour resonated with her, and became an expression of her own experience… of light emerging, somewhat hidden, but with subtle nuances expressed delicately within her work. The place connected with the artist's own being which then was expressed in the art.

Ben recognized that his work was an expression of his own life. "As I get older I find that my art journey is very much reflecting my life. So it is a theme I’ve been working on… exploring… not just producing… exploring.” He reminisced about a statement of his teacher, and what it has taught himself about his work. “The fellow I studied with said, ‘Everything you paint is a self-portrait’. It is as much about you as it is about the painting.” The work interprets his identity. Ben’s landscape painting not only expressed to viewers how he sees the world, but expressed how he sees himself,

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{205} The Devil’s Marbles is a remote location in the Northern Territory, which the artist had never visited until that time.}
\end{footnotesize}
juxtaposed between city and country, seeking to reflect on life and be illuminated by life through the framework of the Page\textsuperscript{206}.

John’s journey out of the workplace to follow his passion through art challenged him to struggle with what his journey was about. Over and over, to each group of viewers he expressed the impact of those initial days when he began his Fine Arts degree. “When you study art, you have to consider \textit{why} you are there, alongside \textit{how} you do the art. So I was able to look inside my life... And started to ask questions... I’m doubting in here.” He is aware that his art is very much about the questions he is exploring about faith and existence. It expresses symbolically for him his faith journey and his struggle to explore God in a meaningful way.

Debbie was very aware of her personal connection with the work even though, at times, the connection may not be at first obvious to herself or a viewer. She is present to it. “It is very personal. Always. It doesn’t matter what artist does what, it is intensely personal. There is stuff that is going on in there that I can’t explain to you.” It cannot be explained, rather that which is \textit{going on} is expressed visually. She is aware that what is \textit{going on in here}, as she points to her heart, is at the essence of the work she is expressing in her play with darkness and light in charcoal. That \textit{stuff} finds its shape in image rather than in words, and continues its invitation to connect with the viewer.

Secondly, when the meeting place between the artist and viewer occurs, words as narrative become secondary. A delightful exchange took place between one of the artists and a viewer, which affirmed this level of inter-subjective connection between them. The research simply gave voice to an experience that is often real to viewers as they voice curiosity about the life of great artists’ stories. In a tender moment, after Libby had shared her story, one of the viewers had been on the verge of tears, reflecting on the subtle shades of light and darkness in her own journey. She only hinted at the story, but it led to the following exchange.

\textit{Libby : It is possible to have a meeting point in the painting and just acknowledge the experience free from all the

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\textsuperscript{206} Ben refers to the format of framing of his work as the \textit{Page}.\textsuperscript{206}
individual narratives that are there. I don’t need to sit here and tell you about my day, and say this was awful, and this happened. And you don’t have to listen to that and come back to your own story. It takes a long time doing it that way to get beneath to what is shared. Whereas this way you can get to what is shared, circumventing all of that other stuff. Which is probably why I paint. It is exploring what is beneath the narrative… what is common ground. The ground that I walk on that other people share, and how do we connect in that. Because I think narrative can block us from that connection.

Julie:  Yes… becomes words.

Libby:  But get beneath the narrative and you may be on common ground.

In this exchange the artist and viewer were aware that the work had drawn them into a shared place. The artist and the viewer discovered resonances between themselves in the work. Their stories were shared without having to actually tell them. They were suggested in the image. The viewer extended the sentence of the artist, affirming that the narrative itself that usually seeks to connect the stories becomes just words in the face of an image that captures the experience of connection.

One of the viewers, who is also an artist, reflected this connection between the artist and viewers. He both acknowledged the artist’s journey within the work, and the viewer’s journey in the viewing. I think it is wonderful that we can use art not just to show people our abilities and our skills, but to show them something about us, and our search, and making others, like you’re making us, think about so many aspects of our journey, through your journey.

The art expresses the experience of the artist which becomes the means of connection with the viewer.

Thirdly, the artist’s intention is generally to draw the connection between the art and the viewer, rather than prescribe what that connection should be. Ben explained, “There is something in me that wants to make my art definitive to one person but open to everyone at the same time; so it is speaking to one person and
every person collectively.” Libby agreed, saying, “What I hope that you look for is your experiences within the piece.” There is not so much a desire to control what the viewer sees, but rather a realization that “it is my job to do the painting and let the viewer see. Whatever they see is perfectly fine.” Ben is then freed from an expectation to communicate some tangible and static reality, and rather is able to hold his work lightly. Indeed, during the evening of his conversation, his fiancé sat quietly in the room. At the end of the evening she reflected upon the process, saying, “What I have loved about this whole exercise is that Ben has been able to hold his painting loosely, and in that, the whole vision of it and interpretation of it has expanded in hearing all this feedback. But if he were to hold it tightly it would still just remain a small picture.” This lovely reflection on the process offered an insight into the freedom that the artist experiences when they are freed from trying to control what the viewer sees, limiting it to their own perception and intent. In such a case, there would be subject-object relationship, where the art is only relating to the subject. What actually occurs is the expansion of the work into a connection with others as a valid expression of subject-subject. The canvas expands to embrace the other. Through the art, indeed, the meeting place of artist and viewer can take place.

John offered some explanation for this connection by explaining that “You bring meaning to the work. I think the viewer brings huge meaning, because there are triggers, memory triggers.” He claimed that the art is not a static reality which is offered by the artist to the world, but rather, the meaning in the art exists in the dynamic between viewer and art. The encounter elicits meaning. One of the other artists added, “What we put into that painting affects another.” This exciting dynamic was expressed by an enthusiastic viewer, who exclaimed on meeting the artist, “That resonates really well. That was the kind of thing that I felt was speaking to me straight away!” And then there were more sobering responses which also illustrate this connection, like the response of one of the ministers to John’s protest piece on the church: “Whatever we may have thought there is, in whatever way, came through and touched our stuff too. We too are all wrestling with this concept of what church should be and maybe isn’t.”
Even those viewers who were less familiar with the experience of sitting with art found a meeting place in the art. One particular viewer often reacted at first glimpse of the art with “What is that!” But he persisted in his looking, to the point of adding, “it was only after I sat here for some minutes that I was able to enter into letting it tell me its story.” Note that he recognizes that there is a potential exchange to take place, where the art could speak into his experience. This same person, after allowing himself to sit with the art, would discover remarkable resonances within his own story. A gentle exchange with the artist took place:

*Viewer:* This is a bit like the little country wooden church I went to as a small child.

*John:* It resonated. That was obviously important. That’s where you were at.

*Viewer:* I looked in and thought this isn’t some sort of see-through glass. There is something reflective there. So I thought, I wonder is there a message that one is supposed to see one’s own self as part of the church.

His insight almost came as a surprise. The art had allowed him to ask the question and discover the resonance within himself.

Another viewer in conversation with the group described her experience: “When it was unveiled I went Gasp! And my first response was to laugh. And it was a really strong response. Like, I really do have to look at this. A very deep, O God!” She knew immediately that the questions the artist was asking were questions she needed to explore, and whilst that wasn’t comfortable, it was powerful and authentic.

Whether comfortable or not, viewers discovered resonance within the art, and were drawn then to their own place of reflection. It led them into the dialogue with the artist with a bold desire to understand. This was verbalized by one viewer as he began the conversation with the artist saying, “This pushes all those buttons in me. I have very strong feelings about it. Is that part of your experience as well?”

John, in a delightful description, extended the experience of the meeting place from the visual to the tactile. He invited people to
connect with the clay, indeed entrust themselves to the experience of it. He says,

*We keep ourselves at arm’s length from art don’t we, and yet the tradition of pottery is that it is made to be held. I make wood fired bowls in the Japanese Ceramic tradition, and it is critical to the Japanese that it feels good in the hands, and that it feels good when it touches the lips, and you have that intimacy with the piece of pottery, you actually drink from it… you trust your body to the clay.*

This physical meeting place in the clay is profoundly connecting of artist-art-viewer, and can offer us a way of understanding the metaphorical connection in story.

It should be noted that being open to the experience of art is a risky business, for both the artist and the viewer. The artist reveals something of himself on the canvas. And similarly, the viewer entrusts her eyes to the canvas. Indeed for one viewer, that was a troubling experience, as her own experience of the darkness did not allow her to entrust her eyes to Libby’s work where the light and darkness were somewhat diffuse. She withdrew from the process, with the explanation that another commitment had emerged on a Tuesday night. In her explanation she also made the point that the work was too dark and that she had needed more light in the world than what the painting had expressed. This meeting place is not always comfortable. Strong responses are elicited. It pushes buttons, irritates, and even elicits fear and anxiety. Perhaps one of the things we experience in saying that we *don’t like it!* is the reluctance to give the work time to engage us. We are subtly aware of the risk we are taking in looking. For, as James Elkins argues, “Seeing is self-definition. Objects look back, and their incoming gaze tells me what I am.” 207

Any encounter with art expects the artist to be present to the art, the viewer to be present to the art, and indeed, the viewer and artist to be present to one another. That is, the communion that occurs in this *presence* is a communion where each is fully present to the other. At one level, this presence transcends words, that is, the

207 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 86
detailed telling of the story. It transcends the limits of time, for time becomes irrelevant in the expression of the work, even though the frame of the work contains and expresses time. This communion or meeting place, where the encounter occurs, in its most sacred moments reflects the presence of God in our shared experience.
3.iv Creative Process

*Did the picture grow?*

*Or did you plan it like that, to drive someone like me absolutely nuts?*

Art is not static. Rather, art exists as a dynamic unfolding, a process. There may be a moment when the work no longer has paint or clay added, when one is tempted to declare it *complete*. But the ongoing work of the art continues in the dynamic engagement with the world. Indeed, it can expand. Awareness of a creative process in the making of art was evident to all artists during the project. For each artist, the creation of a work of art mirrors the unfolding of an image, rather than the making of a product. And that process in turn captured the viewers, and was extended in their own creative process.

The creative process, as outlined by Lois Robbins, takes the artist on a journey of Preparation, Ambiguity, Incubation, Illumination, Elaboration and Communication. During the first step a problem or possibility is identified, a challenge set. What follows is a process of exploring the problem. We learned that Debbie Hill’s image, *Light of Life*, was stimulated by a question raised by a Religious Art Prize Competition. She had seen the invitation to consider creating an image of the *Light of Life*, and wondered about what that would look like for her. Debbie described this stage as the gathering of possibilities, data-collection if you like.

*I’m a bit obsessive and I research, and the first thing that came into my head was a tree – because trees are life, and there is a lot in that. So then I go and research the tree, and I track down, and go on the internet, and I look at trees, and I go to books, and I have a huge collection, ‘cos I do some collage… and I try to find the right tree. And I know when I find the right tree it speaks to me.*

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208 Lois Robbins, *Waking up in the Age of Creativity* 15ff
This stage often shifts into a time of *Ambiguity* and *Frustration*, where there is the temptation to abandon the process or prematurely solve the problem. The artist is not quite sure where the question is leading. The artist is dwelling on the edge of something, in a sense, within a liminal space. In Debbie’s comment, it is evident that the process of searching and wondering about what that will look like continues until something emerges. She articulates the lack of certainty, the *ambiguity* that exists until clarity occurs, and she has some certainty about direction. A period of *Incubation* unfolds, during which the artist “lives the mystery of the question, trusting that at the appropriate moment, insight will break forth.”

This description of the artistic process was interesting for viewers both technically, in understanding how the work was made, and metaphorically, in understanding why the work unfolded within the levels of meaning. The revelatory nature of Debbie’s work settles into an *incubation* phase until it clarifies, and it does this physically as well as metaphorically. The work itself is not known until it unfolds before her, let alone before the viewer. Where the candle sits and where the *faith* pattern emerges are all part of the process. Before the conversation between Debbie and the viewers, the viewers had the perception that the work was very controlled and ordered, even contrived. But this notion of control was challenged and moderated as they began to understand the process: “So it is planned, but not as far as we were thinking,” reflected a viewer after learning the explanation.

Debbie describes her work as *clean-edged*, but not in terms of a structure that builds up from nothing. She may make a sketch to get a sense of where the work is going; that may become a starting point. “I came to the one tree, but it has altered in my own way.” A stronger mode of operation for Debbie is in her capacity to allow the image to emerge on the canvas. “I work from black to white. I actually colour the whole thing in black, and I can’t see what is underneath it until I work back into it.” A viewer clarifies this: “so you cover it all in black and then you rub it out?” Debbie agrees, saying, “So I have no idea where the text is going to come up at any stage, and I don’t plan for it to be in a particular spot.” A second viewer

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209 Lois Robbins, *Waking up in the Age of Creativity* 21
pushed the notion of discovery, saying, “So you end up discovering the light, really.” The process moves to a point of illumination where the artist has a direction that discovers shape.

Debbie’s method of working charcoal onto printed drafting film contains both an anticipation of what might be revealed and a sense of surrender within the process. A form of dialogue unfolds between the artist and the viewer during this process, allowing the work, or the concept of the work, to inform the artist’s movements.

I have (printed drafting paper) all rolled up, as I have to be really careful with the paper because it damages incredibly easily. Sometimes you just look at them and say, that is the one, and you pick it up and put it on the wall and start working on it. It tells me which one I should choose, not the other way around.

The period of incubation, of sitting within the darkness of the page, not knowing clearly what may unfold, is broken open. “I allow my work to happen, what happens on top. There is real structure. But I get into that space, where other things happen, things that you don’t anticipate. I have to be open to that.” Debbie acknowledged the dialogue that occurs between the elements of the work – structure, form and composition – and the freedom to allow inspiration to find expression. Thus, she creates space for incubation to give way to illumination. Robbins refers to this as the Aha! factor: “the mystery gives way to insight”. Debbie almost expressed surprise as she described the placement of the candle in the work: “I’m a bit of a compositional freak. I like to think everything sits in a particular spot well. And then I thought, where will I put the candle? And then the light came off that thing.” There is both the sense of the artist’s presence within the structure and execution of the work, and the freedom to allow the work to unfold. “You can have these photographic ideas, and think this is what I’m going to do, and you just become absorbed, and then other things start to happen. I like that. It is exciting!”

