

I M A G E



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GINGER HENRY GEYER

Art on Board

John Cobb's Panel Paintings

Hit the Texas Highways

AROUND Austin, there had been a quiet buzz about a chapel by the elusive painter John P. Cobb. I had seen only three of his paintings—egg tempera and gold leaf on panel. They were knockouts. When I inquired, nobody knew much about the artist. “He lives in a rural hovel...has no phone or electricity...is a bearded hermit...has been working on a series of paintings for fifty years that he won’t exhibit or sell...is building a chapel in the woods that he intends to give away some day...he doesn’t talk much...is a staunch Catholic and is secretive about his Old Master techniques.”

None of this was accurate. When I finally got hold of a phone number and went out to visit this modern-day Duccio at his home near the Austin airport, I found not a poster child for the “Keep Austin Weird” campaign, but a gentle, friendly, even talkative host. The painter and his wife live in a comfortable house, where Cobb recently built on an addition for his mother. Across the dirt road I saw cows, probably the same ones featured in his paintings. He does have a phone, but no computer. He’s mellow but not a hermit; he’s coy and funny and thrives on conversation. He recently had a show at the Corpus Christi art museum and sold everything but the paintings that comprise the mysterious chapel. (Cobb didn’t tell me this himself; his mother did.) The growing group of chapel paintings forms an open-ended unit; they aren’t for sale individually. Cobb’s dream is to find a permanent home for them, some place where they will be used reverently. He’ll know it when it appears.

A recovered hippie, he’s bearded and wiry, but not old enough to have been painting for fifty years. He’s Catholic because his wife is, and like many artists he struggles with the faith. He feels misperceived by the church because he asks so many questions. He does use traditional techniques, but he reveals them freely.

The chapel itself, a movable, temporary structure, was dismantled when I visited. Walking through the tall weeds, we came upon a pile of weathered wood leaning on a shed. “That’s it,” he said.

“Where?” I asked.

Before this visit, I had first seen Cobb's work in a show at Austin's Hope Chapel: a double panel of *Service, Ms. Rose* and *John the Baptist* [see Plates 3 and 4]. The paintings have smooth, exacting surfaces. They are meticulously crosshatched, gilded, then gently rubbed with humble cheesecloth and later buffed with light wax. Cobb uses egg tempera in the classic methods of Byzantine iconographers, and like those sixth-century works, these paintings are built to last. *Ms. Rose* hangs just above Saint John, who raises his finger in a gesture reminiscent of the Baptist in Grünewald's *Crucifixion*. The two figures, one ancient, one modern, make an odd pairing, at least at first. Cobb's style of rendering is contemporary rather than Byzantine, and so is the theology behind the images.

Like Cobb, I ask too many questions. Like Jesus, Cobb rarely gives straight answers. What did *Ms. Rose* and the Baptist have to do with each other, I asked? There's no arcane theological connection, as it turns out. They just fit into the chapel structure that way. Each is a part of a whole that can be rearranged as space requires. My best question was whether we could exhibit the chapel at Laity Lodge, where I curate exhibitions. He said yes.

Laity Lodge (a ministry of the H.E. Butt Foundation) rented a minivan to transport the paintings; Cobb borrowed a rickety flatbed trailer to carry the chapel's five weathered lattice walls, and I returned to his house to help him load it up. Again and again, we climbed the spindly outdoor staircase to his makeshift studio and carried down the paintings. Upstairs, the neatly wrapped boards were stacked around and on top of a bed in a narrow space crammed with the detritus of art-making. Palettes and jars were strewn across the floor next to a small lamp. As I clambered over an old chair, my feet rolled over paintbrushes; a photograph stuck to my shoe.

He lashed the chapel walls to the trailer and hitched it to his well-used pickup truck. My husband joined us, and together we set off like the Israelites into the wilderness, our tabernacle on a flatbed with bald tires, broken taillights, a faulty gas gauge, and out-of-date plates. On the open road we made only fifty miles per hour, which in Texas means you are as slow as Christmas. My relief overflowed as we rolled into the hill country without having run out of gas, gotten a ticket, or lost the chapel on a bumpy road.

