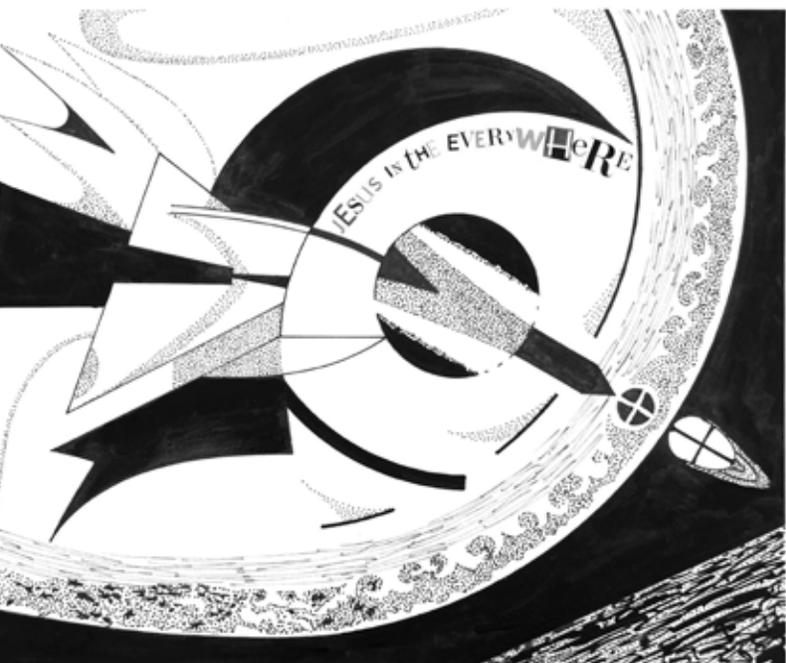# Jesus in the Everywhere

Joel Nickel

As the story goes, back in 1938 John Cage, the avant-garde composer who specialized in the sound of silence, musical intervals, and playing inside the piano by loosening strings and hammering the keys, was giving one of his first concerts at the famous Cornish School in Seattle. A visual artist, Morris Graves, who also taught at Cornish, was in the audience. Graves was a devotee of Zen Buddhism and Dada, the artistic and literary movement that sought to abolish the restrictive norms of classical aesthetics through comic relief, chance, and intuition. Halfway through Cage's performance, Graves started shouting, "Jesus in the everywhere!"—whereupon he was ushered out and banished from the concert hall. John Cage, however, recognized that his aesthetic goals dovetailed nicely with those of Graves. The composer and visual artist became close friends.[1]

"Jesus in the everywhere!" It has slowly dawned on me that this is the guiding principle of my own artistic journey. I remember a lecture given by George W. Forell wherein he proposed that "Lutheran theology is a theology of paradox… tempted by panentheism."[2] The "en" tucked into that word means the creator is understood as transcendent, beyond material creation, neither trapped within it nor defined by it, while still choosing to form and animate it, visit and infuse it with His presence, "in, with, and under" the physical order of things, inviting our awareness and contemplation, our questions and devotion. The both/and position holds apparent opposites in tension, which allows for doxology in the midst of ambiguity and freedom in the face of certainty. All of this describes well a visual artist looking at the mystery of being and the conjunctions of chance, trying to escape the limitations imposed by the secular orthodoxy of "a rose is a rose is a rose." If what you see is all you get, then we'd better educate ourselves about seeing.

After all, Jesus had a penchant for looking beneath the surface of things—at a seed that would become a bush to house birds' nests, at the yeast that leavens dough, at the leafy fruitlessness of a fig tree, and at the rain that falls on the just and the unjust. He saw heaven as a wedding feast and heard God's voice in the thunder. His self-professed identity was elucidated by bread, a grape vine, shepherding, gate-guarding, roads, an emptied grave, and light. Some of his actions were Dadaistic: he overturned tables in the temple and chased moneychangers with a whip, questioned authority, spoke with both Satan and God on a first-name basis, sought solitude, fed a multitude of people with a boy's lunch, stilled storms, told fishermen from which side of the boat to cast their nets, and spread mud on a blind man's eyes. He touched lepers and embraced guilt by association. Accused of blasphemy, he remained silent. Flattered by an admirer, he deflected all glory to God alone but accepted praise from children. His cross has become much larger than two pieces of wood chamfered together, for it is the crossing of the vertical and the horizontal that brings into focus the conjunction of heaven and earth around the conundrums of paradox. The universe is alive—Jesus in the everywhere—even though he had no place to lay his head. There was no room in the inn, no welcome in Jerusalem, no place (not even Nazareth) to answer the basic question, "Where are you from?" (cf. John 9:29–30).