The work continues in its execution during the Elaboration stage. There is a sense of discipline and technique within this part of the

\[210\] Lois Robbins, *Waking up in the Age of Creativity* 22
process, where the work, or a series of works, is executed. “I nearly work in the dark in my studio… I close the blinds, because I need that dark to see the light” described Debbie to curious viewers. The image of smudged walls, hands and face, and a husband horrified at the mess, was fascinating for the viewers. This execution of the work, it was added, does not happen in isolation, but rather stimulates new and creative thoughts that have the potential to keep feeding the next work, and the next. “In another group of works, it came really easily… one just rolled on into another,” she said, describing her larger artistic process.

John O’Loughlin, working with ceramics, added further insight into the connection of the artist and art within the creative process. In the tactile working with ceramics, the artist is reminded again and again that the unfolding physical process echoes the reflective process in the work.

This work was telling me that there are mysteries that cannot be understood, that we cannot know fully in this life… and I thought ‘Wow! This is amazing!’ Then I became much more aware of the dialogue between the artist and their own work. Particularly in ceramics which is the cycle of making, drying, firing, colouring, re-making, you actually live with the work and it feeds the next lot of work. So this was a little one based on that… the technical is really so important with ceramics. As with anything, it is part of the whole understanding process. For that firing cycle is allegorical in its own self.

The work speaks back to the artist and draws him deeper in his understanding, pushing him to consider more and more deeply this process of which he is a part. The creative process reflects the internal journey of the artist, and his understanding of himself and his work.

The final stage, *Communication*, is not often validated as important in the creative process, because preoccupation with communicating results affects the freedom of the artist to create. That is, considering how the viewer might receive the work either in terms of its capacity to communicate, or even have economic value, affects the choices the artist makes. This caution, however, does not diminish the value of communication as a valid stage in the creative
process, rather it affirms the connection with the viewer, and an awareness of the artist that they are not alone – but rather intrinsically connected with an experience that is beyond their own.\textsuperscript{211}

At the moment of communication there is the potential for a shared experience for both artist and viewer. One of the striking things about the conversations during the research process was how the creative process of the artist was echoed in the creative responses of the viewers. The viewers’ responses to the art often reflected a creative process in themselves, where they too engaged in a journey of Preparation, Ambiguity, Incubation, Illumination, Elaboration and Communication. Robbins notes that in the creative process, just as on the spiritual journey, we do not arrive, for “there is always another creative task ahead of us.”\textsuperscript{212} In the outworking of this project, it became apparent that the next creative task was often claimed by the viewer, who proceeded to engage in the process for themselves.

Consider the unfolding of the creative process for one of the viewers as he followed through the research protocol. In noting his initial response to Ben’s work, Graham wrote, “Oh dear! What is this?” Pausing, he was asked to see how this changed when sitting with the work. “I can see form and shape emerging.” Then asked to describe what he saw, Graham entered a journey of ambiguity, allowing questions to emerge. “A building lit up on a hill, perhaps an historic building, and in the foreground a modern city with traffic lights. Why is the building on the hill clothed in light, and the modern city in semi-darkness? What is one to make of the rectangle which shows more light?” Graham was then stimulated to imagine, or wonder, what this might be about. “Perhaps it is an ancient Greek temple surviving on a hill, surrounded by a developing modern city; perhaps some symbolic message between the ancient civilization (ancient Greece) and the modern world.” His own resonances with the image grew into the creation of an imaginary story, where he pondered the need for our civilization to learn from the glory of the ancient Greeks.

\textsuperscript{211} See also sections on 3.iii Art as Meeting Place and 3.vii The Numinous
\textsuperscript{212} Lois Robbins, Waking Up 29
In the conversation with the artist a week later, Graham tentatively posed his view. “So, can you help me. What’s on top of the hill there?” After a deflective, non-specific response from the artist, he said, “So, it could be my little Greek Temple?” Affirmed by the artist, he continued to imagine, “For me it would be symbolic of the sophistication of Ancient Greece. Here we are in the modern world with our street lights and business and traffic. They had none of that in Ancient Greece." Graham had found himself with an insight about the work that had actually enlarged his own understanding and experience. He had allowed his creative imagination enough freedom to illuminate an experience of the work, and in turn, his experience of the world.

On other occasions, when invited to engage in his own creative process, Graham would think of a piece of music. On the very first evening as he concluded his questionnaire, his comment was, “If I had to select a piece of music to go with this work of art, it would be Edvard Grieg’s Morning from Peer Gynt. The piece of music is as if the sun is just coming up. Everything is new and everything is fresh.” This creative response stimulated me to actually include the question in protocol of the next three rounds: If the work were a piece of music, what would it be?

This small illustration outlines the journey of viewers within the creative process that merges into their own creative responses, and indeed, prompts creativity toward the future. Viewers, having been encouraged to engage with the art, sat with the ambiguity of their experience, allowing themselves the discomfort of uncertainty about what they were seeing. As they sat longer with the work and allowed it to incubate in their experience, a point of illumination occurred. From that moment of recognition or even imagination, they elaborated an understanding of what was happening in the work from their own experience. Echoing the creative process of the artist, viewers were then able to explore their own perception, that is, to give voice to the resonant image they had created in their own minds.

This creative process of the artist finds itself then mirrored in the experience of the viewer. It has the potential to continue the creative cycle from artist to viewer, echoing creativity beyond the confines of
what any single artist can imagine when she begins the process with a single problem or question. It may look something like this:

Preparation
  Ambiguity
  Incubation
  Illumination
  Elaboration
  Communication
  Preparation
  Ambiguity
  Incubation
  Illumination
  Elaboration
  Communication
  Preparation...
  Ambiguity...

At every point of communication, there lies the potential for a question to emerge from which the creative process is stimulated. The story of the art stimulates the viewer’s own creative response to the story. For Graham, he could wonder about classical music. Another viewer leapt up from her chair and danced the art. “There is a lot of movement in the picture for me. I’m a trained dancer. This work is harder to write about, or listen and talk about… I would rather interpret through movement.” Julie got up and did a slashing movement. Yet another viewer burst into song. Their reflective process with the art had stimulated a creative response, which became their communication.

The research process extended the viewer in his desire to look more closely and intentionally in an ongoing way. One of the respondents voiced this beautifully: “to sit in front of a painting for a long time is a very powerful thing. I think I will now do it more often.” Indeed, eleven of the twelve respondents to the final questionnaire noted that the process of looking and being invited to see would greatly impact their experience of intentionally looking into the future (Appendix V).
One of the viewers reflected upon the actual process of engaging with Debbie’s art, and responded personally by describing a movement within the painting that she saw mirrored within herself. 

*From darkness to light is about focus; wonder; further exploration; which allows insights to arise. Testing insights leads to new realizations, actions and more depth of understanding. This piece of art took me on this journey. Engagement with the artist will test my insights further.*

It should be noted that she didn’t say that it will test them with a measure of right or wrong. The word *test* is used more to extend or push the insights in deeper ways. She is aware that this art extends her further. Later, she exclaimed, “This is what art is about. It is not about a photo, it is about discovery.” Her experience of the art process stimulated her own creative response, where she again took out her pastels and discovered a freedom to explore creatively that she had not previously experienced. “I just started to use pastels, because I wanted to do something on the paper…suddenly I was quite shocked by what was coming out of it, so I kept going back and looking at it and thinking…oh!”

The connection between the artist and viewer in this final communication stage is critical in order to understand how art has the capacity to transform. Robbins claims that

*in it we are transformed out of our former beliefs about our nature and the world into a larger understanding and experience of God’s love and the nature of reality…Both the world and the individual are made whole by divine love flowing between you and me. We both exist in divine love.*

What this project reveals is how the mirroring of the artists’ creative process in the viewer can be an expression of that extended and deepened understanding and experience of God. The process of the artist’s creativity was reflected in the viewers experiences. In other words, the creativity of the art continued its recognizable pattern and process, even un-selfconsciously, in the viewers’ experience. The viewer is in some way affected by – transformed - by the experience, extended in their beliefs and understandings of

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213 Lois Robbins, *Waking up in the Age of Creativity* 28
the world and drawn to their own creative response. And so the cycle continues.

Connection with art is not an end in itself, but an invitation for us to respond creatively. We become co-creator in the experience of the piece of art, as well as responding creatively. Friedhelm Mennekes claims, “religion and art are both rooted in the human need to create, in the euphoria of such a creation, and in the constant compulsion to communicate one’s deepest feelings.”\(^{214}\) His argument suggests that the desire to communicate things of meaning connects the two intrinsically. As Matthew Fox explores the Dabhar, as the “word that is the divine creative energy”\(^{215}\), the call is for all people to be awakened to the creative, imaginative reality of God. Being awoken to the creative energy of God, demands a creative response. We become alive to savouring the creative experience. Fox claims that “the artist in each one of us needs to be let out of the closet. It deserves to be shared, to be wondered at, to be celebrated and to be critiqued.”\(^{216}\) Indeed, as we allow this energy to flow from the very depth of who we are, then we are truly allowing the creative energy of God to flow through us.

This is not an elitist notion that elevates an exclusive world of great artists, as such, but is rather a call to all people to allow their unique creativity to be unleashed. Within the context of this project, that creative energy was awakened in the viewers, as a response to the call to create, offered by the artist, who had in turn been called to create. And so the cycle continues. In so doing, all are seeking to express their unique creative expression of the experience of existence.

\(^{215}\) Matthew Fox, Original Blessing (Santa Fe : Bear & Co, 1983) 37
\(^{216}\) Matthew Fox, Original Blessing 185 Fox goes on to argue that this creative unleashing will take various creative forms, as it did within the project, from writing or dancing, to storytelling or clowning, painting or parenting.
3.v Seeing as…

It’s imagination, isn’t it? It’s a question?
Where am I? Inside looking out?
Where does your imagination take you?

What we see and how we see is profoundly affected by a range of things, particularly our previous experience and our expectations, as well as our ocular vision. In this project we are drawing a distinction between vision, or what might be indeed be classified as ocular vision, and the capacity to see. What we see concerns a much more complex mix of factors, known as Visual Culture\(^{217}\), which impacts on the interpretation of an art work. Richard Gregory argues that the mind tests hypotheses in order to identify meaning in that which is seen. “Seeing is an interpretive action that relies on memories and experiences of the observer as the world out there is represented in the mind.”\(^{218}\) We seek to understand what we see from past experience. Questions are formed in our mind that seek to discover either resonance and recognition, or even dissonance, from some previous experience.

During this research project what people saw when viewing a work of art, or what they imagined they saw, became their visual experience of the art. When a viewer looked at the work of art their eyes immediately began to send signals to their brain to look for resonances and dissonances that made sense of the work. Looking at Libby’s work, one viewer responded that he saw “a body lying on its side”. Libby had not intended to draw a figure lying on its side and no other viewers reported seeing this figure. Something in the connection between that particular viewer’s eyes with the canvas sent neurological impulses to his brain that triggered resonances from his personal memory, causing him to actually see a body lying on its side. Thus, imagination is drawn from a memory or

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\(^{217}\) S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual Culture*

\(^{218}\) Richard Gregory in S Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art and Visual Culture*
experience of the viewer that gives him the capacity to interpret what he is seeing in a particular way. Similarly, one viewer’s memory was piqued whilst looking at Ben’s painting, to recall her experience of the Melbourne sky in a storm. As she remembered, she re-imagined, and allowed her imagination to feed her excitement at the memory.

Memory created the resonances which allowed viewers to see an image in a more complex way – that is, within a larger context. “I saw the Prisoner of Askaban – Harry Potter – a tree with a full moon, reminded me of this – one turns into a were-wolf,” explained one viewer of Debbie’s work. Another saw “A Midsummer Night’s Dream – an old black and white movie”. Yet another was taken “to the story of the giving tree in the Jewish tradition”. Memory of personal experience shaped the seeing, and indeed the seeing stimulated the memory. The two come into dialogue as imagination.

This invitation to enter the seeing of another person occurred in the dialogue that took place between viewers and artists. One of the viewers took the artist on a journey into his own imagination. The validation of this journey by the artist was important to the viewer, as was the opening up of his way of seeing.

Viewer : “And then I had another funny imagination. I wondered if this was a cave, and the first rays of light coming into this cave for the morning… I think I was just letting my imagination and free association with the forms that were on the canvas…”

Libby : “That’s really interesting. I haven’t seen it from that perspective before, but I think it makes sense.”

Viewer : “Are you saying it is plausible?”

Libby : “It is very plausible. And we would be within the cave.”

Viewer : “Who’s to say that Adam and Eve weren’t created in the cave and this is their first morning!”

The unfolding of this viewer’s imagination took both the viewer and the artist into a story. They began to enter into the experience of that first day, wondering what it might be like, considering concepts of creation and life. Their imagination, fed by their experience and stimulated by the image, unleashed a story.
The capacity to see is not contained by the image within the frame, but is extended beyond the canvas. Two viewers explored with Libby the question, “If it were possible, and the canvas extended to the left, what would it be?” Libby entered the imagination of the other and responded, “If it continues, day would break, and then the colours ultimately, would become really ordinary and turn to just that dusty orange rather than that glowing light... you could do it all the way around, couldn’t you?” Artist and viewer allowed their imagination to expand beyond the canvas. Looking at Debbie’s work, one viewer pondered, “I want to see what is on the other side of this tree.” The imagination is piqued, curiosity awoken.

It wasn’t just the breadth of the canvas being explored, but also the depth. Viewers were able to imagine themselves within the image itself. One viewer asked Libby, “How big are we though? If you were in that picture how big would you be? Put me in that picture, and that slither of light ain’t that small any more! Or is that all we can see because we have got those two big bloody rocks there in the way!” He was imagining the experience of being within the canvas as part of the picture, looking out, in a similar way to viewers wondering if they were inside John’s reliquary looking out, or outside looking in. The painting took on a three dimensional effect. “Something takes your imagination and you want to create it and put yourself in it...” reflected one viewer, aware that she was being carried away into the work.

