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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Homes for the Soul

By

James Hardy

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(Approval Page)

Chief Advisor Luvon Sheppard

(Luvon Sheppard)
Luvon Sheppard
(Signature)

Date: 2/7/08

Associate Advisor Alan Singer
(Alan Singer)

ALAN SINGER
(Signature)

Date: _____

Associate Advisor Andy Buck
(Andy Buck)

Andy Buck
(Signature)

Date: _____

Department Chairperson Don Arday
(Don Arday)

Don Arday
(Signature)

Date: 2/13/08

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Introduction

As an artist I draw inspiration from my current life experiences. The narratives that I choose and the people who model are all directly linked to my life as it is happening now. Before entering graduate school at the Rochester Institute of Technology some significant events occurred that had a deep impact on my spiritual life. I had lost a close friend and my grandfather a few months apart and the experience left me emotionally paralyzed for over a year. A colleague at work suggested that I could find comfort in reading the Bible and at that point I was ready to try anything that might ease my pain. Most of my knowledge of the Bible and the teachings of God were second hand. As a child I was too young to read and understand such a complicated book as the Bible. All I knew came from my parent's example and the Sunday school classes which I would attend while they went to church services. I started reading the Bible for the first time and was amazed how contemporary and pertinent it was. Greed and distrust, stealing and lying, so many of the iniquities spoken of in the Bible are still found in our day to day lives. Things of genuine importance such as human kindness and love, peace and faith in God all rang true and were reaffirmed in my own life experience. I knew I had found my true God and began to see him at work in my day-to-day life. Experiences gained through my spiritual awakening would influence my artwork in

a profound way, changing my narratives to reflect a more socially conscious and spiritually based story.

Upon entering graduate school, I began to investigate Christian themed art, mostly from Europe. I started to produce images of saints, creating dimensional peaked roofs above the paintings. The idea for these structures came from outdoor shrines found in Europe where there are shelters built to protect religious statues from the weather. I began experimenting with the creation of spiritually based work reflecting the recent transformation that had occurred in my life. I struggled with creating these saints, feeling that I was somehow not pious enough to be painting such images. I completed three paintings: one of Saint Mark, Saint Luke and Saint John. I painted them with oil paint on fiber-board. I used the traditional symbols of each saint, for example, Saint John is traditionally shown with a staff and an animal pelt. To form the halos around their heads I carved into the fiber-board and applied gold leaf. I tried to set these saints in modern times because I wanted them to relate to a more contemporary audience. After a while, I felt that saints were an obvious choice of subject matter for religious work and wished to portray God and spirituality in a more contemporary light.

At the end of my first year at graduate school, a colleague introduced me to Retablos and home altars of Mexico and the Southwestern United States. I was immediately captured by the honesty and beauty of these Retablos. What impressed me the most was the fact that they were created by the innate talents of everyday people. Wealthy churches, depicting not only the wealth and power of God but also the wealth and power of the church, commissioned most Christian art

I had seen up until this point. The Retablos and altars created by Mexicans impacted me more because something of significant beauty was created out of found materials. To me the use of marble, precious metal and other valuable materials is an obvious solution when trying to portray something as sacred as God. The fact that Retablos were made by untrained artists out of found material shows an earnest effort and sincerity on the part of the artisan. It reminds me of the parable in the Bible where the little money given by a pauper was worth more to Jesus than a large donation from a dignitary because the pauper gave all that she had. In a way, I feel that the Retablos and home altars of Mexico are more precious to God for the very same reason.

Retablos gave me a new language to speak through in my art. Inspired by the aesthetics of these Retablos, I began to create shrines that were built to resemble modern buildings. I created three-dimensional spaces in which I could set up narratives using painted panels and found objects. These shrines show the everyday saint, regular people, and the circumstances that they find themselves in. They are narratives of hope through spirituality. They show human struggle yet remind us that God is always present, promising and providing hope if we actively search it out. The narratives reflect personal human struggles in which God intervenes, much like the stories portrayed in the Retablos created by the people of Mexico.

Historical

Retablos and Home Altars of Mexico

and

The South Western United States

Retablo paintings flourished in Mexico throughout most of the 19th century and the tradition continues to this day. Retablos were small devotional paintings usually painted on thin sheets of iron, coated with tin. The images, painted by untrained artists, were of Christian saints or other images from the Bible. Often people would paint Retablos for their own homes. The popularity of the Retablo came about for two major reasons. One was its relationship to many Aztec traditions. Christians worshipped a multitude of saints, Aztecs worshipped various deities. Much like the Christian practice of devotion to saints, Aztecs would associate with one of the deities over others and set up altars for them in their homes. (Lovell) The other main reason for the popularity of Retablos was the separation of church and state that occurred during the 19th century. During this time Mexico was riddled with political turmoil, seeing over 30 changes in government. Due to the fragility of the country, state funding of churches ceased and people were encouraged to worship in the privacy of their own homes. Out of these circumstances arose the tradition of the home altar in Mexican culture.

People set up altars upon tables to contain Retablos as well as flowers, candles and other objects to offer up and help one direct their devotion.

Retablos were treated with much respect, however, I think it is important to point out that they were not intended to be worshipped themselves rather they were meant to

“..... induce great spiritual qualities of love, respect, devotion, faith, sacrifice and humility directed toward the person or thing, that is, the model they represent.” (Lovell 18)

Images for Retablos were mostly saints or stories from the Bible. People gave respect to many of Catholicism's traditional saints but people also created Retablos for local saints as well. With the spread of the Catholic Church across Mexico many locals were ordained into sainthood for various acts of charity. This was done in part to help integrate native Mexicans into the Christian tradition. The formation of their own saints creates an interesting Christian sub-culture that is unique to Mexico, one that celebrates its own traditions associated with the church.

One other point of interest regarding Christian faith in Mexico is the formation of pilgrimage sites. Much like the pilgrimage sites in Europe and the Holy Land, Mexico built churches and shrines in areas where miracles were said to have occurred. One of the more popular is the site of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe. According to legend, the Virgin Mary appeared before a man and instructed him to build a church on the site to inspire others to worship God. To this day *The Virgin of Guadalupe* is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in all of Mexico, attracting people from all over that come to give thanks and to make vows. With the

formation of these pilgrimage sites Retablos took on a new identity in the form of ex-votos. These paintings were similar in size and medium, mostly painted on tin coated iron. Instead of depicting saints, ex-votos were created to document a miracle of God or an answered prayer. Also painted are people's vows and promises to God. These ex-votos were created by people to leave at pilgrimage sites in order to declare acts of God or to make vows unto God. I feel that in many ways the narratives in my work are directly related to the ex-voto. These art forms contain narratives documenting the hope offered through faith in God.

The art of the Retablo in Mexico is a unique cultural phenomenon that created a very personal way in which to worship God. Each home contains its own very deliberate and highly personal altar in which the family's circumstances and individual personal relationship with God dictates the creation of the space in which they pray. Ramon Gutierrez explains the relationship between these sacred objects (Retablos) and the space they occupy by stating,

"...when objects, space, and time are so conjoined, the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine are brought into unison, thereby demarcating the sacred from the profane."