Laity Lodge is nestled in the Frio River Canyon, and to get there you have to drive *in* the river for about a quarter of a mile. Everything—from Steinway pianos to generic soda pop to Eugene Peterson—takes that same route, and John Cobb's chapel proved water-worthy, too.

As I unloaded the wooden ribs of the arched ceiling, I realized that their shape had more to do with boat construction than with the barrel vault of a sanctuary. Cobb is preoccupied with weather and the sea; he reminded me of the metaphor of the church as an ark. His chapel (for now, at least) is simply a nave with no

narthex or apse, and *navis* in Latin means ship. The ship is a symbol of movement forward, of safety, of venturing into the unknown with a cross-shaped mast.

For the installation space, he selected a window alcove in the large, main room of the Cody Center, the arts complex at Laity Lodge [see Plate 1]. With help, the walls were erected, the transverse arches set in place, and sixteen panel paintings eased into window-like openings. The centerpiece is the large, horizontal *Baptism by Water* [see Plate 2], showing a line of people walking down to a river. Directly behind the Cody Center wall ran the Frio River; we could faintly hear its current. The landscape outside the windows mimicked that in the painting, an indoor/outdoor effect I had only experienced once before, in Fay Jones's Thorncrown Chapel in Arkansas.

A true mystic of the everyday, Cobb modeled his landscape on Hippy Hollow, a notorious nude swimming hole on an Austin lake. In the background, a naked Adam and Eve also descend to the water.

After the chapel paintings were all installed, one was left over. We hung it on a wall nearby, an aching reminder to make more room. Gold leaf flashed as the sun set. The next morning, patterns of light shot through the slats of wood. By noon, the overhead sun threw curved shadow stripes across the paintings. God was laying the symbolism on pretty thick, in case we didn't get the point: the universal mystery of divine presence is expressed by light.

In his more recent work, Cobb has mastered egg tempera, producing cool, matte surfaces with an effect half transparent, half opaque. Though the technique is classical, the result reveals a blend of influences. Cobb says he owes more to Peter Heard and Andrew Wyeth than to Duccio, and the square-patterned application of gold leaf feels Asian. The compositions are direct, like Giotto's, but unlike Giotto's Arena Chapel, Cobb's doesn't form a narrative cycle. There is no ominous, dark sea; no Leviathan lurks. The subjects are real people, simple folk, unassuming, never sentimentalized, doing the best they can. They aren't necessarily connected, except that the models are all friends of Cobb's. When I asked how he selects models, he told me he looks for the tenderness expressed in Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride*—a painting he reveres so much that he can barely speak about it.

Spending time in the chapel is like being on a modest-sized, beautifully crafted sailboat on an overcast day: there is a gentle rocking motion as you move from one painting to another, a sense that all will be well. The foreground is in sharp focus; the distance is a shimmering mirage. I've since recognized that this dependable assurance appears in all of Cobb's work. It has a measured insistence, like good surf. The palette does not beg attention, but nudges you to see. The coloration lies somewhere between the modest tonalities of Pissarro and the liveliness of Botticelli. Cobb grew up along the Texas coast, and the colors and textures of that landscape still haunt his work. The beaches have a humble,

understated beauty, as if they realize that Texas doesn't need any more spectacular scenery or tourist attractions. Rather, what Texas needs is nuance. The foamy, gritty water of the Texas Gulf seems to lap out its rhythm in his brushstrokes.

Back in the late 1970s, Cobb refurbished the interior of the Seaman's Chapel, a tiny structure built in 1933 in Port Aransas, Texas. The first church on this small island in the Gulf of Mexico, it stands near the beach, its doors opening directly onto the sand. Intended for Portuguese sailors who frequented the port and needed a consecrated place for prayer before setting out to sea, in later years it fell into disrepair. The chapel had grown smelly and full of snakes when Cobb, who had recently converted to Christianity, approached the property owner and asked if he could paint the interior. Working through the Bible, he designed and painted a mural based on stories from Genesis to Revelation. The mural has a childlike tone reminiscent of Chagall, and some of the angelic playfulness of Giotto. Cobb worked directly on the old plaster walls, using another classic technique, fresco secco. The brushwork is washy, the colors blue and airy, quite different from his later work. The Seaman's Chapel is a hidden treasure of Port Aransas, as it now stands on private property. It's used primarily for small weddings, and you have to borrow the key from the landlord to visit. Ten years ago, a relative of the owner announced that he was going to whitewash the walls, and eighty villagers protested. The murals were left intact, although the building suffered an inept restoration.