This notion of extending or depthing the canvas is an attempt to extend the horizon of the experience even further. The image stimulates beyond itself into a seeing that is larger than the image itself. The image then engages a depth that allows itself to expand. Working with people pastorally, sharing stories, I find myself saying, “I wonder what that would look like”, in an attempt to encourage growth in the capacity to imagine life beyond this moment. Indeed, each of the artists described this dynamic themselves. In the exhibition accompanying the presentation of preliminary findings, Libby Byrne actually exhibited a series of seven paintings which had been drawn as slices of the original work Light of the World. The original painting was sliced and expanded, so that the complexity of colour and depth could be explored. The question what would this look like? became a question of looking into the painting and seeing depth, rather than extending the canvas in any one direction. This
process of seeing into the painting was very much an act of imagination.

James Elkins argues that there is no such thing as looking without entanglement with that which is looked at. This entanglement extends such that the object which is looked at becomes part of who I am. The hooks of the art reach out and tug at the viewer. This was reflected by one viewer of Libby’s work who ventured, “The wild wood and all the evil that exists there in the midst of the light… kept coming out and saying, I’m here! Look at me!” The power of what is being looked at impacts upon the viewer illustrating Elkin’s notion of entanglement. The viewer was drawn into the image, and was personally affected by the image itself. “It’s almost like the light was drawing everything to it. That’s what I kept…with the rocks… that sense of drawing… to the rocks…” The conversation that takes place between the viewer and the art has an influence upon the way the imagination is unleashed. Certainly, the visual culture of the conversation offers potentially diverse interpretation and experience. Indeed, one viewer commented to the artist, “There are things that we see in there, where you say that you don’t see, and that’s the baggage we bring.” He was aware that the conversation between himself and the art was personal, drawing on his own memory and experience and extending his own imaginative response. There was no such thing as the object of the art, for he as subject brought himself into the work. In so doing, he illustrated Elkin’s claim that seeing is always a two-way process, and that the observer is changed in the interaction.

*There is no such thing as just looking, and there is also no such thing as an object that is simply looked at by something else called an observer. Looking is much too complex to be reduced to a formula that has a looking subject and a seen object. If I observe attentively enough, I find that my observations are tangles with the object, that the object is part of the world and therefore part of me, that looking is something I do but also something that happens to me.*

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219 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 18ff
220 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* 35
One viewer responded animatedly to Ben’s work, after having realized that on the second week she saw something completely different. Other viewers’ suggestions had stayed with her, and the light in the room and the space to reflect altered her seeing just as the experience of seeing the work for the second time changed her perception.

"It’s like that brain teaser where you see an image and it is whether you see one thing or Jesus’ head or an old crone. That’s what I’m having with this now. Last week there was no shape in there. It was just suggestions of maybe it could be this or that. Now it could be a streetscape. Man! That’s all I can see. I can see headlights coming at me, I can see wet roads, trees, light poles…!"

There is a sense in which what we see confronts us with who we are. We see light-poles or flowers because of who we are, and we see a dead body, because of who we are. And indeed, that which we see in turn enlarges who we are, activating our imagination from this memory-shaping experience.

The process of seeing requires certain disciplines, skills that can be learned and developed. There is “a profound correspondence between the seeing-skills that can be developed by giving our attention to significant art and those that are essential for the spiritual quest.”221 By engaging in a process of looking, the viewer discovers the resonance which allows meaning to occur, which in turn stimulates the capacity to imagine and so see into the future.

One of the viewers spoke simply of the experience of sitting with the painting, attending to what was before her, and allowing the image to emerge slowly.

"I sat here with it and just kept seeing all this light that was there and was just waiting for me to see when I first saw the painting, and I didn’t see it. And so it was just an exercise to sit here and look at it and let the light show itself and that was the thing that was strongest for me, that I saw out of it."
Kidd and Sparkes explain these dynamics in terms of the Effort of Imagination: “genuine understanding of any other is the fruit of concentrated attention – whether the other is a poem, painting or a person – and attention of this kind demands effort…The point is that significant insight, vision, does not arrive on a plate.” One of the viewers commented generally about her appreciation of art as that which continued to speak: “It is good if you can have something that you can look at everyday and see something different, or see a different interpretation.”

Interpreting what one sees, that is investing the image with some meaning, is a critical part of the process of seeing and allowing the imagination to make sense of what is seen. One viewer considered the gaps in Debbie’s work, interpreting them as “Hope in the darkness – that’s in seeing the little white space.” The spaces were meaningful spaces for her, interpreted in a way that makes sense of them. Rather than vacant spaces, she imagined something meaningful into them.

This awareness of the art inviting viewers and artists alike to attend to the imaginative experience, stimulated by the image before them, was illustrated by Ben in his explanation of the series of work The Page. He explained that the page itself pointed to the word of God. Through the word of God, I believe that everything is illuminated and magnified and truthful. It is like a reverse filter so to speak… not so much a filter like sunglasses to block out the sun, but maybe like a magnifying glass that makes everything truer and clearer and more as it is meant to be.

He sees his work as stimulating heightened attention to the image, and ultimately extending imagination beyond. He recognizes that this is his intent, and “what other people see, well that’s fine! What people do with that is up to them, and between them and God, really.” The imagination will lead different people down various tracks, as it did with the viewers considering his work. For one viewer, “I am in a modern city and I can see street lights there. So, am I looking through a window or am I looking through something...”

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222 Richard Kidd & Graham Sparkes, God and the Art of Seeing Preview
symbolic and I am looking back into the past. Am I looking at an ancient Greek temple on the hill?” For another, “I’d wondered if it were the Middle East.” Yet another thought, “it had a bit of a Dutch interior feel to it”, and still another had framed a large interpretative understanding around the work, concluding that it captured the “twilight between Golden Jerusalem and the city that we now live in.” Viewers did not see a static image but rather attended to the image that extended their imaginative sight. Each one sought to work with the impact it had upon them and to make sense of the image.

As some viewers reflected with John about “fluffy ducks” in the windows of his reliquary, and Hansel and Gretel stories of childhood, John was clear about drawing connection between belief and the source of imagination.

Beliefs and imagination come from the same source, the spiritual mind, the spiritual part of the person. It was critical in that piece that people would look in the mirror and see themselves. That was the whole question about my own destiny.

This interplay of seeing yourself in the art and allowing your own experience to release imagination enough to grapple with what is before you, is what he was conscious of doing. In this way you discover yourself. One insightful viewer recognized just this: “It’s imagination, isn’t it? It’s a question? Where am I? Inside looking out? Where does your imagination take you?”

A further extension of this understanding of image stimulating imagination into a reflection of meaning comes in the question of whether an image opens one to attend to life in a more general sense. Are our senses awoken in a broader way? This question found some resonances in the research. When asked what stuck during the week after having looked at Debbie’s work, one viewer responded by saying, “The actual shape of the tree stayed with me, and it made me focus on other tree shapes.” Her capacity to attend to other trees was heightened by having attended to the image before her. Her awareness was heightened. Another said of Libby’s work, “I just keep seeing the painting in my mind… the strong visual that I have in my mind of your work.”
Imagination, nurtured by attending to the experience of the art, stimulated emotional responses as well. One viewer looking at John’s reliquary exclaimed: “Will I run the other way? Oh my God! I can see myself in there… as I’m looking in…” She was experiencing fears and limits and constraints. Her own fears and limits were confronted within the work. In viewing this work, another felt “trapped, and there was no way out. There were windows, but they wouldn’t open. There are no doors.” She was aware that this was about her own experience, but what she saw stimulated her imagination and led to an emotional response.

The question of where the imagination extends was explored a little. It was clear that the image and consequent imaginative response had the potential to stimulate and enrich the experience of faith. It was moving to hear one viewer describe his experience of a deepening understanding of God through reflection upon Debbie Hill’s work. He says,

*what this has done is throw up for me ‘faith’. I’ve always thought of faith as some sort of positive reassurance of God and his working. I began to think about faith as a wall, or as a barrier, not necessarily to be climbed over or broken through but it appears to limit. So it has been interesting to pause and think of faith in a different context…. Now I’m beginning to think of faith almost as a hard place.*

Whilst uncomfortable, the experience of viewing the art and being immersed within it had challenged his experience of faith, and stimulated consideration of the nature of his lived experience. The art had touched him at a faith level, and demanded of him attention that had otherwise not happened.

This capacity to draw meaning from the art work relies upon an openness to *imagine* and a discipline of reflection. That is, there is a need to take one’s field of vision, one’s experience, one’s memory and one’s understanding, and place them in a disciplined process of reflection in order that the richer meaning in the experience of the art may be discovered. Consideration of art using the processes of Theological Reflection - in terms of attending, asserting and decision - allows the sources of imagination to be valued as part of the discipline for understanding experience.
The process of viewing art is echoed in the process of reflecting upon life experience. To see something as something else, that is, to give the imagination space to extend beyond the represented shape and reflect upon all the sources that inform the activity of *seeing* opens the way for deepening understanding of the experience that lies beyond the seeing itself. The viewer continues to attend to the image before him and the questions that arise for him. A tentative assertion of this experience has the potential of leading toward a shift of understanding that is clearer, and that allows an enriching understanding to emerge. It is then for the viewer to decide whether to engage with that new understanding, to decide what it means for their present and future life.
3.6 Metaphor

To everything there is a season…
a season of darkness and a season of light.
What do we see when we reflect this light
in a dark world?

Art is representational. That is, it seeks to re-present the artist’s experience of reality to the viewer. A viewer may exclaim of a painting, “Look at that beautiful boat!” But of course, they see not a boat, but a picture seeking to represent a boat in some genre or another. The representation is symbolic of the actual boat, and is recognizable because of memory and experience. A memory or experience of the viewer is triggered by the visual image before them.

In this research project, where the art was chosen from a contemporary semi-abstract base, the question of what people see in the images became significant. What occurred was that images were readily accessed at a metaphorical level by viewers, and then often extended in interpretation as archetypal images. The art reached a level of representing what people experience as ultimate truths. For example, the darkness and light within the images was drawn into dialogue with life as hidden and revealed, good and evil, truth and deception, hope and despair. People readily made connections between the visual image and the metaphoric meaning.

Interpreting the work metaphorically functioned on different levels. Firstly, viewers tended to use metaphor to describe what they actually saw. They would describe parts of an image as a cave or a veil. The words acted as a form of identifying the subject matter of the work. Secondly, viewers used metaphor to describe their own response to the work or their own engagement with the work. They would even place themselves within the work. And thirdly, metaphor was extended as a marker of universal or archetypal meaning. That is, the viewers drew from larger metaphors of meaning within the image to understand it at a deeper level. We will examine how this unfolded with each of the artists.
As the viewers dialogued with Libby Byrne’s work, they began to describe the figures in the work in dynamic terms. The images were seen as taking on a power in and of themselves. The nature of light was explored as a powerful reality by one viewer – “light is actually being able to push the boulders aside... that’s a really explosive type of thing... almost pulsing, vibrating”. Similarly, in trying to describe the features of the work, images were stimulated in the viewers’ minds and used to describe the work. In Libby’s work, the veil or curtain was used by many to describe one part of the canvas. One viewer commented “I’m very interested in that womb shape too.” And another saw this same light as an eye.

The interpretation of art drawing on metaphor extended even further, as Libby and others described their personal experience of such light breaking through within their own experience. Light is understood as illumination of life's experience, or insight. Libby explained that the work “speaks into my experience... that our brokenness, that God’s breaking seems to come from inside, not outside, expanding, till it breaks open - rather than an attack from outside that breaks it, or breaks me.” One viewer went so far as to describe “That’s my cave where I’ve been.” The notion of not being able to see clearly, of being veiled in darkness, of unseen and hidden things surprising us, engendered fear for some. “The fear I had in driving up to the Devil’s marbles was around what I couldn’t see and what might surprise me... what might jump out at me when I’m not expecting it.” One of the viewers extended this metaphor of light and seeing to light as a descriptor of life, “the light describes things... it describes shape, for you can’t see without it. It even describes us.” In saying this he was grappling with the notion of illumination offering shape and form to reality.

Metaphorical understanding was deepened, as Libby sought to describe why the image was being expressed as it was, ascribing meaning as she did so. “I think this would be the sort of space God would enter the world, because it is a God-forsaken place. It is a place that is crying out for God. It comes into that other layer, of what scares us and what becomes really difficult and dark. That’s the space for this little crack of light.” As Libby described the yellow crack of light, she even exchanged the word light for hope explaining, “I was painting the hope as a solid thing, like concrete. I was trying to get a concrete feel to it. There has always been that
sense that hope is something that is solid." This almost tangible sense of hope was captured by the viewers, who recognized how powerful the size and solidity of the hope was in the work. One viewer said, “Light being like a piece of hope… like you were trapped in a cave, you know, if that wasn’t there, your mental state would be somewhat more bleak… like those two guys in Tassie.” The image made its connection with story and experience, and moved easily to making sense of experience in the light of universal themes of hope and despair.

Archetypal images of good versus evil were also ventured as one viewer reflected that the image was like “Christ’s victory over the almost hellish reality, the darkest most hidden parts of us.” Light, as an expression of the revelation of God, will break through. “No matter how dark night may seem, there is still light. If you sit with it enough, you will actually see light.” The nature of life is used in describing the way the light works. As Libby explained, “So light has made its way into the space between the rocks, like an egg is fertilized by the sperm.” As one viewer described the work as **ephemeral**, another struggled to define what was happening in terms of the layers of metaphor occurring – they are “Images of themselves or impressions rather than actual.” In such a comment, the viewer is aware that they are looking at a figurative suggestion of a reality, not the actual reality of rocks and stones. A reflection on the experience of reality is stimulated by the image.

As viewers grappled with Ben Winspear’s *Page* format, they naturally moved to describing the work metaphorically - descriptively, personally and archetypally.

At the first level, viewers grappled with the actual frame of the work, and used metaphors to describe what they were seeing. Mark commented, “It’s almost the picture within the picture… talks to me of a power in the picture and strength in the image. It seems to frame one scene, and yet it seems to be a picture itself.” Viewers went to great lengths to describe the temple on the hill, or Jerusalem, the birds in the sky, the figures pointing up the hill. The frame took the viewers into reflection upon time-space modalities of medieval and modern, country and city.
One viewer then extended this use of metaphor to describe his experience of the work, almost as though he was within the work itself. The art became a metaphor that invited the viewer to enter.