David Hockney, a contemporary artist and theorist, questions the limits of single-point perspective, that "pictorial artifice of the Renaissance."[3] Prior to the Renaissance, paintings were flat but multi-perspectival. Important figures were painted large and unimportant figures were painted small, even if they were in the foreground. Strict historical chronology wasn't important, as ancient and contemporary scenes could be conflated, picturing agreement in theme and impact. Patrons were painted into historical scenes because their money made the picture possible in the present time.

The Renaissance discovery of single-point perspective changed everything. Our modern camera devices, so important in our electronic information age, are the outgrowth of this optical discovery. They portray precise

Above: "The Cross at the Edge of the Universe," 2014
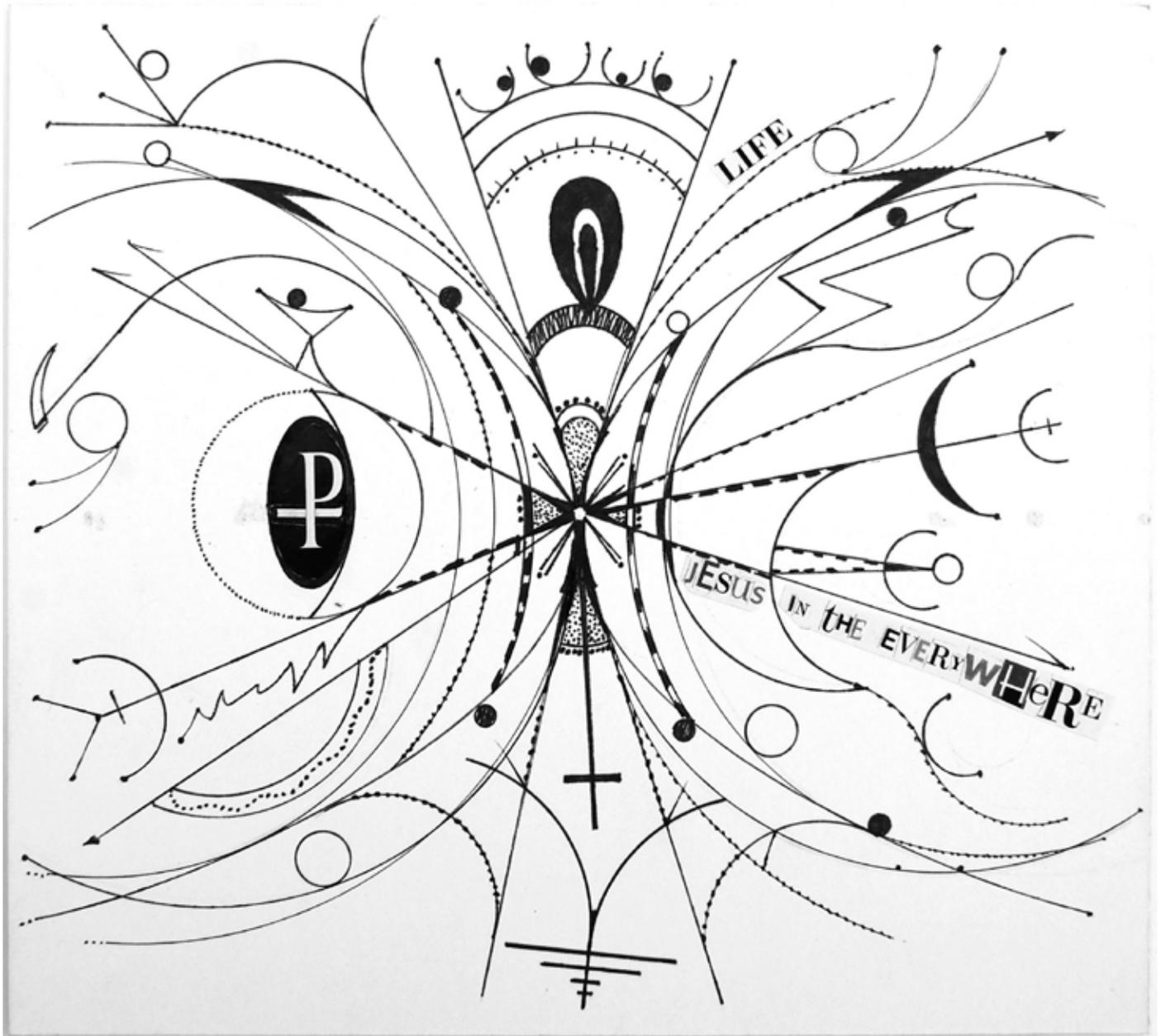
"Jesus in the Everywhere," 2014