As a child in Austin and Corpus Christi, John Cobb showed an artistic bent from a young age. His family encouraged him to take art lessons, and he went on to study art at the Rhode Island School of Design and graduated from Saint Edward's University in Austin. Before beginning the current chapel, Cobb painted a series of land and seascapes in acrylics and grisaille watercolors (monochromatic studies in shades of gray). In 1983 he began working in egg tempera, and his studies of nature and biblical stories began to incorporate the human figure. He is not represented by a gallery and is not motivated by sales, though he's glad to have them. As well as Heard and Wyeth, he cites Goya, Velázquez, Thomas Eakins, Paul Cadmus, and Robert Henri (especially his treatise *Art Spirit*) as his main influences. A medieval sense of anonymity pervades his paintings, but his mark is unmistakable.

For the Laity Lodge show, I asked him to provide some narrative. His quirky artist's statement reveals a lifelong attention to the color and texture of the world around him. He describes studying at the Texas School of Fine Arts as a child:

...in a decrepit home reeking with spirits and the plaster casts and the stacks and stacks of printed art—the most delightful brown cloudscape on the cheesecloth wallpaper of the ceiling from whence drifted down the piano songs from the music school above.

From young adulthood:

I took the money, which I considered a great deal for college, and went to Europe. In nine months or so upon my Vespa, I declare, much was learned that the controlled nature of college could not reveal. Crossing from Tétouan into Spanish Ceuta, I had stashed my hash in a tube of ultramarine blue, but fortunately for my future, I lost my nerve and tossed my load overboard into the blue sea.

As a painter, Cobb sees himself as a journalist; he reports what he observes. Although his paintings include contemporary details—like a wristwatch on the arm of a man assisting with the descent from the cross—there is timelessness here. The models for Cobb’s *Deposition* were three monks from the Order of the Holy Cross, and this Jesus looks older than usual [see Plate 7]. The men and women in Cobb’s paintings are of all ages and ethnicities. This is no artificial, politically correct statement; these happen to be the folks he knows well. The work echoes with compassion and reverence for life in the style of someone like Dorothy Day, but the paintings are not intended to activate social justice. When asked about his work, Cobb steers clear of political claims. Art has absolutely no agency in making the world better, he says. As we talk, he finally arrives at the conclusion that his aim is to reveal love. (Some would contend that that *is* a political aim.) When people feel that who they are has been revealed, he says, they’re only a step away from being made to realize who God is. Paradoxically, he feels he must be cautious with this vision, and says he spends more time restraining it than using it. A good Catholic, he wears his guilt like his greasy old leather hat, still grieving things he did long ago. He believes that illuminating other people gives light to his own “dark self.”

A few weeks after his show was installed at Laity Lodge, we hosted a retreat for artists, where Cobb taught a workshop on egg tempera to an eager bunch of new learners. We’d all observed the persistence of dried yolk on dishes. In paintings, this natural emulsion has endured for six hundred years. We had a lot of questions about the eggs. No, it doesn’t require any special type. Cobb doesn’t raise chickens on his farm, but he does use a fresh egg each time he paints. Yes, the egg medium stinks if you leave it out too long (hence the Italian nickname “la pittura *al putrido*”). Worse, roaches are attracted to fresh paintings. Darker yolks contain more fat and are best for palette knife work. Eggs will never give you the juicy impasto oils do, but a build-up of this cholesterol-laden mixture will create a nice, rich texture. Too much will cause checking (a characteristic crackle pattern in the paint surface). No, the yolk does not affect the coloration, which typically leans toward cooler tones, because the molecular structure of the pure pigments allows differing wavelengths of light to penetrate the egg medium.