(Lovell 17-18)

Construction of the Work

"Homes for the Soul" contains five elements that embody my work, namely: narratives, found objects, housing, lighting and display. In creating this body of work, I have tried to conjoin these elements in a way that evokes the same feeling of sacredness created by Retablos and home altars. The housing structure is the first element built when creating my work. These structures are made from wood for many reasons. For one, I studied the art of woodworking as a minor with the School of American Crafts and I was immersed in the material. Wood is also the primary material used to construct actual buildings and wood is also a material used to build frames and housings around many retablos. Additionally, many of the home altars are placed upon wooden tables, sometimes draped with a cloth. I think that wood is a soft, warm and easily found material that suits my purposes well. I used a variety of hard and soft woods, often scraps found in the wood shop or from friends. I used nails and wood glue for basic construction, occasionally using a screw where more support was needed. I roughly measured and rough cut the wood so that forms do not quite fit together. I wanted them to have a rustic, folk

look with each dent of the hammer or split in the wood adding more character and history to the piece. I frantically built with an automatic state of mind, cutting and fitting pieces of wood together not knowing what the final outcome of the form would be. After finishing construction, I covered the housings with Milk paint, which is a combination of powdered milk, lye and pigment. It is a paint that has been used by the Shakers for their homes and its origins can be traced all the way back to the Egyptians. What I enjoyed most about the paint as a medium was its ability to add age and history to the wood. After subsequent layers of painting and sanding what was left was a soft and subtle finish that revealed the natural grain of the wood. Also exposed by the Milk paint were all the nicks, dings and abuse taken by the wood during construction. Many woodworkers try their best to hide all imperfections but I believe that a lot of the power found in my forms lie within these imperfections. By highlighting them it humbles the piece, it gives it a “touched” look. I have always appreciated work in which you can see the hand of the artist; it gives it an honesty that more polished work does not always possess.

The actual forms of the housings were mainly inspired by the narrative of the piece. For example, “*Family Ties*” deals with family so the form I built is a box in the shape of a residential home. I immersed myself in the study of architecture for inspiration and ideas for construction; however the forms did not necessarily reflect this. I wanted the housings to be generic, easily recognizable buildings such as a home, a church and a school; therefore, there is no reference to any specific architectural style or specific building. The main function of these housings was to hold the panels and objects, to create a stage upon which to set my narratives.

Ultimately, the buildings not only contained the ideas and actions of the narrative but they became an overall symbol of the piece, for example, the home represented family or the church or marriage.

The panels on the inside of the housings contain the narrative. They are oil paint on panel, as are most Retablos. The panels are also similar in paint application and the characterization of the human figure. Each individual person and object is painted on a separate panel and then cut out and arranged in the housing. Many of the panels are cut into long vertical rectangles with a peaked top to echo the shape of many Retablos. Cutting out these two-dimensional panels and arranging them in a three-dimensional space forms a new and interesting aesthetic. The play between the illusion of the two-dimensional painted objects and the reality of the three-dimensional space is something that is quite captivating to me. Many of the panels are wrapped in metal, another reference to the Retablo which is mainly framed or more often painted directly on metal. These metal surfaces add a reflective element inside the piece that plays off of the lighting.

Most of the housings contain shelving or at least areas in which to place found objects. Home altars of Mexico and the Southwest are filled with objects from loved ones, objects that represent a struggle in life or a source of joy. Each object seems to contain its own history even the outsider who knows nothing of the significance of the object, can sense that it has a power of its own. I really enjoy these objects for their aesthetic qualities but I also love the idea of having these objects help focus and concentrate prayers towards a specific person or issue. I thought the inclusion of such objects in my own art would add another layer of

interest both aesthetically and conceptually. I chose objects that seemed to have their own personal history, ones that have “been around the block” a few times. These objects intermixed with the panels refers back to the altars visually, but the story or the narrative overpowers any feeling of worship or devotion of the actual artwork. The interesting thing is that for some people their only attraction to my art is in the found objects. This does not bother me however, because whatever attracts the viewer to my art initially (hopefully) will captivate their attention long enough to appreciate other aspects of the piece.

The final elements that are at the core of my art are lighting and display. For me this last and final stage is the most difficult. My first problem is how to light small structures and be able to hide all the light bulbs and wire. I researched fiber optics and made multiple trips to Radio Shack looking for a system that would work. A friend suggested that I look into dollhouse lighting systems at the local hobby store. It made perfect sense because in a way the architectural structures I create are relatively the same size as a dollhouse.

In pondering how to represent God in an abstract way I returned to my spiritual roots in Christianity. Throughout the Bible, God is represented by light. Not only does God appear before man as light but there are also many analogies made between light and darkness. Light is considered Godly and so inversely darkness represents evil. Scripture contains multiple references of ‘coming out of the darkness and into the light’ (of God). For each piece I create a wooden halo (or halos) that are situated above the ensuing scene. The structure of the halos is loosely based on stained glass found in many Christian churches. Like the lead that

separates solid blocks of stained glass, my halos are painted blocks of color divided by dark painted lines. Behind each halo is actual electrical light; I install this for many reasons. Physical light is a symbol of God, so I think it is important to use actual light as opposed to trying to paint the illusion of light; the impact is more powerful. Another reason for using lighting in my pieces is to help set a spiritual mood. Many churches are intentionally lit to help concentrate and direct ones state of mind while worshipping. Often churches are dark or dimly lit except for the front of the church where there is usually a spotlight, often illuminating a cross or the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The focused light is used to quiet the mind and helps to fixate one's sight and thoughts towards God. In planning the display of my own art I felt that the well-lit, bright environment of a gallery was not fitting to the spiritual tone I was trying to create. For my thesis show, "Homes for the Soul," I set up walls to block out light and also to create an intimate space. The effect is similar to that found in churches. One's eye is drawn to the light, where one is left to ponder the work.

This idea of meditation induced by light relates to the California Light and Space Movement of the 1960's whose main concern revolved around the idea of using light as a medium. The most prolific of its members is James Turrell, an artist who I am greatly interested in. In his pieces the viewer is asked to contemplate the phenomenon of light, this tangible yet intangible form. In researching Turrell's work, I found a host of similarities with my thesis work regarding the idea of light being used as a contemplative tool in order to gain wisdom. Art historian Rudolf Arnheim discusses light in the context of Turrell's work:

“Light is one of the revealing elements of life. To man, as to all diurnal animals, it is the condition for most activities. It is the visual counterpart of that other animating power, heat. It interprets to the eyes the rejuvenating life cycle of the hours and the seasons. It is the most spectacular experience of the senses, an apparition properly celebrated, worshipped, and implored in early religious ceremonies. But as its powers over the practice of daily living become sufficiently familiar, it is threatened with falling into oblivion. It remains for the artist and the occasional poetical moods of the common man to preserve the access to the wisdom that can be gained from the contemplation of light.” (Adcock 3)

Incidentally, Turrell was raised by a Quaker mother and grandmother. Many historians make the connection between Turrell’s work and his Quaker upbringing. The center of the Quaker community is the meetinghouse where all religious ceremonies and other meetings take place. Upon entering the meetinghouse it is said that you are to “greet the light.” This idea stemmed from entering the light of God, a place for worship and spiritual reflection. In fact, in 2000 Turrell designed and created the Live Oak Friends Meeting House at a Quaker community in Houston, Texas. The meetinghouse has a retractable roof that exposes a giant square cut in the ceiling to expose the sky. Similar to my own work, the meetinghouse designed by Turrell uses light as a source of contemplation and personal growth. An interesting connection exists between the designs of James Turrell and my own work and the influence religion has on us both. There is an attempt on both our parts to create a space for quiet contemplation and use light

as a catalyst for meditation. My interest lies in the context of Turrell's work, particularly the meetinghouse. What I enjoy about it is that it is for everyman and sets out to create an environment where anyone can experience the benefits of self-reflection in the light of God. My hopes for the use of light in my own work shares similar intentions to that of Turrell and hopefully harnesses some of the spiritual and reflective quality of light.

For my thesis show I wanted to create work that deals with spirituality in a modern context. I used elements found in traditional spiritual art, specifically Retablos and home altars; however, I did not want copy or mirror traditional styles. I depicted how spirituality is still important in our lives, despite skepticism. I communicated in an honest and sincere way that even in these modern times where much of the world's mysteries have been explained away, that God is still relevant and despite the actions of humans is still here to offer his help.