visual information and convey expressive emotion in a lifelike manner, but the viewer, Hockney explains, fixed to one spot and time, must look at reality through a hole—the camera lens—seeing everything in the foreground in high definition but losing detailed information toward the diminished vanishing point in the distance, over the horizon line and out of sight. The "selfie" is in the foreground while the infinite is out of the picture: it is the story of our culture. Hockney's theological counterpoint in his "journey to a more complex perspective" is this:

In the theory of one-point perspective the vanishing point is infinity and the viewer is at an immobile point outside the picture frame looking in. If the infinite is God, we never connect, because infinity is beyond what we can see. But if perspective is reversed, then infinity is everywhere, infinity is everywhere, infinity is everywhere, infinity is everywhere and the viewer is now mobile.[4]

If Christ is raised, then infinity is everywhere. Perspective has been reversed, for out of death comes life. The church in her preaching starts with the end, with the ascension, resurrection, and cross, and moves backward into the life of Christ, his ministry, teaching, and birth, onward into the contemporary foreground in which we, believing observers with multiple perspectives, have become part of the story itself. Faith is indeed a journey to a more complex perspective in which God is everywhere in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, and we are in Christ! Jesus in the everywhere!

My own attempts to catch a glimpse

of this reversed perspective came into being during a tumultuous ministry on the South Side of Chicago during the late 1960s. It seemed like chaos was about to engulf us. I tried to plug up the leak in the dike but water was coming in over the top. I concluded that if the apocalypse didn't happen in 1968, then it probably wouldn't happen in my lifetime. It was the urban crisis that prompted me to enroll in art school. In the fiery furnace of those experiences I became a geometric abstractionist sketching on the edge of surrealism as regards visual art and a conservative radical as regards theology, preaching, and ethics. To counter distress I tried to convey in color and form what I saw through the eyes of faith. In a side worship area in our cavernous church I hung a wooden cross and fashioned a corpus out of aluminum clothesline. The crown of thorns was a piece of barbed wire that had once been strung around the church parking lot to keep out children. Next came colorful banners hanging under side balconies that spelled out "Resurrection Celebration." My abstract vision focused on circles and crosses: the sign of God's presence breaking into the here and now of daily life, embracing us with hints of Jesus in the everywhere. Circles and crosses are still dominant in my art.

