

A Conversation with Silviu Oravitzan

By Deborah Hawkins

I first met Silviu Oravitzan in the basement of a Romanian church on the northwest side of Chicago. Several people were gathered around him, eager to exchange greetings and pay their respects. For them, it was an honor to have a countryman of such stature in the art world share bread and coffee with them. For those who did not already know him, he remained anonymous. There was nothing about his dress or manner that may have set him apart, that may have hinted at his recent triumph – of being one of a handful of artists included in the National Museum of Catholic Art & History’s grand opening exhibition. Here, he was a fellow worshipper and a man who shared his geography of birth and heritage.

At the time, I did not know how fitting an introduction this was. His work is spiritual in subject and amazingly accessible and moving to people from all range of nationalities and education. It was perfect that we first exchanged greetings at church, where man comes to meet God, in a large community room, where men and women come to meet each other. His art, I believe, reminds all of us what it means to be in relationship with God, in communion with others.

Weeks after this meeting, Silviu Oravitzan, graciously agreed to have a conversation with me. Highlights from that conversation appear here.

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You were chosen as one of only a handful of artists to exhibit work at the new National Museum of Catholic Art & History. Why do you think your work was chosen?

Of course, I have ideas and may even *want* to believe certain things on the subject. Still, I think it would be best for you to ask the organizers themselves because they know best their reasons for choosing me. All I can say is that for me, it was a great honor. So many aspects surrounding the opening of the Catholic Museum are significant. It opened in a new location in Harlem. I have seen a huge interest (on the part of civic leaders) to give something back to this area. There are economic and political reasons that make efforts to re-vitalize this area very compelling and very current. I also think there is an underlying longing to re-build this area because of what it *represents* to many. Considerable efforts being made now to establish Harlem as a cultural zone demonstrates its value as a city center within New York and meeting place for people from around the world.

How did your art add/complement the other artwork in this exhibit?

For me it was a great honor to have my work displayed in the main room along with the work of Salvador Dali. The space itself was very generous, around 11 meters by 12 meters. On the wall, there are sculptures and bas-reliefs. In the middle, there are Dali's famous angels and Crucified Jesus.

Most of my work, my areas of focus for at least for the past 20 years, has related to questions of the *sacred* and to fundamental symbols such as the cross, the center and (the) light. And I considered this question, "How will my work stand up in the context of highly regarded and studied material produced by Dali, Manzu, and Van Dyck?" Of course, Dali is not here to discuss this right now, but the work of Dali towards the end of his career shows him to be preoccupied by the sacred. Thinking of the way he portrayed Jesus floating above the universe in his most famous Crucifixion – this is a point of view of divinity. Jesus is seen looking at the world from the sky, from out of this world, from God's point of view. This is an iconic, Theo-centric point of view. It's unique. Dali is a contemporary artist who tries to explain the iconic perspective rationally. This is transmitted in his sculptures, which appear in the museum, as well. My work is also about the sacred, but in featuring such basic symbols as the Cross, the Center, and the Light, I approach man's challenge of transcending his earthly perspective, to see things from a divine point of view, in a different way.

What does "sacred and spiritual art" mean to you? How would you define "Sacred"?

All sacred art, the sacred, and the problem of the sacred in art relates to the placement of God in the center of the universe (at least in the center of the metaphysical world). In a piece of "sacred" art, all other objects within the work are focused on God, or surround Him in some way, as in a series of concentric circles. He is One and the circles (other elements of the universe) are many. Human beings are multiples.

What do you mean by multiples?

God is One and we are multiples. There is only one God and many, many human beings, whether you consider the number of individuals around the world or across the spectrum of time. What is our relationship to the sacred? It is this connection between multiples and the One. This connection can be achieved by finding God in the depths of our inner selves.

Why is this the focus of your artwork?

Today, we are witnessing a distancing from the belief that puts God in the center of the universe and gave us a very consistent view of how to see the world. When we started to think of ourselves as individuals and developed our own philosophies and focused on our own psychologies, we turned our faces away from Him. Many people saw this as "progress," as intelligence, but this sort of "genius" is not an integrating philosophy. It creates a Brownian movement, a cheap, "pocket," philosophy where nobody can get along with anybody.

Why is this a focus of your art?

I see the world is in a state of disorder. I see this young generation fighting for existence and stability. Everyone is climbing on the back of each other. Especially today, in this consumer society where everyone is guided by the principle “to have.” When I see this, I tell them, “Look deep inside. The world will be ordered, if you will be ordered. If we listen to the principle, ‘to be,’ we will live in a better world. Looking inside we can find an easier way to God.”

The artist is preoccupied by expression. There are two fundamental laws at play here; the idea and its enunciation; what you are saying, and how you are saying it. In art, it is very important how you say things. I studied history. I looked very carefully at ancient civilizations, those cultures that had the greatest influence on humanity. From India, to Japan, to China, to Europe and Africa, to the American Indian – all of them treated the problem of the sacred on the shoulders of four fundamental symbols: the center, the cross, the circle, and the square.