But we had gotten ahead of ourselves, and Cobb gracefully guided us back

to the beginning: preparing the support. He's tried poplar and other woods, but prefers Masonite board because it's more permeable. He builds a cradle on the panel to prevent warping, mixing and applying six coats of gesso and sanding each one as soon as it dries, to retain moisture. Then he puts down the underdrawing. It's like a classic cartoon, traced from a pastiche of his own photographs. He calls these drawings "the facts"—they aren't art, he says, just data about one stone's relation to another, or the patterns of light and dark in the foliage, or the angle of a drapery fold. He reduces or enlarges the facts on an overhead projector and traces them on paper. He shows our class how to sand the back of the paper and rub in red or black powdered clay, making it into homemade carbon paper. All this avoids the use of any waxy material that would prevent the absorption of the egg medium. Then the facts are transferred onto the prepared panel.

Next, he unstoppered little old French bottles of powdered pigments, and we all felt the momentary thrill of wealth as we knifed colors onto a marble slab in careful rows like some bad drug. We added drops of water and ground the pigments into a paste with very small palette knives. Some pigments repel water; others are gritty. Some pigments are more opaque than others. Finally, we got to crack eggs. We separated out the whites (joking about making a meringue) and carefully placed each yolk in a small glass bowl, pierced it, and stirred in a teaspoon or two of water. With fine brushes we dabbed egg into pigment paste, blending them into dollops of color. The paint goes onto the panel in small strokes and dries quickly. We played with glaze effects, and learned that an egg tempera painting has to be earned over time, layer by layer. Blending is tricky. We see that Chinese red is exceedingly strong, viridian can buff out, and yellow is so acidic it goes a long way. We avoid the powdered white lead, which is poisonous and beautiful.

Cobb recommends *The Practice of Tempera Painting: Materials and Methods*, by Daniel V. Thompson Jr., a slim volume published in 1936 and drawing upon the techniques of early Italian masters. Writes Thompson, "Tempera is not to be thought of as a material; it is a discipline." He compares egg tempera to oil painting: if the modern painter "wants to sketch, and feel his way, and capitalize on happy accidents, [tempera] will be no good to him. If he wants to catch the essence of passing moment in his painting, ...or to suggest some elusive, indescribable effect, Cennino's mantle will hang heavy on his shoulders.... Tempera requires clarity in formulation. It cannot adapt itself to any vagueness."

It's too bad Thompson can't see *Baptism by Water*, where the underlying texture of choppy water peeks through the flesh of the figure who represents the Lord (he's the skinny guy in black shorts), or the milky, flowered fabric of Ms. Rose's dress, or the painterly sky behind the *Deposition*. There Cobb used a large, expensive brush, a treasured gift from his wife, to create an atmospheric effect that hints of the promise of heaven. In *Saint Francis and Brother Leo in Their*

Woodland Hovel, tiny flashes of gold glint in the tangled thicket where obscure figures crouch. Dark egg temperas, like this one, are difficult to photograph, as the light seems to get caught in an opalescent layer. Egg tempera does not lend itself to a deep saturation of color, as oil does. Instead, the surface looks webbed, smoky, and mysterious.

Though it's difficult to create warm tones in egg tempera, Cobb is doing so in his current project, a large painting called *Baptism by Fire*. When I saw it, it showed a campfire burning wildly in a Mexican cemetery scene. It will take a year or more to complete, and Cobb isn't about to rush it. He feels that artists today are too focused on expedience, with their acrylics and pre-fab materials, as if the work is only in the paint-application phase. "It may be while grinding bole that I realize the painting is wrong—it gives me time to think while I work."

The workshop ended before we got to the gilding demonstration, which Cobb calls the most sensitive part of the process. Gold leaf blows around the room at the slightest whiff of breeze or breath. A lot just happens on its own, and he allows the incongruities to stand as they occur. He uses a variation on the water gilding technique, with 22-karat gold.