Some people find it strange to be creating work with religious undertones in the context of the contemporary art world. Art and religion parted ways after the Renaissance and the Church who used to be the main patron of the arts gave way to the independent collector. I could see how one might find it trivial to revisit such an "archaic" art genre. The fact is that many contemporary artists talk about religion or have been influenced by their spiritual upbringing. A show organized in 2000 at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art entitled "Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium" highlights the prevalence of religion and religious themes in the contemporary art world. Harry Philbrick offers an explanation as to why some of these religious themes are not as apparent:

"As numerous conversations with artists over the last year revealed, there are many artists making art about religion: artists whose work is built upon the armatures of doubt implied by a fall from faith, and artists whose faith is simply a given in their lives, quietly underlying their art. When questioned about the relationship of their work to religious concerns, nearly all of them said that no one had asked them about the religious component of their work before." (*Faith* 15)

Two artists that were shown, that most people did not associate with religion, were Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe. Both of these artists come from a Catholic upbringing and strong connections can be made between their work and the imagery of their church. For Warhol, the obvious connection would be his rendition of the Madonna or the Last Supper. Eleanor Heartly suggests that Warhol portraits such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy have the same feeling of reverence of religious icons and that his portrayal of the electric chair can be seen as a metaphor for the crucifixion of Christ. Robert Mapplethorpe, who is best known for his photographs of homosexual acts, is another odd choice for a show on faith and religion, but again Heartney offers some light to the connection. Like Warhol, it is the formal qualities of Mapplethorpe's work that reflects his Catholic roots. The centralizing of the figures and the dramatic use of light also hearkens back to religious icon paintings. (Faith) Some of the work included in the show was more recognizably religious using traditional symbology in a contemporary context. Other work such as Warhol and Mapplethorpe were not as apparently religious. What this show accomplished

was to highlight that while it may not always be apparent, religious themes and influence have not completely disappeared from the modern art world. One can conclude that there is still relevance for the exploration of religious themes and aesthetics by artists.

The Work

Violence Hope and Vanity
2004

oil on panel

79.5"x80"

Violence, Hope and Vanity is the first piece created for my thesis show. It is oil on panel and in many ways this piece became a stepping-stone towards my creation of home altars. This triptych was created during the spring quarter of my first year of graduate school. During this time I was experimenting with creating a spiritual narrative. I looked at European Christian art and altarpieces. Images from such artists as Caravaggio, Titian, Michelangelo, Hieronymus Bosch and Grunewald littered my studio. I became fascinated with the seriousness the content of spirituality brought to these artists' work. I wanted to create a spiritual narrative; however, I did not want to borrow

the narrative from Christian doctrine or any other religious doctrine for that matter. I decided to talk about basic human issues and their relationship to spirituality.

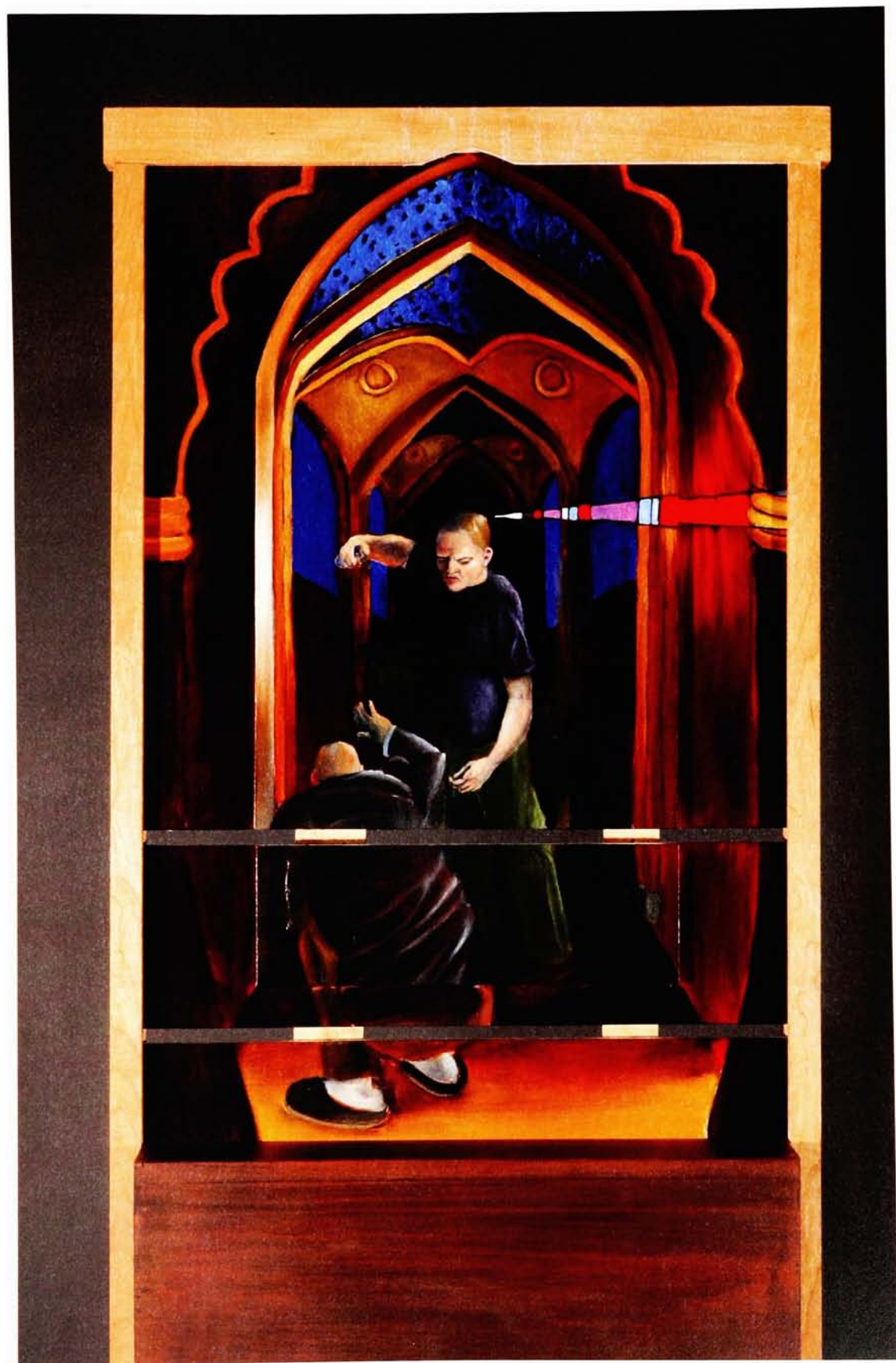
Violence, Hope and Vanity is an attempt to deal with the human issues of violence and vanity. Everyday I see violence on the street, in our entertainment, even our media is violence driven scaring Americans into watching their program because they have information that could “save their lives”. I also see evidence of vanity within our culture, not only in the obsession with our physical appearance but also in our inability to think outside of ourselves. I notice people everyday cutting others off, not holding doors, ignoring people and making decisions to benefit them without considering how they affect others. I created this piece as a visual prayer about these two issues. I wanted it to be positive, that is why between violence and vanity I painted hope.