While working as a campus pastor, I discovered in the architecture library of the University of Illinois a number of art books covering the work of German Expressionists, including their biblical art, especially Emil Nolde, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Otto Dix. That they had been declared "degenerate artists" by Adolf Hitler only magnified their importance. They ignored the illusion of perfect form and instead grounded the human image with elemental energy—*simul justus et peccator*, to put it in Lutheran terms. Their colorful and abrupt forms were balanced in my visual imagination by Wassily Kandinsky's "Improvisation" series that reach into cosmic realms. Kandinsky was influenced by his memory of Pentecost
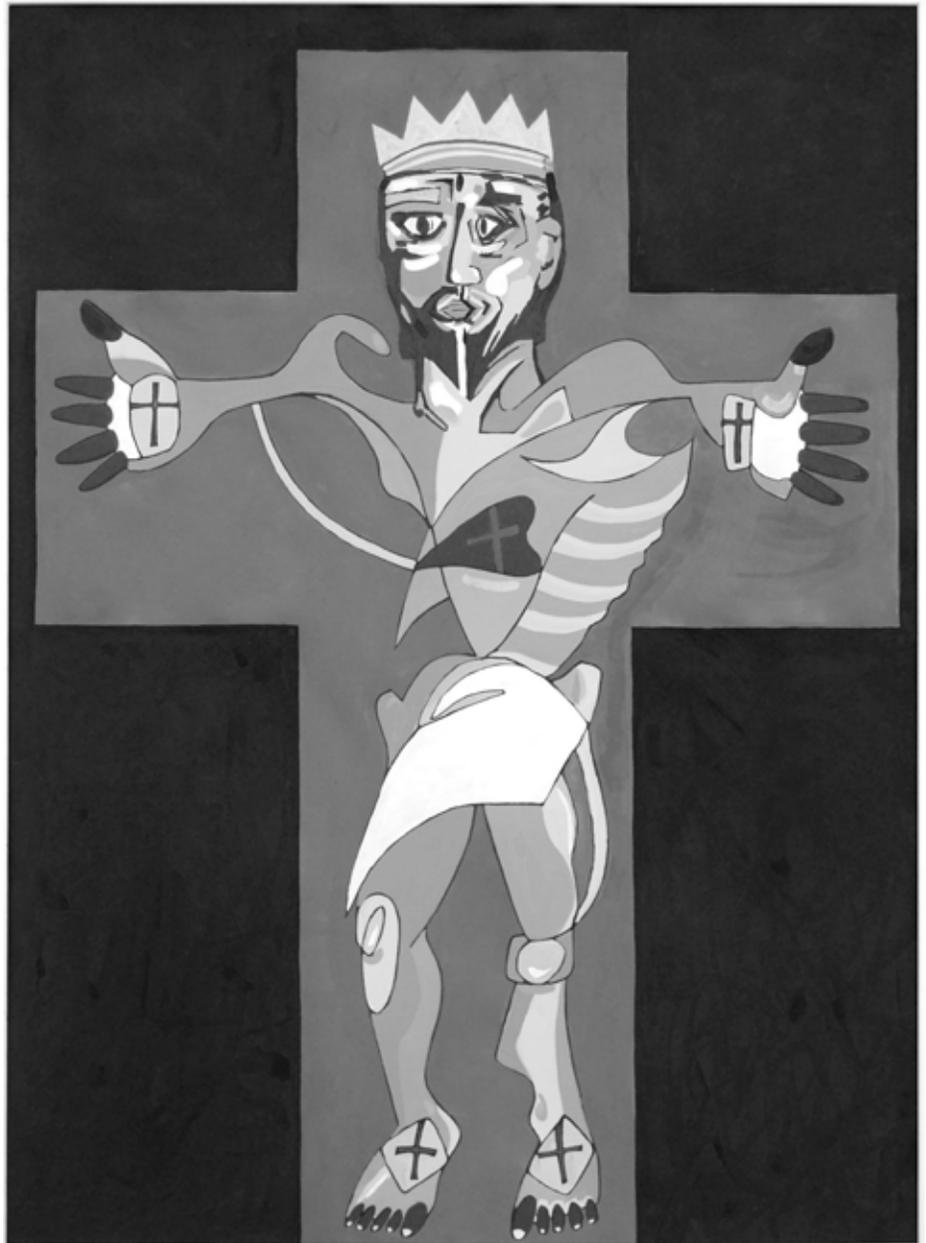

"Bones out of Joint (Psalm 22:14)," 2013

processions in the Russian Orthodox church and by theosophism. His book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), emphasizes the spiritual qualities of line and color in non-objective design. My concurrent discovery of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece with its graphic crucifixion panel, and the fact that it was being painted at the same time that Martin Luther was writing and defending his Heidelberg Disputation on the theology of the cross, had a huge impact on me. Here is the Lutheran icon without peer, the only starting point for a liturgical artist of Lutheran persuasion. A pilgrimage

to Colmar, France, in 1992 allowed me to sit at its feet. In the 1930s Pablo Picasso filled many sketchbook pages with his version of Grünewald's crucifixion panel. He never painted a crucifixion scene with these images, but they found their way into his painting "Guernica," which Paul Tillich called "the greatest Protestant painting."[5]