*The way that marks your work is having that rectangle within and it is almost as though you are in a glass box, floating above something and you are looking out of a window in a glass box. So you get this effect where light is coming through the walled area, and being affected by the wall. The central rectangle of course, is just clear air.*

The viewer projecting themselves into the image, experiencing the floating and perceiving from within the image itself.

One of the artists, reflecting on Ben’s work, affirmed the technique used, and exclaimed passionately, “You have a voice! I just have a vocabulary.” In using the metaphor she was both affirming the skill of the artist, as well as expressing her experience of the work – she was experiencing it with all the nuance and subtlety of integrated expression.

The artist was aware that he was working with a universal image, and that those images embody a meaning that transcends the time and place in which the art was located. “I have always been drawn to the light and dark together… and light is very much about hope.” Specifically, this body of work exploring the Page was taking him to a deeper level of understanding.

*In my paintings and in my thinking about painting, and actually painting them, and working through other stuff, there has come a theme, and it is called the Page. So it is symbolic of a page. The page is symbolic of the Word of God. I believe through the word of God things are magnified, clearly, as they are meant to be. Everything is clear, truthful - as it is meant to be. So instead of looking through a dirty glass, it is like a clean area of it. But in the exploration it has become more than just a symbol of a page; it has become like a doorway or a portal between two worlds.*

The portal was meant to suggest the possibility of something more, to invite the viewer into a movement that connects the image itself with a beyond. The viewer is extended into the world beyond the page, suggesting an engagement with God. The link between the
image painted, that is, the wet city-street in the foreground, the stormy sky with light breaking through within the Page, and the archetypal truth being expressed, was not lost for the viewers. As Sandra expressed, “I think the light symbolizes, and it does here too, the hope, or the passing of the storm.” This capacity for the art to extend beyond the limits of its own canvas and connect with the wider experience of humanity was drawn out by one of the other artist-viewers. “It’s like when you hit on a universal truth. This is something like hope or suffering that’s universal. If you say something about it, it can speak to more people than just one viewpoint.”

The three levels of metaphor are explored within John’s work. The small closed reliquaries, at a primary level, became symbols of quaint country churches, gingerbread houses from fairy stories, sacred reliquaries for bones of saints and even suspended little churches with feet “on the move”. Even the glass on the windows simulated fluffy ducks and cute puppies for a couple of viewers. For some, this coffin-like image articulated their own thinking about church. “For me that symbolizes the death of the symbol of what probably stands for institutional church,” lamented one minister. As John described the various appropriated ecclesiastical symbols, he was aware of the metaphor working on two levels. He wanted “to remind the viewer of old churchy stuff” as well as reflect upon their experience. Explaining the use of fleur de lis on either end of the reliquary as both practical and figurative was interesting. It needed the physical strength to hold the clay, but also needed a figurative level of strength. He says they were chosen “because of the strength of the symbol itself, it is able to hold that weight… the people are guards or whatever… but it is a great thing to hold the church up!”

As the viewers sat with the work, the next layer of metaphor emerged. People were invited to look into the reliquary, to consider themselves within it and note their experience of it. One viewer commented, “Whilst we are inside we are also outside holding the thing up.” Others were challenged by this invitation to enter the reliquary. One viewer declared, “I reacted to this and I had wondered whether the faith was trapped, and there was no way out. There were windows, but they wouldn’t open. There are no doors. So you’re trapped in this!” Yet another viewer was excited by the
invitation to experience herself within the image. “The challenge is to look inside myself as a metaphor. That’s why I loved it. Because I think that is the whole thing. It’s not about head and dogma, but it’s about inner journey for me, and life experience. And that’s like a little slap in the face! Oh, well I’d better go off and take another look at myself.” This was where John had anticipated the viewers might journey, taking the work into their own experience. He explained,

*The mirror is really important because it is where you see yourself, and you start to pour yourself into the reliquary. And all that means – your own mortality, your own beliefs particularly, and where you are at with it… and all sorts of other things as well… I mean, you don’t just stick on that religious stuff – it could be the fairy stories and all sorts of things – the magic mirror and the nasty queen.*

In essence, as viewers sat with the art they were challenged to reflect upon their own experience of life and belief. “Since having spent time with the piece, it has been for me really coming back to the idea of belief and self-reflection.” The metaphor spoke into their personal experience.

As the dialogue continued there was a growing awareness that this work reflected a universal story. Note this brief exchange that occurred after discussing fairy-tales and saints, stories recalled from childhood. John was attempting to validate the viewers’ recollection of childhood myths, and that all these stories hold the “beauty alongside the beast”, the “mystery and the macabre” held together.

*John : Isn’t that interesting. That is about the fight between good and evil. Isn’t that the basis of fairy stories?*
*Viewer : Yes, they are metaphors for the bigger story, aren’t they!*

Whilst this journey of creating *closed reliquaries* came from his own journey of reflection, he was aware that there are primal elements of the experience of humanity. Indeed, the actual techniques of making and shaping his art embody an experience of transformation, which he described in terms of the essence of being, from within his faith tradition.

*In Catholic tradition sharing of communion is the principle of transubstantiation. The substance remains the same, but the essence changes – the essence ‘earth and water’ through a*
The archetypal nature of matter and spirit as substance is reflected in the transformation of the clay and fire in this work. The nature of his artistic process allows him to experience transformation in a way that reflects his sacred belief.

"Is the white blank square faith you take or offer, or something missing in the world? Is Faith missing?" Reflections on Debbie Hill’s work began at the level of why the word Faith was printed all over the page, and what the gaps were about. The questions themselves revealed an awareness that the work was about faith and meaning at a metaphoric level. Debbie too, was conscious that her work was a metaphoric expression of meaning. At one point she described the technique of printing the paper with the word faith without spaces, and later choosing to either overlay or underlay the script with blank rectangles. She decided it was important that the blank spaces were over the top of the words, rather than the words spaced around the rectangles, because she wanted to express the subtlety that “The gaps were literally that, because people go through life and they have gaps in their faith, where they doubt their faith.” These questions of gaps or blank spaces were the starting point for the viewers’ curiosity. The printed word faith functioned as a metaphor for the experience of faith or lack of it.

The placement of the candle as the source of light within the picture was very important to Debbie, not just in the sense of revealing the image on the page, but also in expressing a level of meaning within the work.

The light is really important to all religions, so I wanted to get it as small as I possibly could to emit this great amount of light. It couldn’t possibly happen. But it does, and faith is like that too. You say some things couldn’t possibly happen, but they do!

So small was the candle that some viewers did not even see it. When it was noticed, it made a dramatic difference to the way people ascribed metaphoric meaning to the work. One viewer couldn’t make the connection with the images at first. “I actually saw
the tree and the writing as two separate languages that didn’t quite meet. It was like something was talking at me in Math and something was talking at me in colour.” However, as she noticed the candle, she was able to enter the work at a different level.

The writing for me was like the ritual… the stuff you do that is in and of itself of little value except that it puts you in a position where you can be acted upon. The tree I thought was nature, that you could find God in nature, or whatever… But it is all noise, the nature is noise, and everything going around you is noise, except the still small voice in there.

This revelation of the still small voice, symbolized by the candle, gave her a way of receiving the work for herself.

As viewers began to take the metaphor to a personal level, it began to connect with their personal experience and discover a resonance with their own meaningful reflection. Jane was almost triumphant as she exclaimed, “It challenges the notion that faith is black and white – No! There is a lot of grey!” Paul allowed himself to enter the metaphor and look “through the window, to faith, to God’s presence. The faith is coming through to us”. John, in the experience of darkness, was led to recall a personal family tragedy, not in a destructive way, but as a story that unfolded with a background of faith.

And finally, the shift occurred where questions of universal meaning emerged. Debbie was asked, “Is this the tree of good and evil? Tree of life?” And when a viewer tentatively prodded “You work in black”, Debbie responded immediately, “Yes, but the light is most important!” The use of light to reflect the subtleties of life was most clearly expressed for her in the genre of charcoal. The technique of the charcoal on transparent drafting film was integral to the metaphor. Life is subtle. Not all can be seen. And what is unseen is as significant as what is revealed by light. Debbie described her intention

is not to light up the whole being, but where the light hits and it just makes it strong. It is really strong, and you don’t need to show it like a photograph, all that – sometimes it is just those small areas that are just a pool of light. I really like it and for me it is a real challenge which part is going to be
hit, and what is going to be seen and what is not going to be seen. So what is not going to be seen is probably just as important as what is going to be seen. There is something beautiful about it. It is like a foggy night.

The metaphor of light expresses the experience of life in all its complexity, illuminating experience so that meaning may be reflected. And the metaphor extends to a universal understanding that becomes symbolic. Bernard Lonergan defines the symbol as “an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling.” Symbols become both representative and expressive of meaning. They become a means of communicating and understanding. Lonergan argues, “It is through symbols that mind and body, mind and heart, heart and body communicate.” In this project, artists express their meaning in images which are interpreted symbolically by viewers, who are then drawn to express their own meaning. The symbol or metaphor used may be obvious or obscure, it may be universal or particular to an individual’s experience, but at its deepest level it gives shape to meaning.

At its very simplest level, the metaphor works in the image being seen like something else. The metaphor deepens to an experience of the art. And finally, the metaphor extends to the level of symbol that is an expression of some personal, and potentially universal, human experience.

223 Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology 64
224 Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology 67
3.vii Exploring the numinous

**It’s like that thin place between what we understand and the spiritual world**

One comes to reflection upon art with two possible types of questions: Closed questions and Open questions. Closed questions demand an answer, explanation or clarification. Open questions point us beyond the question into a journey of discovery. They invite further exploration. Most often they do not expect a direct answer. These questions reflect different levels of engagement with reality - the experience of concrete existence and the experience of the mystery.

Art, by its very nature, stimulates questions. During the process, all participants were invited to attend to the questions that emerged for them. The temptation was to look for an answer, to offer explanation or clarification. But again and again the artists responded by returning to the open nature of their work, and the need for viewers to sit with the unanswered questions. Direct questions, like “Is this Christ’s tomb?” “How can you get such detail with such similar colours?” “What are the tubular bits in the foreground that look like light poles?” “What is that on the hill?” and “Is this an actual place?” became overlaid with questions with other levels of meaning, “What is the source of light?” “Am I inside looking out, or outside looking in?” “What are the spaces, like questions, but hidden?” Such questions then moved to questions of deep faith: “Is faith as precarious as this house looks?” “Does my faith illuminate my dark places?” “Why is it that light appears strongest in the darkness?” This movement in the level of questioning by the viewers took them from clear, answerable questions to a place where the questions remained unanswerable.

So began a growing link between question and mystery. John O’Loughlin described the awakening of the experience of mystery in exploring his work. His work itself became the opening to an experience rather than the closing down of a problem to be solved or defined.
Mystery is described by another word, and that is ‘problem’. And in our scientific age, we want to turn mysteries into problems and we want to solve the problem. And as I was playing around with reliquaries and realizing there are mysteries that aren’t solvable, I’m recognizing there are mysteries we can’t know, unfolding through our life, that maybe we will find out later, when we die… maybe… that is the question. And I thought, wow, that is terrific. The difference between a mystery and a problem could well be the answer. We’re trying to solve problems, but we’ve got mysteries that are unsolvable.

The intent of the presenting artists was to engage in their own process of reflection, being open to attend to their own experience of the world. John’s own journey of making art progressed to a point where the work offered him a revelation.

As I progressed through my study I was making boxes and you opened them to reveal the mystery, and then I got to the point one day where I made one, a reliquary, and it was only afterwards that I was looking at it… I realized that the piece was telling me that there are mysteries that you can’t know. That in this life there are things that you cannot fully understand. You can’t get inside and see it all.

This revelation for John shaped his entire body of work as he sought to express creatively an openness to mystery. This awakening to the mystery has the potential to awaken another to the questions that extend their own experience, to discover the resonance within themselves that draws beyond. Art, in this sense is not so much about offering information about the world, but transforming the experience of the world. I am reminded of the

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225 John O’Loughlin exhibited his entire body of Work for his Master’s Degree in Fine Art through Ballarat University, 19-29 September 2007, exhibiting the journey of exploring faith through ceramic art, in particular the movement from open to closed reliquaries. His thesis title was On the Inability to Disallow Belief

226 For clarification of this link see Art as Meeting Place
words of Francis Bacon, “The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery.”

John is clear about what he is doing, in inviting the viewer on her own journey: “The artwork is designed to create questions. It is not designed to answer. It is my contribution so folk think about their own beliefs.” And that was certainly received by the viewers. Jane found the work gave shape to a question for her. “It’s a question. Where am I? Inside looking out? Where does your imagination take you?” Mark similarly experienced the work itself with all its hiddenness and possibility of unknown. “There is still that sense of what is inside? To create a question of what’s inside this? Is it secret? Is it for eyes? There is a sense of mystery about what’s inside.”

John had very deliberately cloaked his work in religious imagery, but offered a surprise for the viewer, an obscured mirror that posed as a window. As the viewer looked into the reliquary to see the sacred relic, they saw themselves. “It’s looking into the reliquary and finding yourself in it, asking yourself all those questions that it raises… about beliefs, miracles, saints, afterlife? How far can I go in this questioning/doubting process?” All of the groups were led to consider the concept of seeing through a glass dimly. Reality is obscured – we see but a glimpse. Life is mystery. The journey of the artist as being prepared to sit in this mystery is honoured by one viewer who comments, “It is interesting to know that you are creating your search through your art… I enjoyed the aspect of the not knowing. We see through the glass dimly. We’re not meant to know it all!”