At the gallery talk he gave us, he told stories about the people in his paintings. Ms. Rose was his co-worker at the Texas Department of Public Safety. As they cleaned toilets and floors together, they took turns complaining, or just enjoyed the emptiness of doing simple chores in silence. Mr. Brown, the plumber from New Mexico, dropped to his knees when Cobb asked him to pose as Saint Peter, a posture he obviously knew well [see Plate 6]. The large, square painting of Mary as a child on a donkey tells an imagined tale of the virgin mother receiving a premonition of her flight into Egypt [see front cover]. In his artist's statement, Cobb wrote, "At such times in the hyper-life of the child, a comforting and loving presence is required. In this case her grandfather is there to ease her vision into place." Homeless men have served as models for *John the Baptist* and for the onlooker in *Baptism by Water*. (Though the latter closely resembles the artist, Cobb insists that it's not.) In *Manger Scene, the Room between Heaven and Earth*, the foreground is devoted to a large cow. Cobb used to earn his living by feeding cows, and speaks lovingly of the care that Mr. and Mrs. Simnacher devoted to four-footed creatures. Eventually their farm went to ruin, and the cows wandered out onto the highway. Worse, the couple's violent son-in-law roared over on his bulldozer and took down the trees and the barn. After the gallery talk, someone asked, "What was that guy's motive for bulldozing the barn and trees?" Cobb flatly replied, "He's from Texas." Later he told me that the son-in-law is a mirror, the crazy paradox of the world embodied in one person. "I couldn't exist without him," he said. "But I'd like to."

The stories behind the paintings are rich examples of narrative theology, but Cobb has trouble writing them down. I read him a passage from *Presence*:

Human Purpose and the Field of the Future by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers: “The fundamental insight of twentieth-century physics has yet to penetrate the social world: relationships are more fundamental than things.” His face lit up—“Yes! What matters is the relationships implied by the paintings, by the people in them. Their unwritten tales are to be discovered by the viewer, and that sets up another relationship.”

If you’ve ever been certain of divine Presence, there is certain to be a story about that encounter, even if you can’t put it into words

At risk of explaining too much, I’ll spill another story. The painting he calls *Joy* is a portrait of Jesse Christopher Columbus Serrano, his brother-in-law [see Plate 5]. Cobb describes Jesse as “a receiving person.” At age two, he was severely disabled by spinal meningitis, and saved from certain death by his mother, who stubbornly refused to give up on him. Unlike the other sitters, Serrano stares mischievously at the viewer. When he and Cobb take their Saturday outings, Serrano confronts people with his steady, inquisitive gaze; though he cannot speak or walk, he can sense dishonesty in both music and in people. The embroidery on the draped white cloth was taken from a design by Serrano’s sister, Cobb’s wife. It is a beautiful and odd detail that begs interpretation. A Laity Lodge employee, Ann Jack, came to see the chapel paintings with her whole family, including her son Ben, who lives in a group home in San Antonio. Later she wrote:

His work communicates such a love of humanity.... I didn’t say a word, but [Ben] was instantly drawn to the mentally retarded man in the painting. John Cobb saw the beauty in that man. Painted him as a saint. Ben focused on the painting. He was moved.

Cobb contends that the people he paints are not-quite-saints. They are not quite certain; nor are they necessarily wise or kind. They are real people, some standing in for biblical characters and saints who were flesh and blood just like us. Others are just who they are. “I get out of my dark self by seeing the hope in these others; I’m a witness just there to tell their story. My job is to see people as God sees them, not as I see them. I try to live up to seeing.”

I asked Cobb if the chapel was a western version of an icon-filled Eastern Orthodox church, a room that mediates holy presence through images and light. No, he says, this isn’t really an eastern thing. He offers that the structure might resemble a Mexican *capilla de los santos*, a little chapel of the saints where ordinary, humble people are elevated. But he resists having his work pigeonholed, and quickly suggests another association, the temporary shelters built during Succoth, the annual Jewish Festival of Booths, to commemorate the tabernacle in the wilderness.

It’s the journey motif again. In an age when Americans are increasingly mobile,

and Christianity is undoubtedly in transition, we need our portable sanctuaries. We yearn for roots, for connectedness, and we need containers to hold all the parts of our lives together. Aren't we in exile, estranged from that to which we belong? Can we see God as our companion on the journey, as the Israelites did?