Pondering the paradoxical Lutheran stance toward Christ and culture in the 1980s led me to create a series of "camouflaged crosses": different cross shapes hidden among surrealist forms. A much later discovery of Andy Warhol's camouflaged Lord's
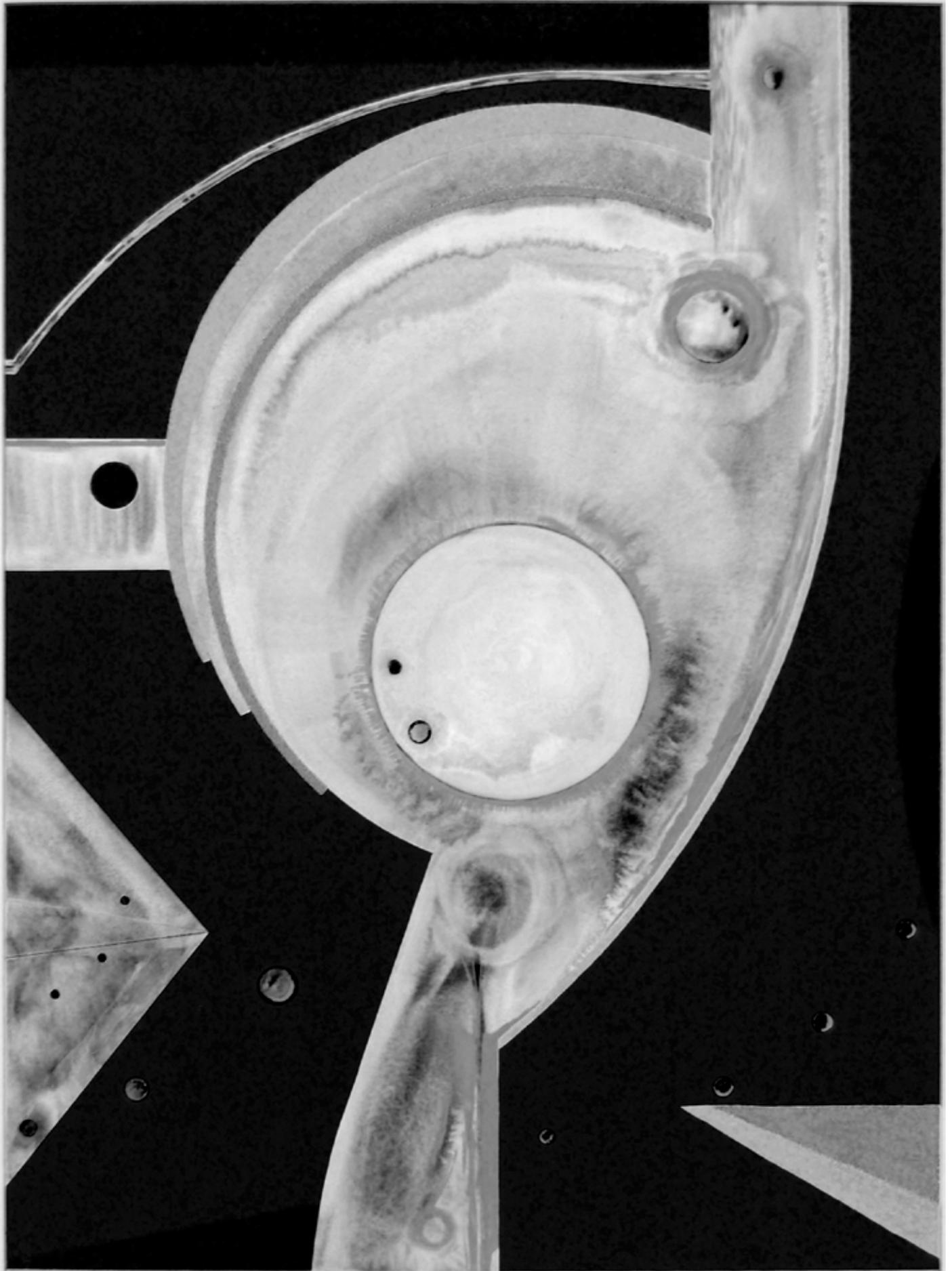
Supper paintings affirmed my intuition.[6] From there it was only a small move to depicting the graphic figure of Christ on the cross, filtered and distorted through Picasso and the German Expressionists, portraying image-truth about the ugliness of God that is more sublime than human beauty: my personal addition to I Corinthians 1:25. The "stumbling block" to ancient and modern minds is not only God's foolishness and weakness but the visual devastation that is the crucifixion, God's ugliness. That still seems to be offensive to those who idealize human beauty. Here is where the wrestling with "theological aesthetics" should begin.