Libby Byrne similarly sought to invite the viewers into their own journey of mystery. The work is not so much intended to answer life’s questions about the source of light and life, but rather a way of piquing curiosity in the viewer, to look carefully in the dark places for the surprises that await. “It is important for me to want to leave the viewer with the unresolved rather than the resolved”. And indeed, all

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227 This often quoted statement is variously attributed to Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Francis Bacon (1902-1997) I have been unable to identify a source document for this statement.
the viewers had the question, “What is the source of light?” Libby was aware that she was sitting within “the cloud of unknowing… that cloud hovering over the water, or land…moving… unknowing, unformed… and the spirit energy that hovers over the creation process… something that is still moving.” This sense of mystery was present to the viewers, who were able to describe their experience of the numinous. One viewer related,

_I really found a sense of mystery right through it…there are two sides… and towards the light there comes form and there comes strength and power in the boulders, and there was that sense of unknowing and mystery on the other side. It’s almost like the light was drawing everything to it…that sense of drawing to the rocks._

He was clearly pulled into the focus of the piece, and was aware that this was not a journey to seek clarification or an answer, but rather toward a larger mystery. A curious tension exists between the drawing power of the rocks as solid and defined and almost familiar, and the ephemeral uncertainty of the mystery.

Whilst viewers saw the play with light and darkness as an expression of _mystery_, not all experienced this sense of the unknown as a positive thing. One saw it as “an almost hellish light” with figures and hidden dangers. “And the eye itself seemed to have some mystery, or it could also hold menace there too.” The notion of _mystery or menace_ is interesting, as Libby herself described the source of the painting and the definition of the place. The painting had been inspired by an experience of _The Devil’s Marbles_, known to the Indigenous people as _The Rainbow Serpent’s Eggs_. A number of years earlier the family trip had been interrupted because of the abduction and murder of a tourist nearby. There was a sense of the ominous in returning to the place that they had left in fear a number of years earlier. And yet there was a strange sense of awe about the experience as they arrived.

_I just feel like when I think of God entering the world, as he did in John, those verses in John where the light enters the world, I think this would be the sort of space that would happen. This is where God would enter the world because it_  

228 Note the earlier reference to this remote location.
is a God-forsaken place. There is nothing around. It is a place that is crying out for God. I think of that sort of image emerging in that sort of darkness that would be where the light would enter. It comes into that other layer… of what scares us and what becomes really difficult and dark… that’s the space for this little crack of light.

Libby was able to express the sense of the darkness as a place of unknown, of not being able to see, and her personal story had embodied the experience of menace in the place. The need for light became the experience of discovering the light between the cracks of this dark place. One participant had actually responded during the conversation with the statement, “If this is the light of the world, pity help the world!” The sense of mysteries unknown is not experienced by being drowned in clarifying light, but by a slow revelation. And a wonder about the source of this light could be troubling, as Mark suggested: “The thing that struck me was that the light looked so much like an eye.” He was allowing his imagination to affirm something looking upon our existence, from beyond the canvas.

John’s piece was not without its more ominous questions about the contents. In recalling wild woods and the evil trees from Harry Potter, the experience of the unknown mysteries have the ingredient of fear. Whilst John’s intention may have been to draw people to reflect on themselves as the sacred contents of the reliquary, the confrontation with questions of mortality and existence embodied in the encasing of saints’ bones also drew viewers to consider a more sombre reality. “It’s the dance between the mystery and the macabre,” declared one. And yet the sacred contents offered a seductive pull for others. “There is something much more beautiful and precious about these little containers because of what they are meant to house. In that sense they are seductive,” exclaimed Wendy. What is supposed to be present in bones or relics connects with the mysteries of mortality.

The subtlety of light in Debbie’s work in charcoal and Libby’s muted oils opens the way for such diverse responses to mystery. All is not revealed, and what may be revealed can be frightening or comforting. Similarly, the hiddeness of John’s secret within the closed reliquary forces the viewer to wonder about the contents.
One group in conversation even took the display lamp to see if they could see inside by manipulating the light, and proudly announced they could see slivers of light through the other side! The mystery of the contents was difficult to live with. Indeed for many, the questions around how John made the work related to the desire to open it up. Similarly the how questions asked of Libby’s technique in achieving such a variety of shades of colour with so little light, relate on a double level. Viewers wanted to work out how mystery is created!

All four artists were aware of the symbols they were drawing on to express this mystery, and were aware that they both experience mystery themselves as well as try to express it within their work. The surprise of John in recognizing that his work transcends problem and embodies mystery was lovely, emerging as a reflection on his own experience. The tiny candle in Debbie’s painting that sheds an unlikely beam of light is for her a way of explaining how mystery exists in experience, that life cannot be controlled or contrived. She explains, “The light is really important to all religions, so I wanted to get it as small as I possibly could to emit this great amount of light. It couldn’t possibly happen. But it does, and faith is like that too. You say some things couldn’t possibly happen, but they do!”

Debbie’s work is under-laid with the word faith in a pattern that is then overlaid with rectangular spaces. Some spaces are obscured by the charcoal black, and some illuminated in half light. One is bathed in clear light. The purpose of these spaces became a huge question for viewers, who wanted to interpret them in all sorts of ways: as gaps in faith, as spaces for the viewer to put her own faith, as windows into eternity, into the reality beyond faith that is mystery. Jane almost surrendered into those spaces. “I saw the space as eternal, like a mystery – how much faith do you have to have?”

Ben’s work certainly did not have that level of darkness and hiddenness that the other works contained. His work appeared to be friendlier or less troubling to people. “There is something warm and inviting…welcoming”, commented one viewer. Ben’s work, where he explores a framing concept, offered for people a gentler way of holding together two levels of experience. One motif for viewers was considering the time frames. Was his work ancient, modern, eternal? The other motif was spatial. One viewer asked, “What
moment is this? Is it a break in the cloud or a divine revelation? Is this a record of a journey?" What this technique provided for the viewers was the experience of viewing differing realities of space and time at once. “It’s like that thin place between what we understand of the spiritual world. It’s there, together.” This style of work gave people a space to move between the worlds, almost defining some spaces and allowing other spaces to be undefined. Ben was very aware of this as he was working.

*The exploration of The Page has become almost like a doorway or a portal or a window between two worlds. I remember painting this painting with the focus on a response to this trip, about a specific place, and it was going in a specific exhibition, and from there I didn’t know where it was going to go, but as I was painting it, there was a ‘knowing’… A knowing of what, I couldn’t tell you, but it was a knowing that this is about this place, but it is also about something larger.*

The notion of portal between worlds that cannot be defined or contained was naming an awareness of mystery within the work. Indeed, as Ben described his work, he was aware that the spaces are quite fluid, inviting even. All of the viewers were curious about the spaces created. “Why is the centre frame there? It excites wonder in me.” And yet Ben notes that there isn’t a clear sense of positive-negative space within the framing, but the spaces almost invert as negative-positive spaces. It is not enough to define the inner page as the positive, lighter space, as this switches and becomes negative or darker in different parts of the work. This flipping of the page accentuates the sense of mystery, as the space is not a neatly defined rectangle where one can clearly define one as the other. Spaces of mystery and clarity extend beyond what are apparently confined areas.

The notion of space in Ben’s work, with foreground as present and background as beyond, was explored by each of the groups. Sometimes this was overlaid with religious symbolism: “Are there three divisions, with meaning in each representing the world in darkness, the mountain top, and the renewal life where the divine resides?” Sometimes the curiosity was simply a desire to understand the reasons for the depiction in each setting: “Why is the building on the hill clothed in light and the modern city in semi
darkness?” Sometimes it was merely an observation and a desire to gain perspective.

I first thought it was an ancient city – more than 2000 years ago, the Middle East perhaps. My second thought was a modern city in the foreground. Then I saw the painting was not so ancient. There is a contrast of three scapes – modern city – ancient city (ruins) – and agricultural land that was ploughed down the hill rather than across which was interesting and strange.

Certainly being drawn to consider the city metaphorically was a common experience, as a city of wonder, Jerusalem, city on a hill or even a Greek temple. For all viewers this city bathed in light drew them toward some mysterious experience of hope or revelation. About what, the viewer is unsure. And Ben was certainly not forthcoming in offering explanation!

In my journey I’ve also realized that it is my job to catch the inspiration… that I get the work down, but a painting can be viewed by a hundred different people and a hundred different people see a hundred different things. And none of them are wrong. And I don’t want to spoil it by just defining it and saying that’s what I intended.

To explain it is like opening the lid on the reliquary and revealing that which can’t be revealed. To define it is to try to capture a truth that is intangible. To validate a perception or experience of the art as correct or not is to elevate one person’s experience of the work over the other. And to do each of these things is to solve a problem, rather than allow a mystery to remain.

To remain “open to the unknown”, according to Jane, is to allow the mystery to be mystery. To sit within that “thin place”, and know it to be both present and illusive simultaneously, was Wendy’s experience. In allowing this to unfold, the artist in her work allows for longing to unfold. “Does this suggest that there is a yearning or a longing for some real connection with that which is miraculous, or unseen?” asked Wendy. And John replied, “Yes, I think there is a longing to know.” Validating the longing is the job of the artist, always extending the viewer beyond, to stimulate the capacity to wonder!
4. Art as Conversational Revelation
4. Art as Conversational Revelation

This study of the conversation between art, artist and viewer draws us to the place in which we consider the very nature of God, and explore possible ways of becoming open to the mystery of God. The conversation takes us to the very heart of our image of God - the nature of our perception of God within the dynamic of human experience. Ultimately the engagement with art as conversation extends our capacity to imagine God, to be open to mystery, to name reality in all its metaphoric levels and to meet with the Other in a place of deep communion. The conversation allows our imaginations to extend beyond experience towards a God who invites us into what may be called the divine creative activity. This creative activity is at the essence of the outworking of our humanity.\textsuperscript{229} For, in the response to the invitation to enter the creative process, the transforming power of the Spirit is unleashed! As Fox claims, "It has to do with the rekindling of the spark of hope and vision, of adventure and blessing, that a tired civilization needs."\textsuperscript{230}

What emerges on the canvas is the invitation to a mutual conversation between artist, art and viewer in which there is the potential for sight to give way to insight, the moment to transcend its temporal location, and for the space to extend beyond the horizon to a thin place where God is revealed. In that place, the world is enlarged and our responses to the world are transformed.

The very dynamic of the conversation reveals something of the nature of God, expressed as a Trinitarian conversation. The doctrine of a creative God revealed in the dynamic of Creator, Christ and Spirit is echoed in the dynamic of the creative conversation between Artist, Art and Viewer. At its heart, God's image is not revealed in a static definition of the persons of the Trinity, but in the movements of the Trinity. Frank Rees outlines such a conversational theology, claiming God is creatively at work in the

\textsuperscript{229} The concept of the creative activity of us as humans is developed in Matthew Fox, \textit{Original Blessing} (Sante Fe: Bear and Co, 1983) Theme 15

\textsuperscript{230} Matthew Fox, \textit{Original Blessing} 187
dynamic conversation of “God’s creative activity as inviting: setting the context, creating the space for conversational community”.

The conversation is embodied in the personhood of Jesus, in whom the human condition meets the God in Christ. Rees continues,

*In the Spirit, I see God the conversationalist further evoking and gathering. The Spirit moves within the human community to draw us to awareness of God, to call forth faithful engagement and to evoke a consensus, an engagement with each other as also with God. The Spirit enables a community of conversation, earth to heaven and heaven to earth.*

The very nature of God is revealed in such Trinitarian conversation. Such a dynamic also lies at the heart of the conversation that exists between artist, art and viewer. The artist in expressing her experience is inviting conversation with the other. The art itself embodies something of the very nature of that experience of the artist itself. And the viewer, in meeting the art, is gathered into the community of conversation, continuing to be stimulated to respond. Ongoing response is then evoked. As one of the viewers responded from the whole conversation,

*This project has stimulated a lot of creative things for me. I climbed the lighthouse at Aries Inlet, and looked out on the rocks and the beach. I went back to the little art shed I have down there, and instead of thinking I’ll do this and this, I just started to use pastels, because I wanted to do something on the paper!*

The emphasis of this dynamic movement is not grasping an image of God as though this image were an attribute to be had. This is not about an artist expressing something of what they imagine God to be, as though it is something that can be possessed by either artist or viewer, or contained within the art itself. Rather, the illusion that God can be imaged or even contained by an image is replaced by an experience whereby God is revealed in the dynamic of the

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231 Frank Rees, Conversational Theology for a Conversational Church in *Asia Journal of Theology, Vol 21, No 1, April 2007* 34
232 Frank Rees, Conversational Theology 34
conversation. And that revelation is the creative invitation to ongoing creative activity.

Rees suggests there is a dynamic of the Spirit’s outworking which he refers to as “The Spirit as Artist”\textsuperscript{233}. He is seeking to explore something of the creative beauty of God, as an expression intrinsic to the nature of God’s grace and salvation. “To talk of the Spirit as an artist is to include many possible guises: the musician or the dreamer, the dancer or the builder, the engineer or the potter.”\textsuperscript{234} With such an experience of an artistic Spirit, we are invited to participate in the creative activity of God. And that creative activity invites us into conversation with one another and God – a conversation that is founded in communication, and comes to rest in communion. That is, with the Spirit as Artist, we are perpetually invited into creative communion. God as Creator calls out of nothingness creation, a universe abundant with ongoing creative activity. God, the creative artist, in the midst of the divisions and brokenness of the world, calls into being a community of the Spirit that might commune with one another.

This dynamic conversation between artist, art and viewer in its creative outworking invites people into an ongoing process whereby their unique and individual experience enters the experience of God. At its core, we come into communion with God. And from that place of communion, as participants, we are led to respond with reflective questions upon the nature of my life and what shape life is taking. At its simplest level, the transformative activity of community leads to the questions that invite ongoing creative response. As one viewer responded of the process, “This is what art is about. It is not about a photo, it is about discovery.” Questions emerge, like: What is happening? How do I understand reality? Where is God? What does God look like in this situation? And where are we going? What might life look like now? Art is liberated from the sphere of elitism, and claimed in its dynamic release among us. When unleashed, it

\textsuperscript{233} Frank Rees, Conversational Theology  44
\textsuperscript{234} Frank Rees, Conversational Theology  44
may take the form of storytelling and conversing; doing carpentry or repairs; writing or dancing; painting or parenting; singing or clowning. If what is let out truly flows from our depths, then it is flowing from God’s depths too, and the divine creative energy of Dabhar that alone inspires the universe is happening through us.