Sacred architecture, like temples and places for prayer, clerical vestments -- from the Mideast to Scandinavia, from Japan to America --- were based on these symbols. And I came back to my question, “Why are these symbols so important to so many different people?” Today, when we have airplanes and computers and the Internet, it might be easy to answer this question. But, how did these symbols appear simultaneously around the world in solidarity centuries ago? And the people, in all different places, believed in these symbols with so much passion.

Why is this so important to you today? Why is this at the core of your art?

Time can be viewed as two continuums; historical time and extra-historical time – time out of history, or time before history, when man was in paradise. In a way, man “fell” into history when he was banished from paradise. Since we have been operating on historical time, man has been confronted with the events of daily life, with seasons, with love, births, deaths, or work. Yet, even while absorbed in these things, man has been obsessed with ideas that were not from his daily existence. Why? The answer for this, I believe, is that these signs were coming from his *paradisiacal* memory. Man has stored experiences in his memory that occurred before he became part of history, before he was banished from paradise. From this, we can explain the power of these symbols all over the world, before technology. Man has retained his memory of paradise and the light he experienced there. Seeing these symbols help people recover or retrieve their memories of paradise, and in doing so, makes them feel closer to God. These symbols inspire beatitude, peace – they help a person feel at peace with himself. They also foster feelings of liberation from suffering and evil.

How do these symbols work? Each is like a stone; a stone cut in two. One half stays with man, the other half with God. Since it is a natural desire to recognize, to experience the *whole*, man is left with the task of putting together the two halves. Man was left with geometrical structures inspired by these four fundamental symbols (the cross, the center,

the circle and the square), basically, pure abstractions. What remained in paradise is the experience of perpetual goodness and happiness, a life free from evil. It's not that the circle or square, the abstractions are interesting per se, but what is interesting is what was left on the other side, what was left with God. This is what I want to do in my art. Unite these two halves, the abstractions, the symbols, and man's memory of what was left with God.

I have a series of works with labyrinths. If you go in a labyrinth, you can find yourself traveling in many different directions. It is a good representation of man's search to find the other half of stone. I also have several pieces that depict rains of light. People who come to my shows often tell me that they don't know why, but they feel different, better after looking at these pieces. The art has a healing aspect. It's like medicine for the soul.

Why do you think your art has this kind of impact?

It would be blasphemous to say that your art has sanctity in itself, but there is a principle which works through art that helps people experience the sacred. Art works on an iconic principle. Through the artwork, a connection is created between a person and divinity. It is the same principle that operates in the Hindu mandala. Here, there is a point and a focus and a perforation through which your spirit meets God – the Absolute, or the state of divinity. This is a principle that makes the unseen seen. This is the iconic principle at work. Relationships are invisible. The iconic principle is that through something you can see you can make a connection with something that cannot be seen. When we see a symbol whose origin is divine, we can experience our relationship with God.

Is your art aimed at helping people increase their awareness of God?

That sounds too pretentious. In contemplating the whole of life, the work of an artist is like a tiny shard of glass. Still, if true light meets this shard of glass, it can reflect and amplify that light. The important thing in art is to catch this light.

Why do you think this kind of art is relevant now?

Today, more than ever, we are living in a world dominated by immeasurable ego. Events occur in a sort of chaotic way, in a sort of Brownian movement. There is much in contemporary culture that resembles Babylon; a new Babylon, not a social or political system or a state, but a world in which man says "I am equal to God. I am the center of the world." So, how many *centers* can we have in this world? If there are as many centers as there are individuals, where should we look for guidance? This art is relevant now because it reminds people of the importance of finding the center; outside of ourselves and inside. It also captures something fundamental about our lives as human beings. The symbol of the cross is the intersection of two lines. The vertical line says, "to be" while the horizontal says, "to have." These two elements are constantly coming in contradiction. The horizontal is related to our struggle for existence, our focus on daily matters such as jobs and family, while the vertical is about transcendence. This line

is our ladder to God. Without the sacred, as Mircea Eliade (20th century Romanian religious scholar) said, everything would be dust and ashes.

How do you reconcile the mission of your art with the pressures of an artist to exhibit?

Maybe God has a plan for me. Maybe I have not become a millionaire overnight. Still, I have never been left without food or colors (paint/materials). I think it is part of God's design that I should do my work.

As for exhibiting, you can listen to Bach in a church or in a concert hall and have an uplifting experience. The phenomenon is richer than the law. So, we can do this act of recuperation (connecting with spirit) not only by going to the church, but by going to museums and galleries as well. One of the greatest Romanian poets, Lucian Blaga told us not to crush the corolla of the world's marvels, that we should not cut trees and flowers then go to the church to experience the sublime. God gave us life to enjoy it, to amplify and celebrate it. We just need to remember to keep our faces towards Him.

I have been very fortunate that my work has found the right kinds of places to be exhibited such as the National Museum of Catholic Art & History. My work requires a special environment. While, when I first came to this country, I thought that everyone would be absorbed with commercial values, I have seen people here are very hungry for culture and spiritual experiences. I always see people sitting down and reading in bookstores, and the museums here are flooded, more than anywhere else in the world.

What do you think were some of the most important influences on your art?