And then, a roadside hut-as-chapel is as American as it is Jewish. It has the appeal of a fast-food franchise—not the place where you expect a theophany. And then again, why not? As Kathleen Norris writes in *The Quotidian Mysteries*, “The true mystics of the quotidian are not those who contemplate holiness in isolation, reaching godlike illumination in serene silence, but those who manage to find God in a life filled with noise, the demands of other people and relentless daily duties that can consume the self.”

As I enthuse about the Succoth metaphor, Cobb gets squirmy and suggests that maybe the chapel is more like the brush arbors of the Navajo: people dwell in them, but they're not dedicated to any holy festival. Likewise, his chapel is not dedicated to any particular liturgical season or event. Yet it's a liturgical space in that it encloses and enfolds, sets aside a place for encounter. Cobb likens it to the Bride of Christ, the receptacle of the Spirit. It's called a chapel, but it's not meant for conventional worship. It falls somewhere between installation art and liturgical architecture. The structure itself is not integral to the paintings; they can be exhibited without it or in a different construction. The pine structure lacks the preciousness of much installation art, as well as the permanence of much liturgical architecture. It is portable, though not flimsy. Yet, install it in a museum, gallery, or library, and you get an uneasy collision of the religious and the secular.

For an artist, liturgical art is often a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” proposition: even if you create something aesthetically excellent, it can still fail. Stunning liturgical art can distract the congregation. So can work that is sentimental, inappropriate, showy, or just plain ugly. On the other hand, art can also augment the liturgy by enlarging the dialogue between God and the people. Like John the Baptist, good liturgical art knows its place, and it points to the main thing: the liturgy, the work of the people and God. The crucial factor is what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls fittingness, that rightness that resonates among the art, the theology behind the liturgy, the style of the people, the time and place. A good fit requires utmost humility.

Cobb's chapel is looking for the right place. It has both aesthetic excellence and humility, ready and waiting. Like the wonderful unmarried person who yearns for the right spouse, it is full of a hopeful tension.

The chapel has made me wonder if we have set up a false competition between aesthetic and spiritual perception. If we could value aesthetic contemplation as a spiritual practice and not as a substitute religion, perhaps a fabulous work of art in a worship space would not lead us down a hedonistic trail but into the glory of God.

To this end, at another Laity Lodge retreat, guests were offered a guided meditation beside Cobb's chapel. Contemplation tends to be the most common function of art made with a Christian perspective, yet we've found at these retreats that few people know how to approach art that way. A fellow artist, Lynda Young Kaffie, began by reading poems by Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry, easy matches for any artwork that evokes nature and humanity. Later I showed these poems to Cobb, along with my dog-eared copy of Scott Cairns's *Philokalia*. I saw a similarity between the two men, maybe because both have intense eyes that make them resemble icons. When I asked if any of Cairns's poems had struck home, Cobb chose ones that evoke landscape, prayer, and the meek and poor, all fitting parallels to his paintings. His favorite, however, was the charming poem about housetraining a turtle, "On Slow Learning." It ends, "Forgive him."

The retreat guests weren't given much information about Cobb or his work. Instead, they were told to be still and allow one painting to capture them, then to observe it and write about it. Later we shared our impressions and dissected the paintings' and chapel's symbolism. Is the egg embedded in the medium a sign of purity, new beginnings, wholeness? And what about the veil of fabric over the chapel exterior? Could it refer to the Hebrew tent of meeting, where the veil separated the holy of holies? Or was it the veil of the temple, torn at Jesus' death? Maybe a bridal veil for the bride of Christ? Or is the chapel veiled like Moses's face, so that love revealed will not startle or blind us? Cobb says the veil just covers up the cradled backs of the panel paintings. Or, depending on the overhead lighting, a scrim of fabric over the arched roof can help filter the light. Sometimes it's best to keep all those profound speculations to yourself.