In the conversation itself, the creative process unfolds, perpetually. Consider Robbins’ description of the creative process for the artist of preparation, frustration, incubation, illumination, elaboration, communication flowing within the dynamic of the conversation, unfolding as activities of the Spirit. Indeed, Robbins relies on the work of Matthew Fox, reflecting that “our life with our images becomes a pattern for our own spiritual lives.”

The creative process is always about movement, and the potential is for that creative movement to be about the dynamic of the Spirit’s unfolding. This occurs in the preparation of cultivating eyes to see, in the attending to the questions raised by life, in provoking reflection upon the questions, in moments of insight and awakening, in the disciplined outworking of life shaped by such insight and by the communication of this transformative message to the world. Thus the creative process becomes an ongoing act of divine activity, always with the possibility of being generative, reflecting the creative image of God. According to Fox, “Creativity is so divine that it is awesome.” Welcoming the Spirit’s participation in the process is critical if our creativity is to be generative rather than destructive. Engaging the process of creativity, we are living in the dynamic of the Spirit’s activity, participating with God’s creative work.

Significant theological debate is shaped around what precisely is meant by humans being created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27).

235 Matthew Fox, Original Blessing 185
236 Lois Robbins, Waking Up 24
237 Matthew Fox, Original Blessing 182
238 Fox cautions on the need for the creative, generative creative power to be used as a blessing to the planet rather than the perverse and destructive possibilities of creativity which does not reflect the life-giving nature of God.
Rather than considering some attribute of humanity as that which reflects the image of God, Pannenberg\textsuperscript{239} makes a strong claim that divine likeness unfolds with the outworking of our humanity. That is, being created in God’s image is realized in human destiny or unfolding, rather than as a static historical event effected at the moment of creation. To be created in God’s image recognizes both our creatureliness, that is, our finitude, and our capacity to move toward God. It is in the movement of our lives, the creative unfolding of our lives, that we most reflect the very nature of God “in awareness of a horizon that transcends their finitude.”\textsuperscript{240} Such a movement makes us, as humans, open to the world and open to that which is beyond the finite.

So, rather than considering mind, or body, or gender as reflecting the nature of God, the image of God is the calling of us as humans to make God visible, to live as God was in Christ. And that is expressed in the creative outworking of our living. As Libby struggled at the Devil’s Marbles to imagine God made visible in the most God-forsaken place, so we are called to make God visible in the way we live. Dorothy Sayers is not alone in seeking to identify the creative nature of God with that which is created. I delight in her perception, despite the gender-bound language.

\textit{Looking at man, he (God) sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see that he says about the original upon which the “Image” of God was modelled, we find only the single assertion, “God Created”. The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.}\textsuperscript{241}

Art thus considered may attempt to reflect the very nature of a creative God, to make God visible. More particularly, art reveals significant aspects of the human condition and the creation. In doing so, art bears a theological message. “If all the ideas of God as the power of being includes all reality, then everything that artistically expresses reality will express God, whether it intends to do so or

\textsuperscript{239} Wolfhart Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology} vol 2, chap 8, part II  
\textsuperscript{240} Wolfhart Pannenberg, \textit{Systematic Theology} 229  
\textsuperscript{241} Dorothy Sayers, \textit{The Mind of the Maker} (Cleveland : World, 1956) 34
In this way, all art seeks to respond to the reality of experience, and so expresses something of the nature of God. And that nature of God is revealed in the loving action of God in Christ. As Rohan Williams underlines, “Human making seeks to echo, necessarily imperfectly, the character of God’s love as shown in making and becoming incarnate.”

This conversation involving art, artist and viewer has the potential to become the thin place of encounter with God, as Wendy experienced in her exclamation: “It’s like that thin place between what we understand of the spiritual world.” Marcus Borg, recognizing the rich Celtic heritage, describes the thin place as a way of seeing or experiencing God, “the More, as the encompassing Spirit in which everything is.” The material world of what we experience is enveloped in the non-material world. Carl Jung used the image of two cones which intersect at their apex, asserting one as matter and the other spirit. The point of connection between spirit and matter both meet and don’t meet. The thin place is that place where we become aware of the meeting of spirit and matter, when apparent boundaries of existence break down, and we become aware of the connection of all. Heck describes the thin place as

\[ a \text{ place where the veil between the worlds nearly disappears} \]
\[ – \text{but I understand this deep empathy, which can cross time and place, as only one of many ways we can experience connection between worlds. Having felt this empathy I must live differently.} \]

As Borg describes, “the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable.” The thin place draws one to the

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dynamic of experience that changes the way we approach the world and transforms the way we live.

Our openness to enter the conversation, to entertain the possibility of transformation, to consider the questions that lead to the possibility of an understanding of God’s invitation to communion, relies upon the capacity to see. Seeing involves a conversation between context and culture, tradition and experience. It involves predicting from experience what it is that is being seen. It involves memory and resonance or dissonance. It involves imagination beyond an actual object seen, to the possibility of what may be unseen. And it involves openness to the potential of transformation in the action of seeing itself.

What is the dynamic that occurs between seeing and God, faith and vision, sight and insight? Margaret Miles chooses to title her work *Image as Insight*, suggesting the significance of the connection between art, the capacity to see and God. Experience continues to move and evolve as the seeing is enlarged, so that the point of insight rests in a fuller experience within the conversation between art, artist and viewer. Seeing, with all its complex and fluid weavings of understandings, comes to rest in a place of understanding, or belief. Or is it that understanding, belief, comes to rest in a place of seeing, but seeing in a fresh, new way, with insight? Whether the illustration of light and darkness, goodness and evil is told as a story about Hansel and Gretel, or the story of a building illuminated on a hill, the seeing reveals a connection with universal themes. Seeing is believing in as much as the seeing and believing connect with experience through archetypal themes.

As blind Bartimaeus states his desire to see (Mark 10:51), Jesus responds by underlining the connection that exists between faith and seeing. The desire to see, the openness to see and the capacity to acknowledge the possibility of seeing rests in the one with whom he entrusts his sight. And yet Jesus responds, “your faith has healed you”. The exchange between the two returns to rest upon Bartimaeus’ own action of faith. The clarity of vision connects clearly with the experience of faith.

248 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight*
Seeing requires us to recognize the limits in the field of vision, that is, what we can and cannot see, given that we exist within a culture, with the strengths and frailties of perception that brings. As Elkins reminds us “there are things we do not see and things we cannot see and things we refuse to see, and there are also things we can’t make out...” Seeing is very much entangled with blindness, because of the capacities to see and not see from the limitations of our field of vision. Bartimaeus’ faith-action is embodied within his frailties. That is, his visual frame of reference shapes his longing to see, and hence comes his belief in Jesus’ healing-action. And yet in the exchange, the clarifying and defining of self occurs. Bartimaeus comes to know himself as a person of faith. Jesus identifies himself as the object of that faith. Who enacts the healing in the story is clearly blurred, just as there is the blurring of the object-subject in the meeting place of the canvas.

Stories of faith and vision offer us glimpses of the profound connection between sight and insight. As Miles suggests, the times when eyesight becomes insight offer a “clue to the nature and structure of reality and the first step toward realization of the ultimate fulfilment of human being as symbolized by the idea of the vision of God.” The fact that in one story the blind man’s healing is linked to his own faith and in another the blind man sees “people that look like trees walking around” (Mark 8:24) leaves us wondering at how this motif of seeing hooks into ways of making sense of the world, and ultimately God, and, how seeing is “a determinate trading of blindnesses and insights.” The movement within the story extends the experience of seeing to an experience of believing. We, in turn, are drawn to consider how we experience sight-faith when we are able to make the connections between our experience and Jesus. Interestingly, in this story of the blind man there is a process of vision becoming clearer as it is tested against the memory. Recognition that the moving trees are actually people is the precursor to his muddied image of reality being clarified. As Elkins reminds us,

249 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 205
250 Margaret Miles, Image as Insight 2
251 James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 202
all the principal metaphors for thinking, knowledge, and truth itself have to do with seeing: notions such as illuminating, casting light on a problem, being enlightened, insightful, clear, distinct, or brilliant are only the symptoms of this relation, which has become as deeply ingrained as thinking itself.\textsuperscript{252}

These Markan accounts of healing the blind (Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52) frame Peter’s confession of the Christ, and the Transfiguration, where visions are seen and the identity of Jesus becomes illuminated on the mountain. In both stories there is confusion about what is seen by the disciples, who is seen and consequently, who is the Christ. The events are shrouded in mystery. In these passages, there is complexity around the disciples not being able to see. That is, they see with their eyes, but cannot understand. There is a gap in the connection that occurs between the seeing action and the understanding that emerges from the seeing. Perhaps there is simply no precedent for such seeing! The journey they are on as followers of Jesus is confused by the incapacity to see Jesus’ non-violent, open way of being. Elkins claims that “the paradox of seeing is that the more forcefully I try to see, the more blind I become.”\textsuperscript{253} The disciples’ perception of the world, their Visual Culture filters their perception, and their limited field of vision finds them bickering over who is the greatest! (Mark 9:33ff) Indeed, the Markan account doesn’t give us the luxury of hearing the story of a group of disciples who experience the clarity of sight of the resurrection. Rather, the entire narrative draws us towards its eventual invitation, to meet the risen Christ in Galilee. We must go there ourselves to see.

Brent Plate argues that there are distinctives in seeing religiously, which he claims “alters the way we see in general: one begins to notice things they haven’t noticed before; space enlarges or contracts; time moves faster or slower; and new ways of thinking are introduced into one’s conceptual worldview.”\textsuperscript{254} Believing alters the seeing precisely because it alters the capacity to perceive by the seer. As one of the viewers struggled with John’s reliquary, he was

\textsuperscript{252} James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 224
\textsuperscript{253} James Elkins, The Object Stares Back 210
\textsuperscript{254} S Brent Plate, Religion, Art and Visual Culture 22
left pondering “what this has done is throw up for me ‘faith’. I’ve always thought of faith as some sort of positive reassurance of God and his working”. The **seeing** re-interpreted his understanding of faith as connecting with mystery, rather than faith as an expression of seeing clearly within boundaries of doctrine and propositional belief. He likened the latter to *not seeing* at all, and certainly not *faithing*.

The popular notion of **seeing is believing** as a proof for the objective truth of experience emerges in the interplay between Thomas and Jesus. This link between **seeing** and **believing** occurs in the resurrection appearance of Jesus to Thomas. (John 20:24-29) Whilst we can read the text in terms of a rebuke of Thomas for needing *proof* of sight in order to believe, and a charge to others to believe even if they don’t see, there is a curious meeting of **seeing and believing**. For Thomas, seeing, really seeing, is believing. That is, the seeing and believing meet as Thomas meets Jesus. The genuine capacity to see is about an authentic experience of believing. We are challenged to consider what it is that Thomas has seen – the wounds, the scars of the Christ who has died and is now risen.

In this story, doubt is the precursor to seeing. Of course, Jesus’ response calling on people to not see and still believe has stimulated the somewhat naïve notion of **blind faith**. Is it actually possible to have blind faith? Is faith ever blind? Does it not anticipate or imagine reality in a greater fullness. Is it not that faith is always connected with insight? Is there, in seeing, always that invitation to imagination? To extend beyond the visual to what might be? Just as one viewer’s imagination called out, “I want to see what is on the other side of the tree”, faith always anticipates something more from the place where it is located. Imagination is that which extends our way of seeing, and so extends and enriches our ways of seeing and believing. Faith is always connected with a movement towards, a desire, a longing, a curiosity fed by an openness to see.

Lorenzen’s examination of the Greek word *Ophthe*, in relation to the resurrection appearances of Christ, suggests that **seeing** is linked to a complex experience of vision. Unlike scholars who connect the word *ophthe* with spiritual visions rather than ocular seeing, hence understanding the word as seeing in the light of divine revelation, Lorenzen wants to affirm a broader interpretation. He argues, “it has
the wider connotation of a holistic revelatory experience in which seeing, hearing, vision, ecstasy and dreaming cannot be clearly distinguished from one another.”

The experience of seeing is a whole-body experience. And in this seeing, the mystery of God is in some way perceived within the whole experience of the viewer.

Rather than connecting seeing with proof, as in the notion of eyewitness reports, seeing is connected with the making of sense about what is seen. Eyewitness reports are as reliable as the perceptions of the eyewitnesses, with all their distortions and accuracies. Eyewitnesses rarely prove a case; rather their evidence is added to the body of evidence. It is the interpretation of that which is seen that leads to the conviction of truth. Indeed, only one viewer saw “a body lying on its side” in Libby’s painting. Most saw rocks and pools and veils and light. That does not make our lone viewer wrong in his seeing. Rather, it extends the possibilities of what may be seen by his capacity to see.

This complex dynamic of seeing, then, is tantamount to believing reality to be as it is. It involves the process of hypothesizing that which is seen— that is, Thomas looks at the hands, hazards a guess at the wounds before him and connects that with a memory, and sees. Hence he believes that Jesus is risen.

Therefore, seeing the wounded hands of Jesus is about recognizing the woundedness of humanity and the resurrection life as a potential within that. The wounds become a metaphor for the larger levels of woundedness that exist. The sight of the wounds is expanded to an archetypal understanding of woundedness. Just as our viewers identified the “beauty alongside the beast” in the image, so does the Biblical narrative reflect the complex way in which woundedness exists as a precursor to seeing.

Seeing, as it sits in the experience of faith, is about redemption. The effect of seeing is to respond, and the response is about the action,

255 Thorwald Lorenzen, Resurrection and Discipleship: Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflection, Theological Consequences (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 133
that is, about the movement that extends from perceiving. “From darkness to light is about focus; wonder; further exploration; which allows insights to arise. Testing insights leads to new realizations, actions and more depth of understanding,” was one viewer’s perception of the experience of engaging with art. This transformation lies at the heart of the awakening of humanity to the reality of the human condition, and the recognition that it is only in the image of a suffering and resurrected Jesus that there is hope. That the blind might see! That doubt may find faith! That wounds may discover healing!

The nature of such seeing, then, is to be transformed or shaped by that which is seen. At its simplest level, change is to take place in us as seers, transforming our perception of life in its entirety, and transforming our action in the transformed world.