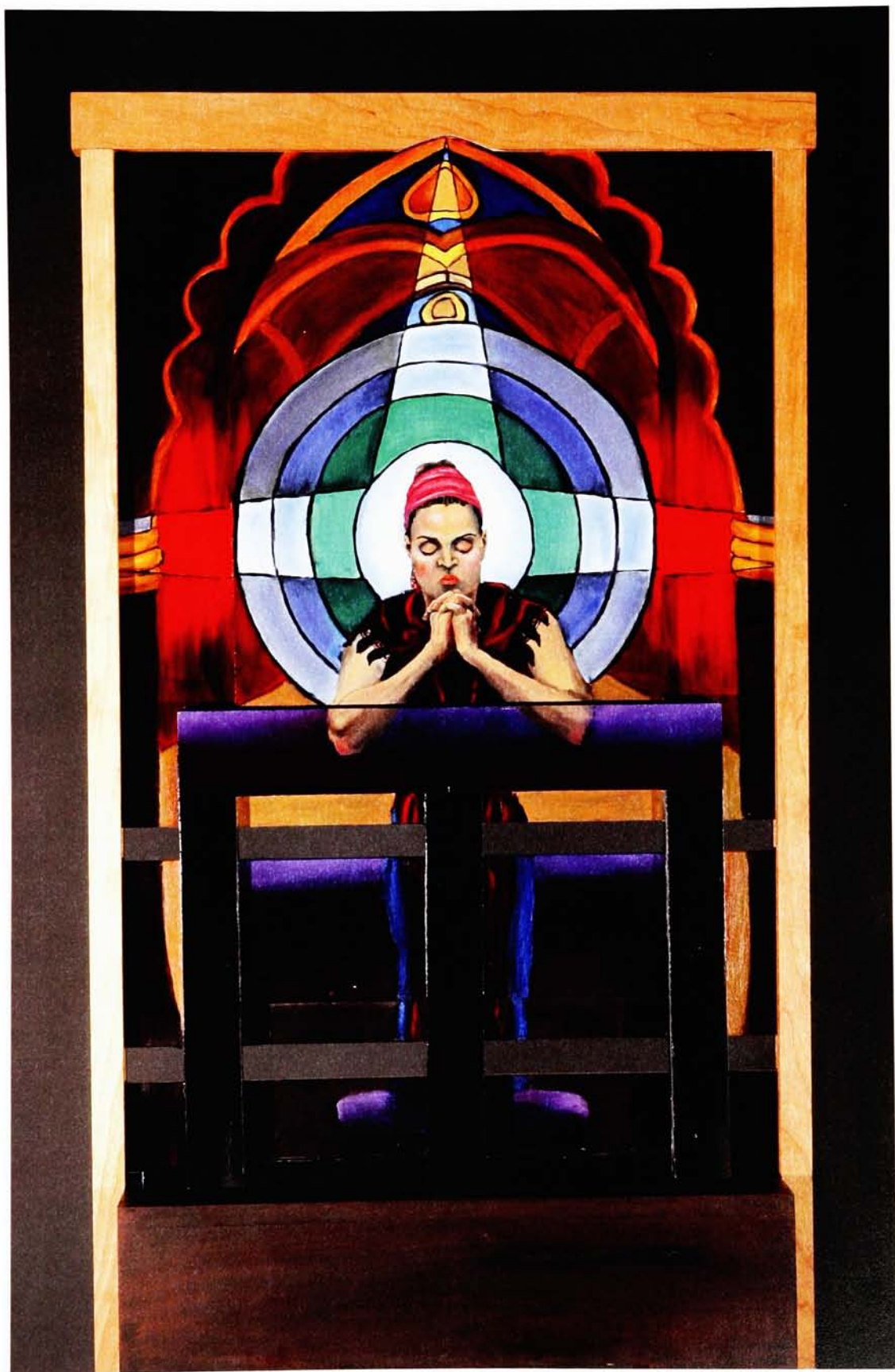
Violence is depicted in the left panel where there is one character beating on another. Behind the figures are grotesques, a symbol used in Christian art to symbolize the devil or evil. A man who is fixated on his reflection depicts *Vanity* in the right panel. Once again there are grotesques lurking in the shadows to symbolize evil or wrongdoing. In the middle of these two scenes is the center panel, *Hope*. A female praying over *Violence* and *Vanity* is kneeling behind a pew; behind her there is a halo of light that beams out towards the accompanying scenes. She is there to remind us that there is hope in God, who is depicted by this halo.

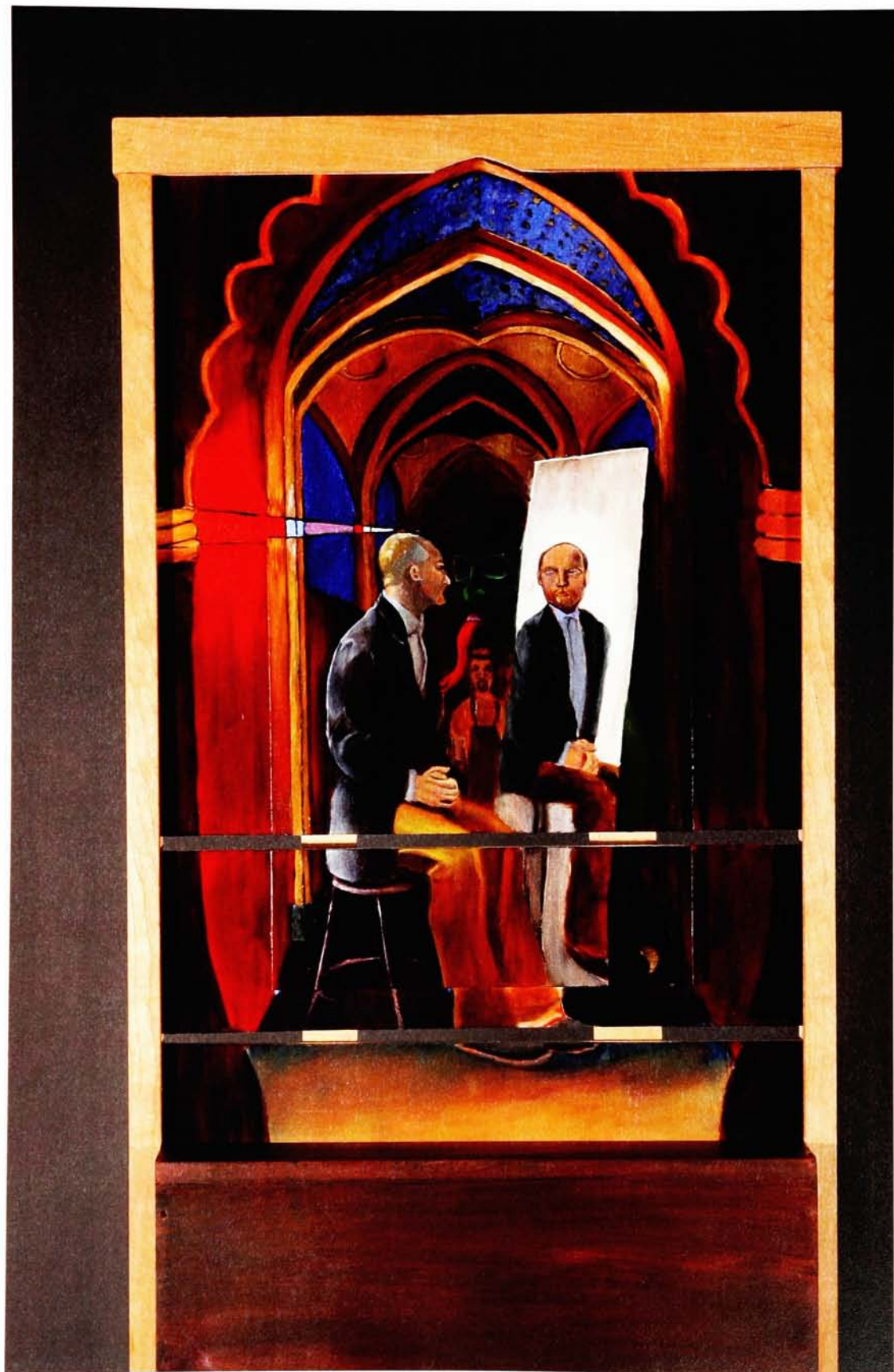
Stylistically *Violence, Hope and Vanity* is a hybrid between my old painting style and traditional Christian altar painting. I used multiple panels laminated together to create a ground, much like my older paintings. Shapes such as the Gothic arch and the halo refer back to the European Christian tradition. Additionally, I made reference to

Mark Rothko using his familiar format of three rectangles stacked on top of each other. I successfully intertwined traditional spiritual painting with modern spiritual painting. The end result is a modern version of the traditional Christian European altar. The shapes and the triptych format echo traditional altars but the clean lines and geometric shapes give the piece a much more contemporary feel.









