

## Sacred Symbol – curatorial essay

The language of 'symbol' and of the 'sacred' is of interest to artists and theologians alike. Whether a symbol is personal, cultural, or religious, it is, in the language of artist Nick Webb, "...a *container* for something greater than itself." But what makes a symbol sacred? Is it the container, or is it, as Webb suggests, "the nature of the container?" Are *things* or *places* actually sacred, or is sacredness the result of our *perception*?

For Renée Forrestall, Webb's partner and collaborator in this exhibition, "*anything* can be sacred... it depends on how you look at it." For her, everything has an "inherent" capacity for sacredness. She suggests that the sacred is not easily bounded by the symbols that seek to contain it. In fact, the figures in many of her images suggest just that, crowded as they are into shapes constructed by Webb's frames or by the edges of the canvas itself.

Likewise, for sculptor Brad Hall any material or *thing* can be *made* sacred – literally and metaphorically – by our approach and handling of it. For Hall, the creation process itself is sacred. This idea is evidenced by his metal sculptures, in which discarded and mundane materials are transformed into works of beauty and sensuous invitation. Employing everyday items (such as nails or cables) as lines, he creates complex symbolic shapes through the baptismal fires of the forge. More suggestive than descriptive, Hall's sculptures remind us, as do the works of Webb and Forrestall, of the potential for experiencing the holy in the concrete substance of everyday life.

The 'tree of life,' a popular biblical symbol, takes on a new twist in the large ceramic sculpture created by Marla Benton, Teresa Bergen and Mary Jane Lundy. Aptly named *Treeology*, this collaborative work calls attention to creatures and the natural world as a single interconnected community. The life size 'Apple Blossom' tree, formed from the red clay of the earth itself, and decorated with colourful flowers and birds, underscores the sacred process of birthing: roots morph into fish, birds nest amid colourful flowers, and Eve herself emerges from a fragile earthenware branch.

To appreciate works such as these, we cannot be passive viewers; we must engage each work on its own terms, becoming active spectators in shaping its meaning. As depth psychologist Rollo May pointed out decades ago, art, for both creator and spectator, is an *encounter* "whereby we experience some new moment of sensibility. Some new vision is triggered in us by our contact with the [image]; something unique is born in us." Like Moses on sacred ground, it is our responsibility to become more fully aware of participation in the encounter.

Regina Coupar  
*Exhibitions Director and Curator*  
*Atlantic School of Theology Art Gallery*