The use of metaphor to name experience is intrinsic to the Biblical narrative. In the Genesis story, Adam is given the responsibility to name the animals, that is, to create a symbolic connection between the name of the animal and the existence of the animal. There is, though, an act that precedes the naming, and that is the experience of ‘seeing’ the animals. God “brought them to Adam to SEE what he would call them.” (Genesis 2:19) The act of seeing the animals was connected with the capacity to grasp the nature of their being. The Hebrew word, r’ḥ, contains both the notion of seeing and perceiving.256 There is an extension beyond the ocular process to a seeing which makes sense of that which is seen. That is, the seeing connects with the animal and the name connects with the seeing. In this case, the visual act stimulated the metaphoric naming of reality.

Similarly, the metaphoric naming of reality, to an archetypal level, is developed in the Gospel of John, around many understandings of reality. For example, the metaphor of light is drawn on as a powerful image for revelation itself, for without light nothing is revealed. Light is the very thing that reveals the existence of God. If we consider for a moment, light in relation to the art that we see on a wall, it is the refraction of light that creates the ability to recognise

anything. In a painting it is the darkness in relation to the light that allows that which is to be seen. As Libby reflected on her painting, it is light itself that allows life to be birthed.

So the space between the rocks becomes like a womb, wherein the light starts to grow and illuminate the rocks and starts to change first of all the colour of the rocks, and then the temperature of the rocks, and then they move. And just as when you’ve got a couple of little cells there, it gets bigger until the shape changes until it can no longer be contained and it is birthed.

In John’s gospel the embodiment of light is the being of Jesus. Jesus, in his living, reflects life as a revelatory light; a light that points beyond to the source of light. He becomes the communication of God. The word became flesh and blood, the communication of God with skin on. God was visible as life embodied. Light reflecting light as the revelation of God.

Jeremy Begbie argues that art seeks to create the connections between images and understandings, and so develop new and fresh meanings:

Art involves an interaction with the created order, not merely bowing down before it... For the artist simply to mirror what he perceives will never be adequate; new connections and novel meanings need to be established through developing what is given to hand.257

The metaphorical activity of art becomes an invitation that opens up further creative activity, whereby links and connections between experience and meaning continually evolve and extend. The original order of creation is a gift “given to stimulate rather than restrict authentic creativity.”258 The artist then offers the part that is hers to know, and creates a movement, an unfolding picture, which onto the canvas is added ongoing brush strokes. There is an incomplete

258 Jeremy Begbie cited in Anthony Monti, A Natural theology of the Arts 138
pattern at any given moment in the temporal process, which anticipates the completion or the whole. As Debbie reflects upon this creative process in her work of discovering light from the charcoal darkness, she declares,

*My Intention is “It is not to light up the whole being, but where the light hits and it just makes it strong. It is really strong, and you don’t need to show it like a photograph, all that – sometimes it is just those small areas that are just a pool of light. I really like it and for me it is a real challenge which part is going to be hit, and what is going to be seen, and what is not going to be seen. So what is not going to be seen is probably just as important as what is going to be seen. There is something beautiful about it. It is like a foggy night."

The beauty of a foggy night expresses powerfully the notion of “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). At one and the same time there is the expression of the created order, and a drawing forward in an eschatological goal of clarity and completion. “All knowledge of the world as creation is hence a metaphorical knowledge of this world as parable of the world to come.” The artistic creation itself resides in time and place as well as draws us on in anticipation of how the creation might unfold. What is anticipated is what is to be revealed as the world to come. Art stirs and arouses “recollections of the beginning... in fact, art discerns and yes, reveals traces of creation in the beginning precisely by knowing the world metaphorically, as a parable of the world to come.” Contained with this notion is the awareness of the world as it exists in all its frailty, and an anticipation of fulfilment.

Ben’s work embodied the frame of time and space and encouraged reflection on beyond time and space. In his dark-light motif within and outside the frame, he challenges notions of clarity and mystery. Ben described his work as “portal or a window between two worlds”.

259 Jurgen Motmann’s reflection is developed in Anthony Monti *A Natural theology of the Arts* 164
260 Anthony Monti *A Natural Theology of the Arts*
at one and the same time located in a particular place and for a particular exhibition, but extending beyond. Similarly, Libby’s work stimulated reflection upon the veil or curtain, suggesting that which is not quite seen. Such a mix of clarity and openness to interpretation invites an “openness to the unknown”, as one viewer reflected.

The unknown meets theology in its invitation to ask questions. Paul Tillich argues that theology’s function is to create links between the questions implicit in the human situation of a particular era, and the responses given by God’s revelation. The art makes known the world as it is experienced. He contends that the forms of human culture meet the ultimate concern of humanity. Art, then, is a primary factor in the discernment of the human condition to which the Christian response may be addressed.

Art indicates what the character of a spiritual situation is: it does this more immediately and directly than do science and philosophy for it is less burdened by objective considerations. Its symbols have something of a revelatory character while scientific conceptualization must suppress the symbolical in favour of objective adequacy.261

In effect, art unconsciously expresses the ultimate concern of its society. As Ben explained, “there is something in me that wants to make my art definitive not only to one person but to everyone at the same time, so it is speaking to one person and every person collectively.” The artist betrays his own ultimate concern and that of his context. That is, there is a world behind the work as it seeks to be both particular in its connection and transcendent in its message.

In this way art becomes symbolic, in that it mediates the content and experience of life as it is lived, and in so doing connects the larger reality of existence, God, with the lived experience. Viladesau argues that art offers

symbols that convey to religiously committed persons not merely information about the tradition, but that actually are

261 Paul Tillich cited in Richard Viladesau’s work Theology and the Arts 154
tradition – that is, the act of mediating the content and attitude of faith.\textsuperscript{262}

In this way, art becomes sacred, not in that it merely offers information about a message, but that it conveys dimensions of meaning, both cognitive and affective, that directly accomplish the communication of God’s word. In its expression of the human situation, art becomes a text for theology.

As an invitation to communion, or as a text for theology, art stimulates those of us in the church to realise that this is one of the ways that we, as participants in the communication of the creative work of God, can share the transforming message of the Good News.

\textsuperscript{262} Richard Viladesau, Theology of the Arts 135
Art’s Invitation

Come See Me 😊
5. Art's Invitation

The past ten years have been rich in the experience of challenging and deepening my own appreciation of art and its capacity to transform and extend horizons. However, there remains a degree of insecurity about my role as a minister, and indeed, Field Educator, delving into the realms of art and theology. I find myself reflecting with Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, on the experience of anxiety in speaking so forthrightly about the power of art to speak into the theological world. He reflects,

*What was this theologian doing in the properties of the art historian and art critic, of the artist and the art gallery? Yet as I struggled with the issues of these difficult disciplines, the work of art always took me deeply into what seemed a familiar field, a common ground in which there were no fences. This was the heart of my own humanity in which I glimpsed a mysterious Beauty that transcended all fences, all methodological issues, and all claims. Here on the common ground of the beautiful, the theologian has a place along with the art historian and the art critic, the artist and the museums for it is a common humanity that binds us. Whatever the wounds of history have done to isolate and separate the theological from the historical, the spiritual from the artistic, or the textbook from the living, a new humanism, a wounded innocence, I have come to believe can bring them together.*

It is on this basis, that I lay claim to how this conversation with art must continue into the theological institutions, into the formational processes, into the religious communities and into the streets where conversations on the questions of meaning are explored. Engagement with *Art* in all its guises must become a priority for us in the ministerial and theological endeavour if we are to claim these as creative process reflecting the dynamic creative nature of God.

Ministry may be considered an invitation to draw people to reflect upon their questions of God and existence. We could frame our understanding of ministry as encouraging people to enter their own

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263 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence* 122
creative process, whereby they become aware of the movement of the Spirit questioning, attending, illuminating, journeying and communicating. The role of the minister is one of engaging others in reflecting meaningfully upon their experience and creating safe enough spaces in which transforming experiences can occur. The process of ministry formation, whereby ministers-in-training are encouraged to reflect upon their own experience using theological tools, and so integrate fresh insights into ministry practice, challenges those of us involved in the Formation process to ask about the role of art as both a stimulus for reflection and an expression of experience. Indeed, art provides an integrative model for theological reflection, as the human condition is placed in the foreground of the process.

A theology of art calls for a new (actually, very old) way of doing theology. A theological method proper to a theology of art tends toward synthesis, putting things together, rather than analysis, taking things apart. A theology of art ought to understand the whole rather than the parts. Moreover, it ought to bring insight into the human condition rather than philosophical clarity as to the nature of art.264

The premise for exploring creative approaches for connecting meaningfully with other human beings lies in the conviction that our primary need as humans is transformation into a deepening experience of God. The church does “not function primarily for the sake of theology, nor merely as a moral program, but to foster the religious experience.”265 If we are to explore the eternal questions of meaning with people, then art has the potential to offer us a language that can encourage that engagement in exploring deep to deep about existence. Art offers the place in which the particular of an experience meets the universal themes of ultimate concern.

For many of us, both within and without the institutional church, the language of the religious tradition has lost impact. Sallie McFague argues that connection will not be renewed through language which seeks to arrange and order and explicate what she calls an

264 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, A Wounded Innocence xi of Introduction
otherwise primary, “first-order revelatory, metaphorical language.”

The renovation will occur

*through the search for new metaphors - poems, stories, even lives – which will ‘image’ to us, in our total existential unity, the compassion of the father, the bright wings of the bird, the trustworthiness of a world in which parents keep promises to their children.*

The unleashing of the imagination to new re-creations of metaphorical reality has the potential to transform, and make relevant, ways of being. As Kung argues, “At a time of threatening meaninglessness, art helps (even by what appears to be meaningless) to arouse afresh through the senses and to keep awake the sense for meaning.”

At its core, we must unleash the imagination so that new ways of learning, of being, and of becoming, may open up. Theological education must continue to be open to new possibilities of understanding and interpreting life and constructs of meaning. “To bring imagination as central into the educational process may well be one of the most crucial requirements of forming new ways of knowing and new ways of learning.” And art, as a stimulus for imagination, may provide us with the way forward.

_We need for this, the artist’s imagination, creative power, civil courage, and integrity. For, in their wholly individual fashion, with their very varied methods of presentation, artists can help us human beings, often so lacking in ideas, so helpless in all our activism, to test our attitude to reality as a whole and especially to ourselves, to perceive our condition of alienation and to find our own integrity._

The premise for exploring creative approaches of connecting with other human beings lies in the conviction that our primary need as humans is transformation into a deepening experience of God. If we

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266 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* 23
267 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables* 23
268 Hans Küng, *Art and the Question of Meaning* 53
269 Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Grace* (Kentucky: Westminster, 1995) 110
270 Hans Küng, *Art & the Question of Meaning* 54
are to explore with people the eternal questions of meaning, then art has the potential to offer us a language that can encourage that engagement in exploring deeply questions of existence.

Art has the potential to express meaning in ways that words and actions cannot. Colin Hunter presents the case for using art as means of expressing ministry experience as a legitimate shape for theological reflection. Art is drawn from the deep part of oneself, and can draw from the deep place of another. Often this occurs beyond a conscious level, and can bid us pay attention to the experience in fresh ways. "The work of art is an invitation to participate, to try it, to see for oneself." The experience of the art is an invitation to imagine life for oneself as the artist expresses it and to respond out of that insight. Such a response in turns moves us, and potentially the other, to a fresh point within a creative process.

The intention of the formal processes of theological reflection is not to functionally rationalise and explain experience, but rather integrate the complexity of experience into our reality, with all its paradoxical truth. The student’s ministry experience, personal identity and theological understandings, are reflected upon in order to enrich and understand any given experience more fully. Whether the student is encouraged to engage in her own creative process by doing art, or by reflecting upon a work of art that is presented, there is the potential for art to offer a mirror to reflect and heighten the experience of the student, and hence enrich her capacity to interpret her experience and responses. And so, the process of action-reflection-action becomes a fluid and creative journey of enquiry and discovery.

"The viewer who, looking, is looked at by the art… may well be challenged to go beyond a familiar way of seeing and, in so doing, to be awakened to fresh vision and to break free of fixed

271 Colin Hunter, Creative Expression & the Art of Theological Reflection – paper delivered to ATFE conference, 2005
272 Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology 64
expectations." In a sense the viewer is surprised into seeing. What is seen both connects and extends the experience. In terms of theological reflection, the experience of viewing art may be the starting point in the conversation, where mysteries and meanings begin to be explored. Art may elevate the viewer into a realm of response that enriches his own religious experience. David Freedberg argues that the religious imagination is stimulated by the art, both in its subject matter, and in its potential to invite an experience of the divine. This occurs in the

intense pictorial activity which draws the beholder in, which engages and even compels attention. In the very act of being compelled we are forced to reflect in our own solitude before what is represented. That sense of ourselves interacting with a representation has within it some of the qualities of a mystical experience, a devotional experience, and by any standards you could call this religious.  

That is, the artist, whether overtly intentionally religious or not, has the potential to invite the viewer into a mystical experience. There is a dance between the person, the image and the expanding experience of the Creator.

In this sense, art is not just a tool for theological reflection, but a potential way of integrating experience and insight. It may indeed be provocative as a prophetic voice stimulating thinking upon experience, allowing questions to find form. Art is not being used, as much as opening up the opportunity for reflective engagement within the viewer. Fresh insights may be stimulated, and horizons may be extended. As ministry formation is shaped around theological reflection, experience is opened up for emerging questions to be explored.

274 David Freedberg, “Beyond Belief and the Power of the Image” in Rosemary Crumlin ed. Beyond Belief 14
Questions mean movement, wondering and sensing, seeking and grasping. In this open-ended process the individual needs company, conversation and dialogue, the community of all those who can and want to ask. In this respect the partnership of art and religion is significant, for this dialogue plumbs the depths of such questioning – to humankind’s best ability and in pursuit of the best answers. 

In ministry formation, where ‘faith’ is the movement of a minister on a journey of discovery, then the invitation to engage with the creative process is a powerful call to the dynamic creative endeavour of moving among people within the church, and stimulating people to be fully known as the people of God.

