



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Abstracting Grace - further adventures in Art Theology Part Six

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Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination

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The idea of Art Theology raises the question(s): *what is art and what is theology?*

We live within this incredible moment of decolonization where people are interrogating the ideas of the academy and its gatekeepers. Inspired by the decolonizing work so many are engaged in, Art Theology seeks to create something new.

There are wonderful conversations going on. Beyond what art is, who decides what “great art” is? Who is a “great artist”? Where should “great art” be held? And who is privileged to view it?

The old gatekeepers of “art” were many of the same gatekeepers of the academy.

The academy, built by free white men who created the method of research.

We teach college students to write research papers that argue a thesis.

If they want to succeed in the academy, they have to learn to write this way:

arguing
judging
defining

using propositions
being technical
always reaching for “objective truth”

I wanted a method built on and towards connection rather than argument. I have learned that the first step is to remove judgement. Get rid of the word *great* and tell me what it is to make art.

I often engage my students in peer reviews, whether they are writing a research paper or making art. Before they meet with their partners, I ask them to write out their feedback by first summarizing the piece, then describing strengths of the piece, and finally offering questions or suggestion, (they only offer suggestions if they are sure they have understood their peer's intent in the piece). The thing they have to be sure of—and that I review in their feedback before they share it with each other—is that they remove all judgement.

They struggle at first wanting to write, “I like your conclusion” or “This is great...” I invite them to remove *like* and *great* and say something more. This encourages them to go back and look more closely, read more closely, in order to reimagine the sentence to something like:

“Your thesis is so clear from the very beginning of your paper through to the end. You keep returning to the thesis like a spiral throughout, it is this clear throughline reaching into the conclusion. When you restate your thesis in your conclusion it really it holds the paper in a very satisfying way.”

Removing judgement not only helps them read more closely, it removes the fear that they often feel going into peer review. Once judgement is removed, we are free to make new things. Our focus shifts toward making art in order to engage in visual-thinking that creates new theological insights and understandings.

What is theology really? The exploration of ideas and understandings of God? Knowledge of God? But, I do not just know things in my mind—I know them in my body. I also know them through making.

Art Theology uses visual-thinking, seeing, and making to explore questions and ideas about God.

In the *abstracting grace series* I created for the Wabash Center, I made my way into new questions and ideas about grace through painting and poetry. For example, in making, *Is it like air?* as I painted I somatically realized I had been unconsciously carrying an idea that grace was arbitrarily given. I didn't know why Mary had been “full of grace” and I wasn't. I reviewed what the academy had taught me about grace and saw that it was all bound up with sin and the idea of gift. Which made me wonder, if it is a gift how is it given? As I dipped my paintbrush into the white acrylic and made a swooping line I thought, maybe it is like air...all around us, all the time, and it is us who decide how we breathe it in. This insight had me revisiting Duns

Scotus' idea of the will and how it is the will that makes us human, not our intellect. Scotus said *our will is where our capacity to love resides*. This is the greatest gift we have been given, and it is all around us. We choose how mindfully we breathe.

Through making art theology, a new rich understanding of grace came into being.

A new understanding that discursive reasoning alone could not, and had not, given me.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/01/abstracting-grace-further-adventures-in-art-theology-part-six/>