

The Art Gallery of the Future - Your Church

An Interview with Wayne Forte, by Spencer Burke

As we entered the dimly lit entryway, we were almost mistaken that we had stepped into an after-hours gallery. Our eyes darted back and forth looking for the auditorium, but we soon got a little sidetracked. After catching a slight glimpse, we made our way up the carpeted stairs one step at a time.

Where did these come from? Did the church purchase these? Where could they have found them?

Our gazes upon one canvas after another never ceasing to be amazed by the profound, impressionistic representations of the biblical narrative. We weren't in an art gallery, we were in a church, Coast Hills Church to be exact.

That night, we stumbled across a collection of paintings that dramatically tells the Story of Redemption in a way that you can see and feel. A member of the church, Wayne Forte, is an accomplished artist that is making waves in the world of religious art. We caught just a glimpse of what he will be presenting at our May event in Southern California, "Soularize."

Listen in as we hear one artist's journey to express his gifts within the context of his own local church.

1. Tell us a little bit about your life story.

I was born in the Philippines in 1950. But, I came here when I was 3 years old to Santa Barbara. I started painting when very early when I was 4 or 5 years old. I always have had a studio in my house. That was always a place that I went to work things out. I went to high school in Santa Barbara. I had an ex-cop that was very influential in me as an artist. He was my art teacher in high school.

2. So, he was an ex-cop, but he had a heart for the arts?

Yeah, he was an ex-cop that became an art teacher, because he really loved art. He was very talented. Then, I went to UC Santa Barbara and majored in art. Mostly print-making. I did a lot of etching and lithography. Then, I went to Denver and I switched around to a lot of universities. But finally I went to UC Irvine which is how I came into this area. Then, I actually had a studio in LA off Western Blvd. for a few years. On a trip to Hawaii to get my brother out of a so-called cult, I ended up coming to the Lord. Then, I came back to LA and got plugged into the Vineyard. I really didn't do any art there, but I did meet my present wife. She was doing some singing here. Then, I followed her back to Brazil the next year, and we got married and lived there for 2 years. Then, we came back here and moved to Laguna Niguel.

I was also very influenced by taking figure-drawing classes at a local junior college with Ling Chun. It was with her that I started doing the figure. Before that, I was mostly a landscape painter. When I started doing figure, I saw the possibility of my desire to do religious and biblical paintings. Then, I started doing some of the visuals at Coast Hills Church. I also joined CIVA, and it was an encouragement to do paintings like that such as liturgical paintings. Or, even paintings just for my personal use where I wanted to give visual form to Biblical things that I was thinking about.

3. It sounded like you took a little hiatus at the time of conversion, but then it resurged. What was that like? Was there a sense of old life/new life or what was going on during that time?

Well, I stayed in Hawaii for a couple of months just reading the Bible to get grounded which was a good thing. I remember as a very immature Christian thinking, "Wow, maybe God is going to have me painting these evangelical paintings for the world." But, once I got back to mainland and saw what was happening, I realized that my mission field would not be the world. It would be the church. Especially since my wife is Presbyterian and I am Catholic, we usually go to churches that are community churches that are non-denominational.

I really saw that churches had lost any appreciation or experience for the arts. So that has been my ministry - really to bring art back into the church and into worship just to give people an experience of art. So that was kind of an irony there.

4. Well, you mentioned that several things encouraged you to get back in there - a class and even CIVA. Give us a little description of CIVA.

CIVA stands for Christians in the Visual Arts. It is a national organization of Christian artists, filmmakers, photographers, dancers, and anyone in the arts. Every other year, they have a conference - usually at a Christian college where they have dormitories available. Then, they invite the best speakers they can get who are interested in religion but not necessarily Christian. They have had a Jewish writer and Robert Hughes - the LA Times art critic. They have had a lot of really challenging and eloquent people come to speak. They also have a juried show and what they call a midnight special. Everybody can bring slides, and they sign up for 15-minute slots. They show their work from 11:30 to 2:00 in the morning. Really, that is the most exciting, because you see the most exciting things. You see the most amazing things like what a little lady is doing out in Iowa with her chickens mounting them and making a Christ symbol out of that. They are just very entertaining.

5. How did that encourage you to get back into the arts?

As a Christian artist, you pretty much feel like you are in a vacuum. The world doesn't understand them, and the church doesn't understand them. So, CIVA gives you a community with kin and kindred spirits. They also arranged a grant where

other painters and I were able to go to Florence for the summer and do etchings on the theme of sacrifice. Then, they market them, and they take the show around.

One thing that always happens when I go there is encouragement. The thing that encouraged me most the last time I went was that I just showed slides of the administrative offices of our church. People were shocked. They said, "You mean your church hangs your paintings all over their offices?" They couldn't believe that the church would be so open and receptive and supportive.