John Dillenberger sets forth some confronting questions to Theological institutions, grounded in the central question: “How can seeing, as part of our humanity and therefore also of our religious perception, be reclaimed?” We must approach the issue of the visual in theological education from many angles. He calls on all the fields of theological endeavour, Systematic Theologians, Historians, Biblical Scholars and Pastoral Theologians alike, to be enlivened by the stimulus of the modality of seeing. The new interest in spirituality and affirmation of the experience of God draws people toward creativity in their personal response to God; in such fields, embracing art as a carrier of meaning is warmly welcomed. Indeed, Viladesau claims that there appears to be a “convergence between art and theology in the emerging contemporary theological paradigm” and he goes on to explore ways in which art can serve as a theological text or source.

Dillenberger argues that resistance to the Arts as a valid medium of theological communication may be grounded in the elevated status of Biblical Studies itself, and the constructs of theological

275 Friedhelm Mennekes, “Interconnection: Religion and Art” in Rosemary Crumlin, Beyond Belief 27
277 Richard Viladesau, Theology and the Arts 5
dogmatics. In such disciplines, it is much harder to embrace the arts as communicators of meaning, other than as illustrators of Biblical stories themselves. “Churches that consistently stress that Scripture is not only the vehicle for the elicitation and structuring of faith but also the blueprint for modelling the life of the church mainly ignore those passages of Scripture that suggest a role for the visual.”

When we deny the power of the visual image to stimulate the experience of the viewer, we then ignore significant conversation partners in the process of Theological Reflection, and hence the potential meanings. Dillenberger argues that “the stretching of our sensibilities is necessary if we are to understand and come to terms with our pluralist world.”

The intent is not that we add courses to the theological curriculum to teach about art, but rather, to examine our own openness and exposure to the arts, which in turn will invite engagement with the arts alongside others. Indeed, it is from our own seeing that we can invite others to see.

My own work, as a faculty member at the Churches of Christ Theological College, has focused on the integration of art, not so much as a curriculum addition, but in the ongoing hosting of art exhibitions, of stimulating creative worship, and of encouraging the introduction of art across the disciplines. Simple questions, like 'I wonder what this might look like?' serve to offer permission to those engaged in formal theological education to extend their own imagination. To unleash the imagination is to create opportunities for fresh ways of understanding and responding, for students to engage in their own creative process. “To bring imagination as central into the educational processes may well be one of the most crucial requirements of forming new ways of knowing and new ways of learning.”

And for religious communities, in addition to the need to transcend intellectual argument and rationalized programming, there is a need to recover the language which has for centuries been both devotional and prophetic. “It is art, and it is this artistic element in religion – above all in its inherent striving for form – that binds

278 John Dillenberger, A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities 255
279 John Dillenberger, A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities 255
280 Rebecca Chopp Saving Grace 108
religious inwardness to reality. Art keeps religion’s feet on the ground... Art gives shape and form to the invisible and invites a viewer response that has the capacity to connect in ways that transcend the rational thinking that particularly the Western church has particularly elevated. At the same time art, accepted as a valid language for religious community, has the potential to harness “awe and leads dawning comprehension to active creativity.” In this way, art is part of the ongoing re-shaping of the church, as it responds to the emerging culture.

The necessity of educating ourselves to sit with art is a critical step if we are to see the arts as more than a tag to the educational endeavour. Just as Kidd and Sparkes’ consider the disciplined Effort of Imagination, Miles offers three practical steps in this process of cultivating eyes to see images which speak into our experience of the world. Her suggestions echo the significance of the reflective process and the way this process dynamically unfolds, almost like the dynamic of conversation between the image and perception of God in the world. She affirms, firstly, the need to attend to the messages we receive from the myriad of images around us – newspaper photographs, television, advertising. Most of these images have a stated intent, a controlling connection with the world that anchors the image with a meaning. Attending to the link that occurs between the image and the linguistic message we are offered, allows reflection on either the dissonance or resonance between the message and the image. Awareness is heightened.

The second step is to then ask questions about the image/message, and critique the connection between the two. The reflective person seeks to make sense of the image and discern whether the image contributes to or diminishes the experience of the world. Is there a resonance with the image that enlarges or contributes to their experience of God? Does the image reflect the viewer’s reality, or does it alienate? Miles writes, “Can I locate in my daily fare of images, a supply of images that affirm me and help me to explore

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281 Friedhelm Mennekes in Rosemary Crumlin, Beyond Belief 26
282 Friedhelm Mennekes in Rosemary Crumlin, Beyond Belief 26
283 Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes’ concept is developed in an earlier section of this report.
what it is to be a woman of my age in my culture? Or do media images tell me that I am the wrong sex, the wrong age, or the wrong colour?  

This process offers a basis for the third step of choosing life-enhancing images, and hence begins to select and develop a repertoire of images that reflect the experience of life. Images are selected for two reasons:

*either they express a valued aspect or quality of our experience or they compensate, offer alternatives to, our individual experiences… We need images that express – that help us to see – what we are about, and we need images that represent – that make present - aspects of human possibility we have known, perhaps only momentarily.*

Over time, as a library reflects the intellectual stimuli of an academic, so do the images offer glimpses of reflective spaces where life has been enlarged and enriched. This process of gathering the images that inform our experience, enlarges our way of reflecting and interpreting the world around us. In turn, it enlarges our way of engaging with a creating God, who is constantly present in the ever changing environment.

Many possibilities exist for us to open ourselves up to the arts as a carrier of meaning, and so engage with others in conversations of significance. For churches, as for theological institutions, the options are broad. Just a few possibilities are outlined in Appendix i. At one level we need to demystify the arts, and realize that “neither art nor religion explains the unknown”. Rather, as expressions of human seeking, in art and religion “the unknown is incorporated into our daily and imaginative faculties in vital effective and significant manner.”

“Art and religion alike lead into the future. The individual can only approach the future by means of a series of honest questions.”

Theological reflection and engagement with art draw people to

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284 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* 148
285 Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight* 149
286 Friedhelm Mennekes in Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief* 28
287 Friedhelm Mennekes in Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief* 28
288 Friedhelm Mennekes in Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond Belief* 27
consider deeply all the richness of the experiences of life and ministry, to see the world in all its complexity and confusion, and to experience the wholeness of a faith that draws a creative response which continues to move the cycles of question towards active transformation. There is room and need for the inclusion and development of the Arts by all of us who appreciate the conversation that the Theological endeavour invites.
Appendix i

Resources for Ministry

A few ideas to explore...

1. Cultivating Eyes to See...

The starting point for our journey is to become familiar with art – not expert, but familiar. It isn’t necessary to know about cubism, or the roots of expressionism, or to ‘get’ abstract contemporary art. It isn’t necessary to do a course in Art history, although the stories are fascinating. What is necessary is to start looking at it. I recall my first experiences with a wonderful artist-priest viewing an exhibition including a range of abstract works. I asked earnestly, ‘how might I learn to see what this is about? How can I understand.’ His response was ‘keep looking’. There are no short cuts to allowing the art to connect, other than looking. It is helpful to read about art. It is helpful, even, to read artists’ statements. It is helpful to visit galleries with someone who shows an interest, to hire head-phones. But primarily, ‘cultivating eyes to see’ involves the task of suspending premature judgement, of being open to possibility, of looking sympathetically, and of spending time.

2. Affirming the Arts

Having begun to ‘see’, one can’t help but begin to share what is seen. When our horizons are opened, we can’t help but delight in the fresh insights. As ministers in churches, we have a unique position in being able to speak into the lives of the community, drawing on our own experiences of growth and transformation. In our era of Data Projectors, presenting images is a relatively easy affair, being mindful of copyright, of course, and ensuring due acknowledgement of the artist. By simply having art around us, in our offices, in our churches, on our walls, conversations unfold that begin to enlarge and extend. Our journey may begin with crude ‘use’ of images to ‘illustrate’, but hopefully as confidence
grows, our capacity to allow the image to sit and speak for itself, or even leave people with questions around the art, will grow.

3. The Artist In Our Midst

There are artists in every community. They may not be acknowledged. They may not make themselves known until they believe that their art will be valued and validated. My experience suggests that as soon as one starts speaking about art, validating the voice that it offers, then artists will emerge, perhaps tentatively, but eager, none the less.

An amusing anecdotal story comes from the presentation of the formal Proposal for an art gallery to my local church. There were only a few questions. The first was, “what are you going to do with all those arty, hippy, druggy types?” to which I responded, “Let’s minute that question”. The question reveals a suspicion that keeps the ‘arty types’ away, as somehow not valid, not normal, not to be trusted. The second question was “Where are you going to find the artists?” to which I responded, “Scratch the surface, and they’ll come out of the woodwork.” The very next day I received four enquiries and made two bookings for exhibitions the following year. Validating the artists drew them toward a welcoming space, where they knew their voice would be heard, that is, their images may be seen inviting others to wonder.

4. A Community Creating

As the community becomes more familiar with art as a language to communicate that which is meaningful, there is the potential to grow in the art adventure. Art can become part of the visual message in the worship space weekly. Art becomes part of the expression of the children in their activities. Art becomes part of the conversation as people are visited, and they share the stories of this piece or that. Art becomes part of the intentional reflective spaces created for the community. Art becomes a stimulus for small group discussions. And art becomes the metaphoric invitation for
others to discover their own creative palette. Creative movement, in gardening, music and a range of creative expression begins to unfold.

5. A Community Art Exhibition

Chapel on Station Gallery did not emerge from a vacuum. It grew from a story. The church community in their centenary year had come up with the idea of an art and craft show to celebrate their history and their current identity. Hard times had followed the celebratory season, but the rudimentary hanging system remained in the empty room as a gentle reminder. Even more potent were the stories of the exhibition. Several years down the track, the ‘good times’ equalled the art and craft show, and the people who had wandered in off the street. People loved the idea that their craft was on show. And they felt proud of what they had achieved. The art was an expression of what mattered to them, and they valued the opportunity to show it off, and later, tell the story. It was the richness of those stories that grew into a gallery.

Not all art and craft shows, or exhibitions, will or need to, grow into major ongoing projects. However, all art and craft shows and exhibitions will elicit responses and stimulate rich reflections and stories. People will remember their participation, and with the inclusion of people, there grows a community that is rich in connecting stories.

6. A Community Art Space

Churches generally have space. They don’t often use it well, for we are renowned for collecting old materials, furniture, equipment, and the communal owning of it makes it hard for any one person to feel able to throw it out.

One of the most powerful phrases I find myself using with people is the notion of ‘creating a space’... for anything, really... When there is space, something happens. There is room to move. There is possibility. The space becomes the palette on which potential occurs.
Open Art studios, hired rooms for artists, Artist in Residence programs, Art Workshops, all have possibilities for us in the ‘spaces’ that are underutilized or misused or poorly used in our facilities. Once you start ‘talking art’ there will be an artist or ten who will emerge looking for a space to work, to explore, to belong... What an interesting possibility to make available as church communities.

7. The Religious Art Prize & Themed Exhibitions

Hosting an ‘Art Show’ is a possibility for church communities, but recognizing the intent with which the project is undertaken is even more important. Art Shows, like the community Rotary art shows, have the dual intent of making art available to the community at low cost/effort of the artist and raising money. Church Art shows have the potential to be ‘used’ as a vehicle to ‘get people into the church environment’, at one level or another. Being clear about our motives is a first step.

A Themed Exhibition, or Religious Art Prize offers the opportunity to stimulate artists to think outside their regular mode of thinking, and extend their way of expressing. They broaden the base of their reflection to incorporate and develop a religious affirmation. This is not specifically ‘religion’ base, but an acknowledgement that art has the potential to explore meaning at various levels.

A set of criteria and conditions of entry need to be established, in order to offer clarity, and invitations to artists need to be advertised widely. The following is an example of the prologue and criteria used recently. Note that the work is not judged on the basis of religious content, but on the openness of the artist to explore. The invitation is then extended in the conversation that unfolds in the experience of the viewer during the exhibition. Any “Prize” that is offered is only an affirmation of the quality of the work and an opportunity to invite a wider base of artists, rather than an affirmation of the validity of any of the theological understanding. Getting this balance right is difficult.
“This year the Gallery is inviting artists to explore their understanding of God by offering a Religious Art Prize, along the theme *Daring, Dancing, Deity!* The Prize hopes to encourage artists who are grappling with what it means to reflect theologically upon the theme, exploring the experiencing of a God who extends and challenges life experience, and delights in the richness of life. Our hope is that artists may explore expressions of hope and courage in the midst of an era of global pain and dislocation from one another and the environment.

Involvement in the process of this Prize is intended to enrich the Spiritual experience of the artist, and indeed, to extend an invitation to all who view the exhibition to reflect upon understandings of *Daring Dancing Deity!*

All entries will be judged according to the following criteria:

i. Response to theme of *Daring, Dancing Deity!*
ii. Ability to communicate an awareness of spiritual journey within the art.
iii. Creativity of expression
iv. Application of technique

8. Exercises with Students

*Inviting people to attend to the art and their responses in the context of a process, can be a helpful exercise in opening up thinking and possibility.* Whether in a church context, and particularly in an educational context of theological reflection the following process provides an opportunity to stimulate conversation and reflection. This is best done in a small group of around 8 people. After the art work is viewed and responded to silently the group is invited to share their responses.
An Exercise in Art Reflection

Take some time to reflect upon the art work. Fill in your responses, as you feel able. Please be aware that there are no right or wrong responses. These responses will not be read by anyone, but will form the basis of a conversation to which we will return.

What is your immediate reaction to the work of Art?
________________________________________________________________________

How does this change when you sit with the work for a while?
________________________________________________________________________

Describe what you see?
________________________________________________________________________

What questions does the work stimulate in your mind?
________________________________________________________________________

What question would you most want to ask the artist?
________________________________________________________________________

What stories, events or thoughts from your own experience does the work stimulate, if any?
________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What do you think the artist is trying to communicate?
________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What stories, values or concepts from your belief system or religious tradition does the art remind you of, if any?
If there is one thing, a word, an image, a thought, a story, a poem that encapsulates your experience of this work of art, what is it? If the work were a piece of music, what would it be?

If you wish, you may respond in any way on the page below.
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