Ghetto Messiah
2004

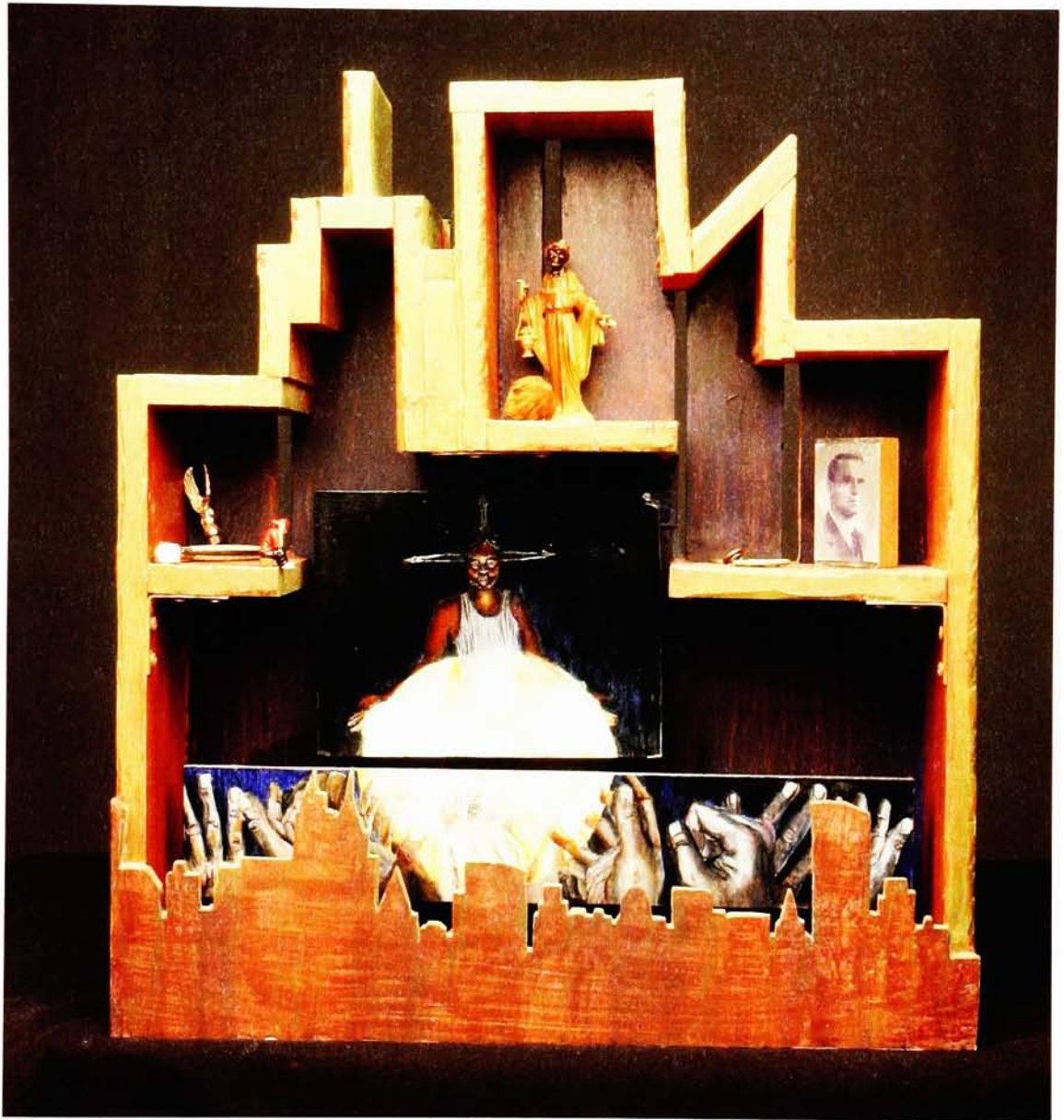
hardwood, milk paint, found objects, and oil on panel paintings

24"x21"x6"

Ghetto Messiah was created during the summer between my first and second year of graduate school. This piece was yet another stepping-stone to my current three-dimensional work. It bridges the gap between my painting and sculpture by placing panels in a box assemblage. It was during this time that I started looking at home altars and retablos; its influence is seen in my inclusion of found objects arranged throughout the piece. When thinking about the housings for traditional altars more often than not they are a simple box construction with a peaked roof to keep out the elements. Instead of using this basic house construction, I thought it would be interesting to incorporate modern architectural shapes, creating a more contemporary feel. I built the housing for *Ghetto Messiah* in the shape of a city skyline to tie in with the theme of urban struggle. Above the panels I built shelves on which to arrange found objects. This was the first time that my construction stood as a symbol for the narrative.

Ghetto Messiah is a narrative about urban struggle. In the foreground there is a wooden silhouette of a city skyline painted in rusty decay. From behind the cityscape rise hands from different races all outstretched towards the light. These hands symbolize peoples' struggle to rise above the adversities of urban life. The hands are painted in subdued colors, mostly blue tones except where there is the halo of light. Within the halo the hands are painted in their natural colors, bathed in light. The halo comes from the hands of a modern day Christ figure. He is neither black nor white nor Arab nor Asian, he transcends race. He is dressed, as a simple carpenter would dress in work jeans and a tank top. A cross-shaped halo behind his head is fashioned from flying jets, to keep with the modern feel. The

painted scene is about urban struggle and the ability to rise above one's circumstances with the help of God. Above this scene I arranged found objects on the shelving. I selected objects that had an urban feel and seemed to have their own personal history. They are mementos, objects that may have belonged to one of these people reaching out towards the Messiah. They add a different reality to the piece which ties the narrative to our physical world.



Family Ties
2004

hardwood, milk paint, found objects, oil on panel paintings and electric light

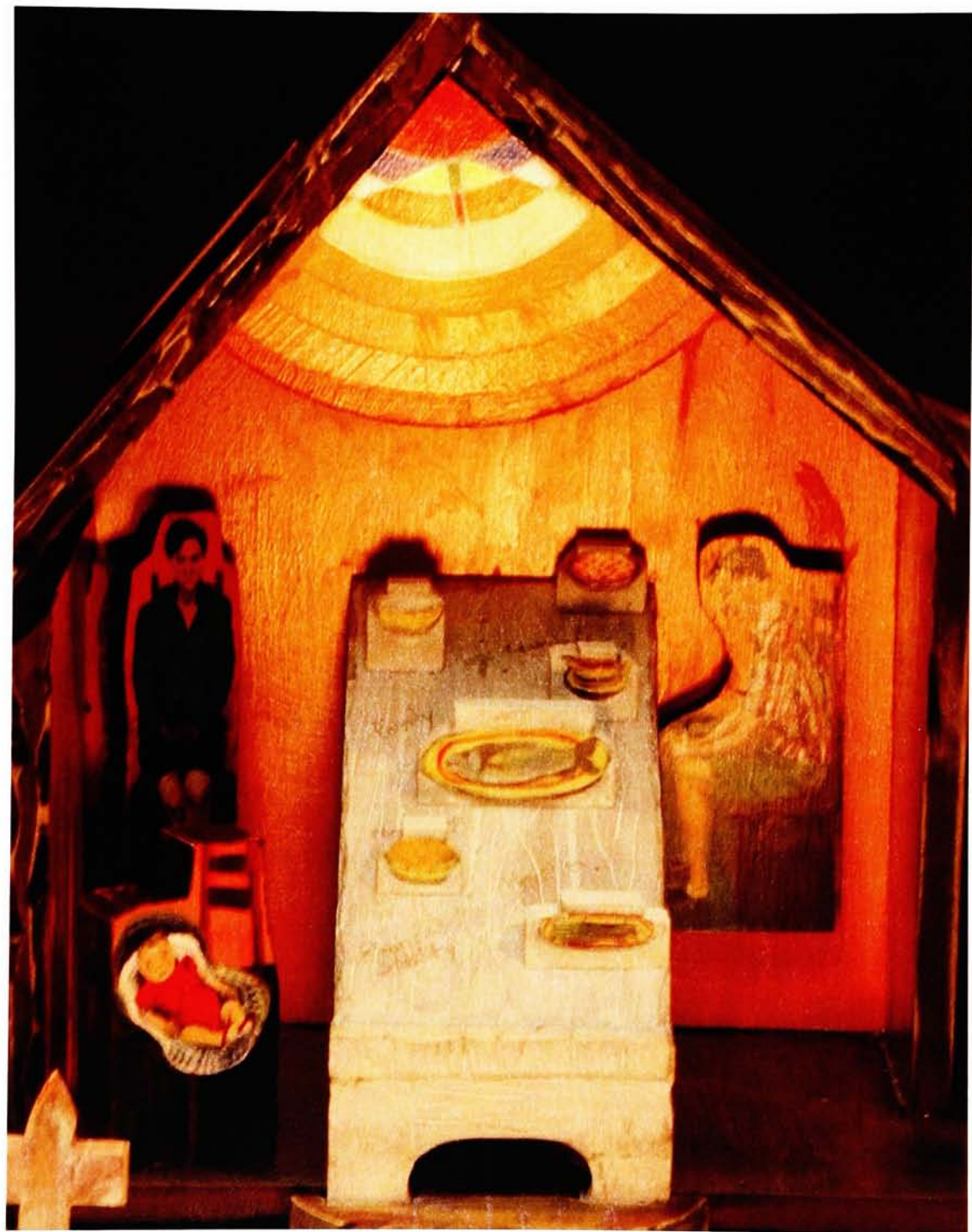
app. 74"x36"x22"