Photographs of the expanding universe sent back to earth by the Hubble Space Telescope are visually overwhelming and deeply spiritual. They underline the psalmist's proclamation that sun, moon, and stars praise their creator and define the "everywhere." My fascination found expression in a series that I called "Hubble Meditations," painted mostly in watercolor and gouache, with one painting envisioning "the cross at the edge of the universe." Large black forms establish the foreground while the transparencies of deep space swirl around in perpetual motion.

My second stint as a part-time art student was in the metals department of the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts in 1990, and this experience with craft was furthered by the discovery of enameling at the Grünewald Guild in Plains, Washington, in 2000. This colorful medium continues to instigate the creation of pectoral crosses and pendants with colors and forms often inspired by Kandinsky and Picasso, worn as visual testimony to Jesus in the everywhere.[7]

Retirement from full-time parish work now allows me more freedom to create liturgical art. A series of paintings on Advent and Easter Vigil themes uses strong color contrasts and brings the art into dialogue with worship action. These were followed by pen-and-ink drawings of the stations of the cross and torn-paper collage images of the stations of the resurrection, including devotional material. The quest for meaning in an asymmetrical world has led most recently to a series called "Harmonic Balance" that tries to "unmask the banality of the beautiful and release the beauty of the apparently banal."[8] The grand landscapes and seascapes of Oregon often create a visual overload from which I continue to select limited slices, still linked by faith to the graciousness of Jesus in the everywhere.   *LF*

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Notes

1. *Sounds of the Inner Eye: John Cage, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves*, eds. Wulf Herzogenrath & Andreas Kreul (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002). See Herzogenrath's "John Cage: An Artist Who Accepts Life," 8; and Wesley Wehr's "Mark Tobey: A Dialogue Between Painting and Music," 35. Two essays tell the story of the Cornish School

concert incident.

2. My notes from a lecture presented by George W. Forell to the Oregon Pastoral Conference in the early 1980s. To my knowledge, his paper remains unpublished. Forell made a careful distinction between "pantheism" and "pan*en*theism," referring to Colossians 1:15–17, especially "in [Christ] all things hold together."

3. Paul Melia and Ulrich Luckhardt, *David Hockney* (New York: Prestel, 1994), 152.

4. David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (New York: Viking Studio, 2001), 94–95. Hockney compares the perspective of his photo collage, "Pearlblossom Hwy." (1986) with Van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece of 1432. Hockney used a Polaroid camera to create interesting photo collages, moving around the point of view, bringing distant objects into the foreground. This technique is similar to that of the Cubists, especially Picasso and Braque in the 1920s, when they pasted together bits and pieces of photographs within their paintings. Renaissance artists from the fifteenth century onward used optical devices such as mirrors and lenses, *camera obscura* and *camera lucida*, to replicate intricately detailed woven cloth and other textures not only in the foreground but also in the receding backgrounds. Such detail is not possible through "eyeballing" it alone.

5. Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 95, 110, 119, 124.

6. Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* (New York: Continuum, 1998), especially "Leonardo's Last Supper Transformed" and "Warhol and Leonardo in Milan," 79–121.

7. Cloisonné enamel is glass on metal (usually copper). The full-palette color wheel can be employed in this labor-intensive medium of glass and metal fused together in a kiln, which has become my primary artistic medium for the past decade and a half. The medium flourished during the Middle Ages in the city of Limoges in France and carries with it the imprint of liturgical art.

8. Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 15. Matheson sees this as "the challenge of Surrealist art in our century" and parallel to the "world turned upside down" by the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Hopefully such upsetting will create room to imagine new futures for the church in this age of its decline.

Opposite: "Hubble Meditation #2," 1998
Front Cover: "Three Men in the Furnace of Fire (Daniel 3)," 2012

Above: Pectoral cross, 2014
Back Cover: "Heaven Heights and Earth Ways (Isaiah 55)," 2012