I was born in Banat, Romania. For many reasons, Banat is like America, a home to people of many different nationalities and religions. Being born and growing up in such a diverse place opened my mind for multi-cultural, multi-ethnic diversity. It helped me develop the understanding that people are more alike than they are different. I have a great respect for different cultures, also for what people share regardless of personal history.

What was it like to produce art in a Communist country?

It would have been nice if, under the communist regime, everybody would have been a dissident, a hero, then communism probably would have ended faster. Of course, there were some (political) dissident artists, like Paul Goma, but most of the artists living under communism practiced a special form of resistance. By not aligning with, or participating in state-produced art shows and other cultural manifestations organized and manipulated by political operatives, artists found a way to exercise some freedom. Artists, by locking themselves in their ivory towers, started doing art for the sake of art. This orientation was a way of sabotaging pressures to make art serve a political agenda. Artists found an oasis of freedom in Lugoj, where the only gallery in town acted like a steam locomotive pulling the rusted and crippled freight cars of Romanian art. This gallery actively tried to

attract as many free spirits as possible. (While not mentioned in his comments, Oravitza was a leader in a union of visual artists in Lugoj.)

Were the artists left alone?

Because the city was so small, the eyes of Securitate (Romanian Secret Service) were less scrutinizing. It was less important for them to try to regulate activities here.

Sergiu Celibidache (conductor) said you were the "Most Romanian of Romanians." What does this mean to you?

I met Sergiu Celibidache several times. He was a spiritual teacher for me. My art has been hung in his home along with Hindu water colors, mandalas, Byzantine art and icons, ancient Buddhist, Taoist and Chinese sculptures --- art from all parts of the world. There is a paradox at work here. The deeper you go into your own culture, the more you will discover yourself in what is universal. My art certainly reflects Romanian influences, such as patterns inspired from our Orthodox church. But the most fundamental values in art and in spirituality are those that are common across cultures. So, my presence in this collection may imply my work is highly Romanian *because* it is highly universal. This is what I think Celibidache meant by his statement. This is a difficult question (what it means to be the most Romanian of Romanians). I am not an expert at what makes nationalities different. I am concerned with what makes people the same.

How do you think of your work within the great tradition of other Romanian artists?

Since my legacy is not complete, I cannot give you an answer. Brancusi meant a lot for universal art. Brancusi is not an original artist. He is an "originator." He did more than produce fresh work with innovative techniques. He actually found a thread that helps us experience the beginnings of humanity. His inspiration, and his sculptures, takes us back to Genesis, to the origins of man and the universe.

Many elements of Brancusi's work can be traced back to Romanian folklore, like the columns of peasants' houses or pottery from Oltenia. What was interesting about him was the fact that he did not mechanically copy these elements, but actually distilled them into configurations of forms that captured their essence. He would condense the entire history, the lineage of an object, from its original conception to how we might view it today. This was a great lesson to me. He had a rare power to re-cover elemental configurations. He was in touch with his own paradisiacal memory. This made him an incredibly unique artist.

How did your childhood and the Orthodox Church influence you?

Art from Banat was highly geometrical; structures of rings and squares; very little animal or floral ornamentation. Even carpets and decorative arts featured these types of patterns. Abstract ornamentation and church iconography, which is polychromatic

(multi-colored) -- all these images intrigued me. This was my perceptual world as a child. And I wondered, "Where are these shapes coming from? What do they signify?" When I sat in church as a boy, I felt all these shapes, these elements, were filtered through a golden light. I felt as if this light baptized me. In later years, I came to the conclusion that this light could not be comprehended by the mind alone. It is not light from the sun, but light from God. It is this light that allows us to have a miraculous and magical dialogue with Him.

Can you identify any experiences that particularly impacted you and your art?

I experienced a chain of happy events in my life. I met the right people at the right time. I was blessed to live in a remote city in Romania where I could create in peace. My childhood itself was like going to Harvard, a great education. I learned fairy tales and participated in customs related to birth and death, weddings, friendships. For many of these events, the bell of the church would ring and I would marvel at the position of the bell tower between earth and sky. And I thought about my own position in the universe; the point in time in which I was placed on this earth, in the village where I lived and where I felt God's presence above me. Just as the bell tower was the intersection between earth and sky, and resonated with a special vibration, I felt that I, too, was a point of resonance between two axes, between my parents, teachers, the happenings in my village -- and God above.

Can you identify any favorite works?

I can't talk about favorites because works of art are like children. Each has special qualities. I can say that several themes are repeated in different pieces, and these themes, of course, are dear to me. Golden rains, for instance, my labyrinths and fields of crosses. Probably, the most complex piece of work I produced was the recent altar for the Nicula Monastery in Romania. This piece is the quintessence of my twenty years of work with light. Commissioned by the archbishop of Cluj, Bartolomeu Anania, who is also a great scholar, the Nicula altar gave me the opportunity to capture the experience of Light as commanded by God on the first day in Genesis. This is the light that *rises and never sets*. If we lose our true religious (religare) feeling, our connection with God, we will be lost in a sad personal adventure. I hope my art will help people experience the connection with the true Light.

Silviu Oravitza's art can be seen at the National Museum of Catholic Art & History, New York through the end of 2003.

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