Family Ties was built in the fall quarter of my second year of graduate school. This was my first completely three-dimensional piece. This piece deals with spirituality in day-to-day family life. In thinking about how to portray this concept, I decided to depict a family in prayer around the dinner table. In many families the one time that they gather together and give thanks to God is at dinner. The family is seated around an oversized table that recedes up and backwards towards the wall, as if in a two-dimensional illusion. The positioning and perspective of the table shape is meant to ride the line between the three-dimensional reality of the house and the two dimensional illusion of panels. The table is intentionally larger in scale than the people. This is done to highlight the idea of a family bringing their problems "to the table," giving the table more significance by increasing its size. On the table is a banquet of food, the main dish being fish a symbol for Christ Jesus. Inscribed on the table are words such as finances, health and other words symbolizing issues that families pray about, further strengthening the idea of the bringing of issues to "the table" before God. As in all of my pieces, God is represented by a halo. The halo is seen in the eaves of the roof cascading back into space. Electric light streams from the halo not only to physically represent God but also to illuminate the scene below.

The structure of *Family Ties* is modeled after my idea of a generic residential home. It has all the elements I associate with a "typical" suburban home; a simple peaked roof, white picket fence and a cellar door. The cellar door is functional to add more interest to the piece. To the right of the dining room is a dimly lit back room that is partially covered by a half wall. In this room is shelving for objects like

the ones found in *Ghetto Messiah*. The objects include old photographs to represent family past, an old doll to represent the child and an old angel decoration holding a "Gloria" banner to represent a type of family heirloom. The stand was crafted using a reclaimed timber from an old barn. I felt that the color and roughness of form married well with the faded milk paint of the house. I wanted the stand to compliment and blend in with the piece rather than creating a separation.







Holy Matrimony
2004

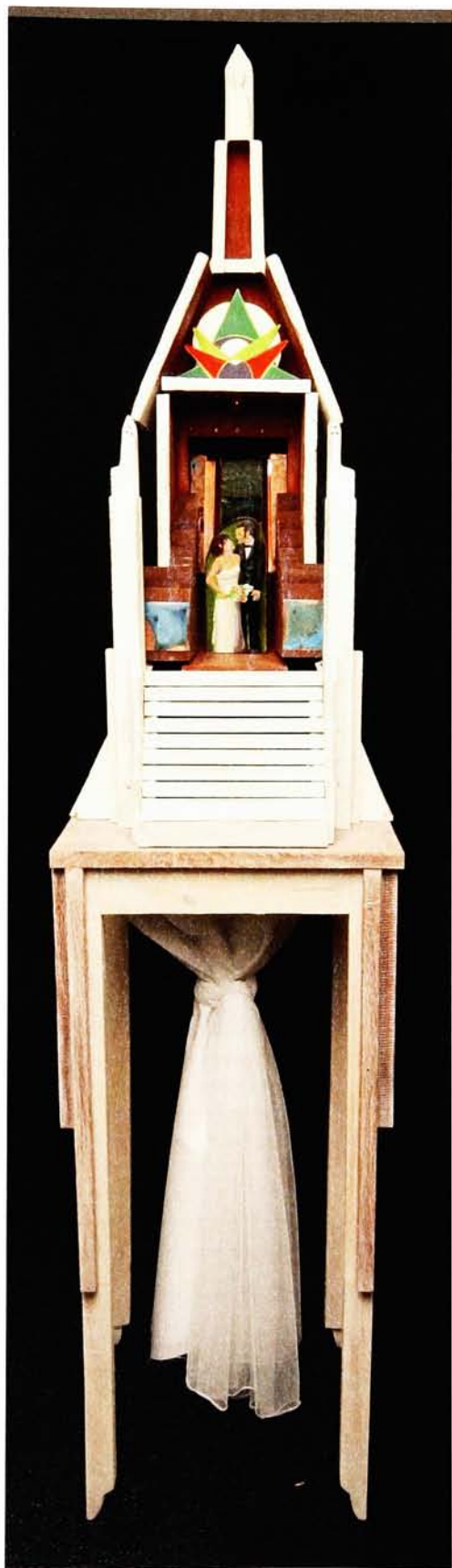
hardwood, milk paint, copper, found objects, oil on panel paintings and electrical lights

app. 91"x20x30"

Holy Matrimony was made as a wedding present for Jennifer and Damion Silver, both artists residing in Philadelphia. To me, marriage is not only proclaiming your commitment to love in front of friends and family but more importantly before God. For it is to God that we make our most solemn vows. While my friends did not get married in a church, or by a man of the cloth, I decided to use the church as a universal symbol for marriage. The shape of the church is constructed after my memories of old New England style Congregational churches. In New England, many towns had a simple white church with a tall steeple seen from miles around. The steps of the church sweep up to the pews that are set at dramatic inclines towards the back of the church. Above the pew is a halo that is directly below the steeple. Electric light shines from behind the halo and also surrounds the couple in the room below. The stand I built mirrors the shape of the towers on either side of the staircase. The darker mahogany wood creates a separation between the church and the stand, while the fabric hanging below not only symbolizes the "tying of the knot" but also leads the eye up from the foot of the sculpture.

The interior of *Holy Matrimony* is simple. Jennifer and Damion are placed in the center of the church, right at the moment before their first kiss as husband and wife. I wanted this moment to be the focus of the piece, their passage into the unity of marriage. Behind the bride and groom in the back room is a triptych depicting the lake, which they stood in front of during their ceremony. These panels as well as the painting of Jen and Damion are wrapped in copper not only to frame them but also to reflect the electric light. I also used copper accents at the front of the pews to relate to these panels. Ammonia was used on all of the copper

as a patina, bringing out natural blues and greens that are also seen in the paintings. In the end, all the elements converged into a cohesive whole, celebrating the sacrament of marriage.