6. How did that journey come about?

It came about over time, because I have been doing it for over 10 years. So, we really needed time to build a rapport. A bond of trust needed to develop, so that took time. We have a visual arts team, so it didn't all fall on my shoulders. There was a group of us that took the sermons - even now we are in the midst of artists learning how to work together. You have a group of artists and a group of administrative people and pastors - so, we all have different needs. We all have different priorities. So, that is an ongoing thing that we are committed to working through. Once and awhile, we have a liaison person which works well, but they tend to get burned. So, we go through our share of leaders; it is a very stressful job.

We also put on an arts conference once a year where we are able to bring out some of these ideas. You just saw the show I have at the church, and that is the first one I have had in 10 years. I mean I have an ongoing one in the offices, but this is the first one in a public place to be labeled and everything.

The children's pastor complained about a couple of paintings; so we took those down. Didn't really close up the show, because I really wanted them to realize that the show had been censored. But it was okay; we weren't taking it personally. When the arts conference returns, we'll put those back up, because it is a mature audience. It's like a family - learning how to work together and allow compromise.

7. Let's say someone is reading this article saying, "Man, I wish we could do that!" What are some things you might encourage them to think about?

The arts conference we do is on a basic level. It is for churches that really want to incorporate art into their worship and into their church. CIVA is more for ministry to artists. I would definitely say to incorporate art into your worship and church, because it makes it a much richer experience. God is a Master Painter. He created a bunch of abstract art that Adam gave names to. I think it makes a much richer experience for everyone, but it is not going to just happen overnight. It is going to take a lot of compromise and study and trial and error in order to find out what fits.

8. What are some of the different ways people are responding to the art in their own journey with God?

Our church is pretty much white collar. So, most of them have been exposed to the arts. Although, in the Christian community, you get a lot of knee-jerk reactions to some things. I've even had calls from the church receptionist saying, "Come over quick! Someone says one of your paintings is occult."

So, I go over there real fast and type up an explanation of the painting. "No these are actually objects of the Passion and they are arranged in this way for this reason. They are given this look in order to evoke the early church." Then, they can kind of understand after you've given an accounting.

9. So, it is somewhat educational as well as experiential. (laughter)

We've had cult alerts and all sorts of things. We have had many other people encouraging me and motivating me by their analysis of their painting. I feel free to use impressionistic or classic techniques depending on what the subject matter requires, although I have developed a strong, recognizable style over the last 15 years.

A lot of people in our church recognize my work right away now. Which in itself is quite an accomplishment, because that takes a lot of looking. Other artists are really encouraged when they come to our church. Even some of our pastors told me that when they interviewed they said that just to be in that environment where there was a lot of art made them want to work there. They wanted a more progressive church, and that was a signal that they got. So, all sorts of blessings come from it.

10. You've shown us one painting that is an annual piece. Is this theme something you revisit or is it ongoing? How did that come to you?

The theme is of Jacob fighting the angel. I see it almost as Jacob representing me or every Christian, and the angel representing God. I always think about this, because it seems like I am always struggling with God. A lot of other people are too. People who talk about my work like that theme; they relate to that in a more personal way than any other theme. It seems like almost every year I'll have new thoughts about that subject matter and what it means to me. So, I'll do a new version. Sometimes with Jacob having a transcendental look in his eyes with a reflection in the shape of a cross. Other times meditating on a wing - on how it is fluttering and fighting but also a covering. Other times, I will take it very abstract so that you almost see these two forces colliding. Other times, I will do a version that is quite literal where you can see their facial expressions. I'll do them in charcoal and painting. Like Rembrandt always did a self- portrait - an ongoing theme. So, in a way, this is a self-portrait.

11. Is it part of your spiritual journey? I mean, this doesn't seem like just a painting.

This is definitely a way to deal with that question visually. Then, it feeds back and forth between the mental and physical and visual. I can say, "You know, I am going to put in a crutch this year". That crutch is going to indicate that he was lamed by the

angel. Then, that crutch may remind me of a branch of a tree, which reminds me of a cross. That way you can take it deeper and meditate on it. That way it becomes an object of meditation.

12. If you were to guide our readers through your gallery, what would you say to them as you led them by the hand?

I would say that most of the biblical works are updates on old master paintings. I have taken them and adjusted them so that they are more readable to contemporary vision. We who are used to TV, movies, big billboards where the information comes hot and fast. Otherwise, we don't have time. It used to be in the Renaissance that a painting was an object of contemplation, because people had time. Not anymore.

So, lots of times I will use old master paintings that people haven't seen in awhile. I will simplify by just including the necessary figures - push them right up to the picture frame using impressionistic techniques so they feel energetic. I will try to make the message using a few words like having a rooster crowing and words that say, "and Peter wept." Then, they will make the connection between the image and the text, and hopefully that will resonate. Then, hopefully, they can always think of that image when they hear those words or story. I will use an impressionistic technique to get energy going in there.

13. Any words of hope or inspiration for someone just starting out.

Allow God to use your talents. That doesn't mean that you are just going to be painting religious or sanctified paintings. A lot of times I will paint things that are profane. Sometimes, it is just something that bothered me and I had to paint about it. I don't really try to divide myself and say I'm just a spiritual painter all the time. I think that if you allow God to use any talent He has given you, it will be his responsibility.