Our retreat speaker was Phyllis Tickle, contributing religion editor to *Publishers Weekly* and a sociologist of religion. Her topic was twenty-first-century Christianity in America. She traced the development of the faith through history, and spoke of emerging trends in belief and practice. A devoted keeper of the Benedictine hours herself, she gave us a gentle nudge toward traditional practices. She pointed out how orthopraxy (practice) is popping up everywhere, especially among young adults, who are taking on the disciplines of fasting, keeping the Sabbath, and *lectio divina*. We are in one of those hinges of history, she contends, that happen every five hundred years. The faith is being reconfigured, but the heart of the story will remain. I wonder, is this orthopraxy business like a container, a ship, a safe place for the newness to grow and be tested? The church, like Cobb's chapel, is a pilgrim.

This summer and fall, Cobb's work will be on the road again. It will show at his alma mater, Saint Edward's in September, then in November it will travel to Houston for the annual *Image* Conference, which this year will grapple with liturgical art. The existing structure will do for now, he says, although when we dismantled it I could almost hear his mind clicking as he glanced at the one leftover

painting and considered where the big new one would go. Will he nail together a larger structure? Add a transept, perhaps? Should he reject some of the older pictures to make way for the new? Meanwhile, he has purchased the rickety flatbed trailer he borrowed for our trip and will be converting it into a studio on wheels.

As we left Laity Lodge and drove back through the Frio River, our little caravan like an ark in the current, I began to envision Cobb's chapel as an embodiment of the emerging church Tickle described. It may be collapsible, but its contents are not. He honors tradition by using one of the earliest media for painting. Egg tempera was perfected in early medieval Europe at the same time Christian doctrine was being solidified, and remained the medium of choice until oil paints were concocted in the fifteenth century. Art conservators say that egg tempera, when classically executed, remains the most durable paint surface of all. It ages beautifully, becoming more transparent over time, both darks and lights gaining in richness. The way the physics of matter and light operate in art is incarnational: one affects the other. Material things give a form to the invisible. And the material determines the form. Perhaps this is why Cobb is so careful about his technique, why he treats his materials with such reverence, for they are shaping him.

As I drive, Phyllis Tickle's words linger along with John Cobb's images. She closed the retreat with a medieval myth about a monk who brought joy and love to a staid monastery by dancing in its chapel. Miracles occurred there, and legends grew. After generations, the monastery and chapel were gradually destroyed, but the beauty of the monk's tale endured.

Love—the very heart of the gospel—is what endures. This concept is a tough one to reveal in contemporary art. Exiled from our own history, we modern people can become numb; we often don't know where to aim our yearning. We mistake love for mere sentimentality or nostalgia, and coolly dismiss the earthiness of our past. We forget the story of the monk dancing in the chapel. We lose track of ancient techniques like egg tempera. We don't expect to see continuity between biblical stories and the stories of our friends and neighbors. Hence we fail to experience the durability of love over time. In truth, it is a far cry from sentimentality when we are able to pull at our own history and rediscover in it the promises of God that are true in the present.

Before he left Laity Lodge, John Cobb gave one last rambling, delightful gallery talk. He remarked, "I reach into an ancient technique and fill it with contemporary life so that people will connect the two. And then the world will make sense."



PLATE 1. John P. Cobb. **Chapel**, 1982 to the present. Egg tempera on Masonite board, wood and cloth. 10 x 10 x 16 feet.
Photo by Barry Watson



PLATE 2. John P. Cobb. **Baptism by Water**, 2003. Egg tempera on Masonite board, 34 ½ x 70 inches.
Photo by Barry Watson



PLATES 3 AND 4. John P. Cobb. **Service, Ms. Rose**, 1991 and **John the Baptist**, 1986. Egg tempera on Masonite board, 17 ¼ x 17 ¼ inches each.



PLATES 5 AND 6. John P. Cobb. **Joy, Jesse Christopher Columbus Serrano, 1998** and **St. Peter (Mr. Brown the Plumber), 1989.** Egg tempera on Masonite board, 34 ½ x 17 ¼ inches each.



PLATES 7. John P. Cobb. **Deposition**, 2002. Egg tempera on Masonite board, 34 ½ x 17 ¼ inches.