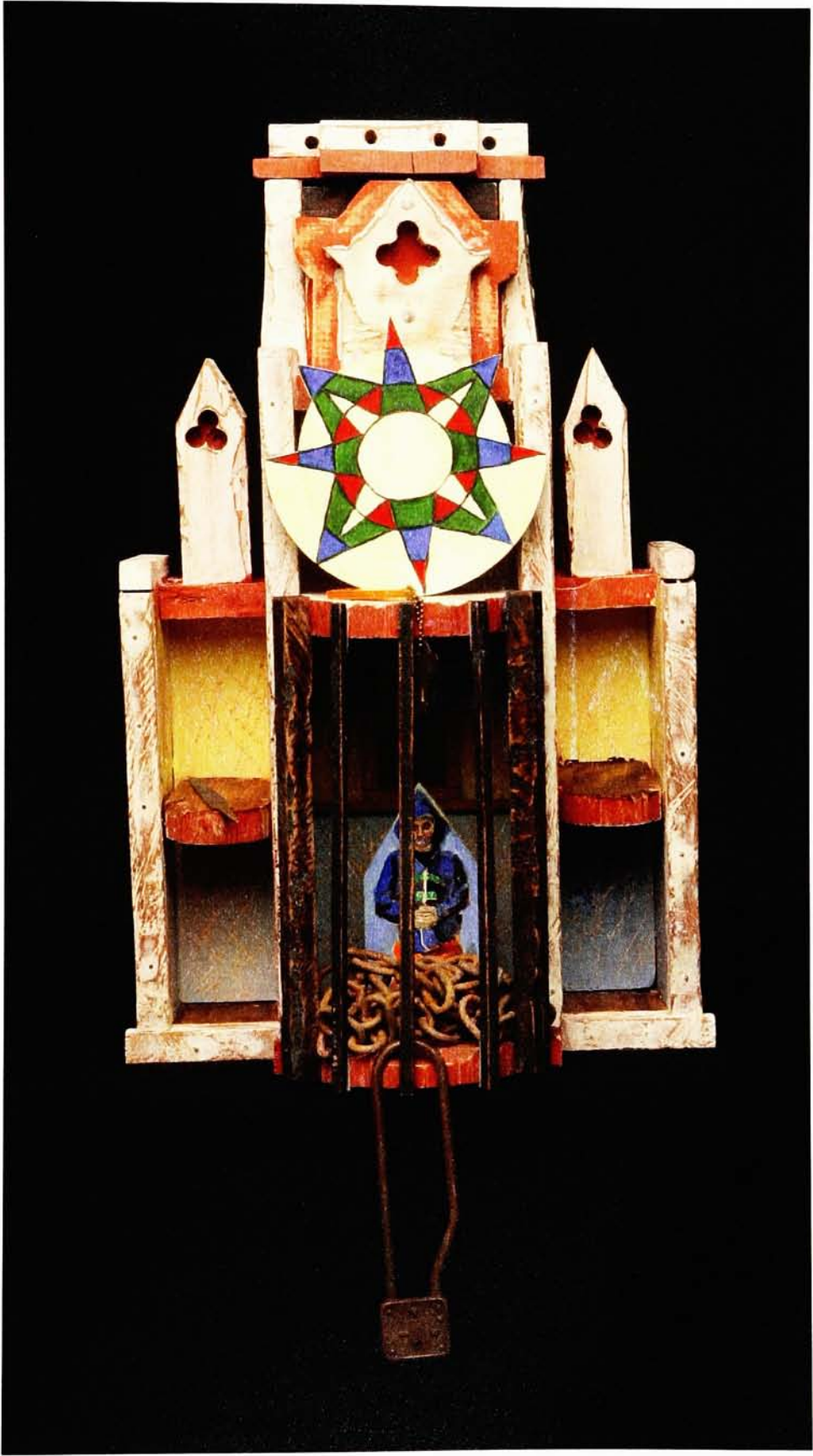


Unchain My Heart
2005

hardwood, milk paint, steel, found objects, oil on panel painting and electrical light

app. 21"x13"x8.5"

I started *Unchain My Heart* during the winter quarter of 2004. It is a self-portrait about my own personal struggles. The only painted panel is of me, kneeling in prayer surrounded by rusted chains. I am locked behind bars, but there is help shining from above. This piece is about those emotional chains that hold you down; human depression and guilt fear and anger. These are issues that I deal with and spend a lot of time praying about. The structure is a replica of the front of an abandoned mental hospital. I thought it fitting because sometimes my emotions are so overwhelming that I feel I could literally go insane. I am locked downstairs but there is electric light cascading down over me. Above my painted portrait there is a wooden halo lit from behind and a key dangling, symbolizing freedom. The halo and lighting represent God and illustrate his presence during prayer. On either side of the jail are shelves for objects. Inside are placed a jailbird, beer cans to symbolize vices, a file for freedom and a bible to represent hope. This piece is my first to be built as a wall hanging. I wanted to create some variety between my thesis work and its display.





After School Education
2005

hardwood, milk paint, copper, found objects, oil on panel paintings and electric lighting

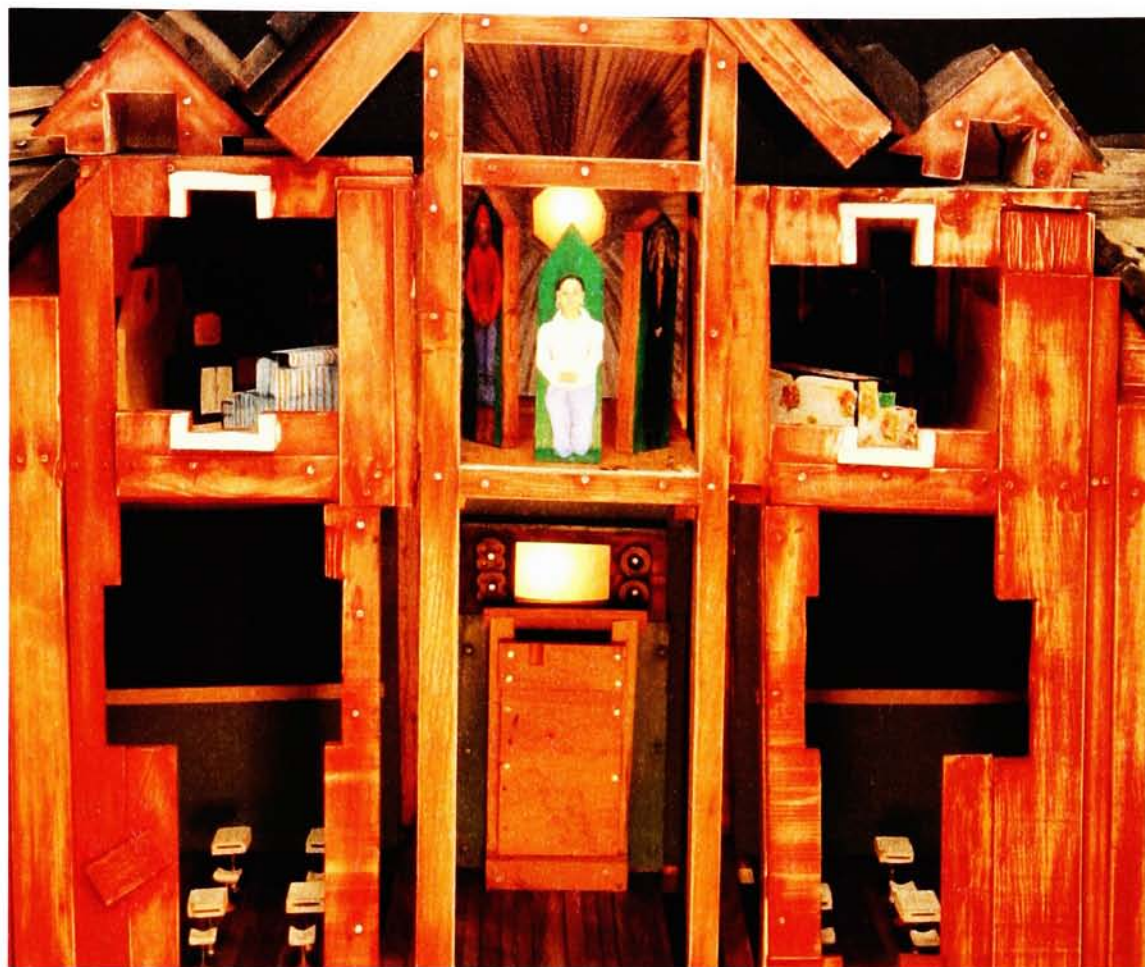
app. 62"x48"x20"

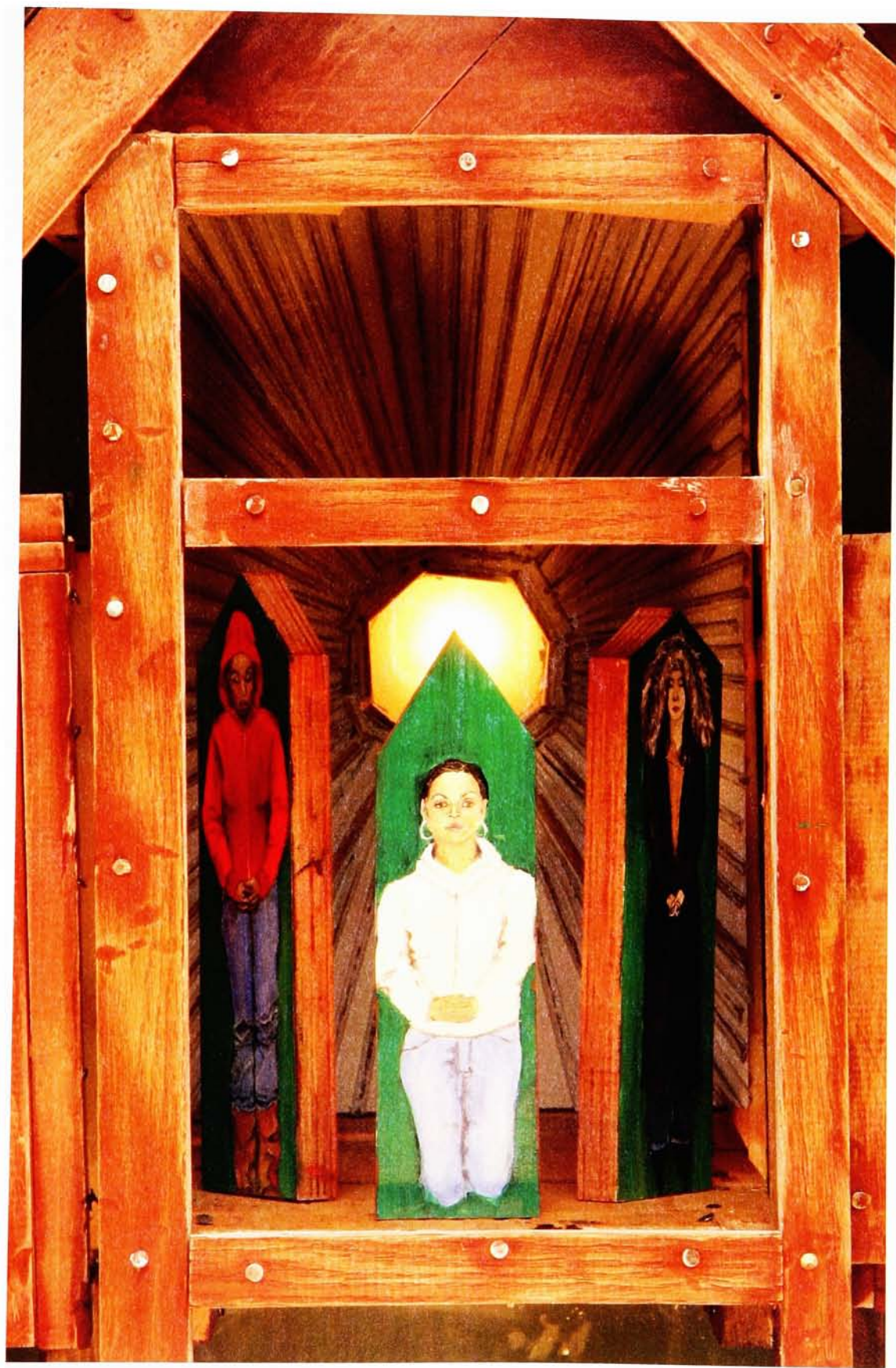
I started *After School Education* in winter quarter 2004. I wanted to create a piece of substantial size to act as a focal point in my show. Additionally, I wanted to deal with a contemporary social issue in a way that did not preach. There is no question that we live in a “television” culture and this thought scares me. Children whose minds are still absorbing information spend hours watching violence and perversion on TV without the ability to separate real life from life portrayed by television networks. This piece presents television as an educator of children and the ill affects this may have if not properly monitored.

On the first floor of the school is an empty classroom. Objects such as apples and blocks are placed in the classroom to add another layer to the piece and also tie it in with found objects seen in my other works. At the head of the class is a wooden lectern with a television rising from behind it; the television is literally portrayed as the teacher. The only light in the room comes from the TV screen creating a dark and disturbing setting; enhancing the feeling of power the screen gives off. Above the classroom are three individual rooms. The room to the left is a high school boy’s bedroom containing a couch, a television, a computer and a stereo. On the TV screen is a picture of a rap artist and in the back of the room the boy stands with his pockets turned inside out. The theme is that the idea of wealth portrayed by Rap is appealing to youth who spend money they don’t have on material objects. The room on the right is a high school girl’s bedroom furnished with a couch, television and a wall mirror. On the TV screen is a Thighmaster commercial and in the background a girl is looking at herself in the mirror. The idea behind this scene is the idealized beauty portrayed on TV and how it negatively

effects youth. In the center room are three women in prayer. The one on the right is standing praying over the boy, the one on the left is standing praying over the girl and the one in the middle is kneeling in prayer looking directly at the viewer. The woman in the middle is intended to confront the viewers forcing them to look at themselves. Behind all three women is a wooden halo that allows electric light to shine through the center. The idea of the center room is a visual prayer over the effects Television is having on our youth; offering hope to this powerful influence that is molding our children's future.







Epilogue

My thesis work has revolved around architecture, light, social themes and God. I see endless possibilities for the combination of these elements and believe that I will work in this vein for quite some time. I see architecture as a window into the human experience. Run down decrepit buildings show the poverty and decay of the meek. Churches symbolize hope and the power of God in human life. Store buildings show consumption. The types and conditions of buildings in a community reflect its inhabitants. Rich communities have beautiful homes and well kept streets. Farm communities have buildings that reflect generations of families working the land to survive. What kinds of stores, what religious buildings, what type of entertainment halls, all these things reflect upon the interests and history of the individual community. I am constantly brought back to the saying "if these walls could talk." The marks and wear left on buildings speaks to the people that are no longer there. The patina that buildings gain with age is due in part to its use by humans and each little scuff and dent left by someone engrains them into the building forever. My goal is to have the painted panels contain the narrative and to have the building that houses it aid in telling that story.

The element of light in my work came from my desire to represent God in a more modern context. God is represented by light in my culture and painters have worked for generations to be able to create the illusion and the beauty of light. By taking advantage of modern electricity I am able to represent God more literally. What I find interesting is that by using real light the idea that it is a symbol of God is lost on the viewer. We are used to seeing heavenly light cascading from the sky onto the wet eyes of those who gaze upon it. By shining electrical light onto a painted figure the viewer does not make the same relationship because it is a language that I have come up with on my own. This is one of my next goals, to use the light in a way that it becomes a more recognizable symbol for God.

My last goal is to perfect the lighting and documentation of my work. It is a delicate situation in a gallery space to balance the light that comes from within the work with the gallery lights that illuminate it's outside. I want the shadows and details of the housings to be well lit, however I do not want to loose the luminosity that occurs within the piece. The internal lights also have caused a problem with documentation. Photos I have had taken showcase my art nicely, however you do not get a sense that there is

electrical light glowing from within. This is something that I feel will take some time to resolve, and for me this a major part in the joy and satisfaction of making art. It is the journey that I enjoy the most, not the finished product.

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