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The Art of Father Arthur Poulin

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Father Arthur Poulin, *Tree of Life, Big Sur*, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 6", 1998

Permission has been granted by the artist, Father Arthur Poulin, for use of his artwork throughout this journal.

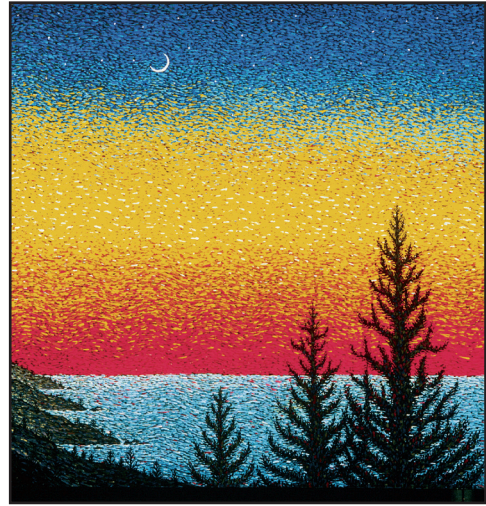
The Art of Father Arthur Poulin

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The process of selecting art to represent each new volume, and theme, of *Diálogo* is not an easy task. It is, however, the most inspiring phase of the production process. Our desire is to showcase the work of a Latin American and U.S. Latina/o artists, or an artist whose work enhances and reflects the theme being explored. Selecting the art that will combine harmoniously with the content is an exhilarating challenge from which we seek to bring forth an enriched reading experience. This issue in tribute to Cuban-American theologian Alejandro García-Rivera, features the art of Father Arthur Poulin¹, a Camaldolese hermit-monk and artist residing at Incarnation Monastery in Berkeley, California. He holds a B.A. in Fine Arts from Loyola University Chicago.

Father Poulin's style is commonly compared to pointillist art. Pointillism, developed by George Seurat, branched from the Impressionist movement of late 19th century France. Pointillism is produced when small dots of pure unmixed colors are applied to a surface, in varying densities, to create an optically blended image when viewed from a distance.² It is the testing of the human sensory system, void of significance—a superficial beauty. The viewer experiences movement, light, and vibrant energy from the blending of juxtaposing colors; but nothing more.

While there are visual similarities, such as the use of contrasting colors to create depth of luminosity, Father Poulin's landscape art is quite distinct from traditional pointillism. The artist begins by preparing a canvas with layers of gesso: a binding mix of pigment, chalk and gypsum that will serve as an absorbent primer base for acrylic paint. He defines his own style through the production process and the spiritual message revealed beyond the visual aesthetic. In his 1999 Letter to Artists, Pope John Paul II stated: "Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colors, shapes and sounds which nourish the intuition of those who look and listen. It does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery."³ Father Poulin's art could best be described as spiritual



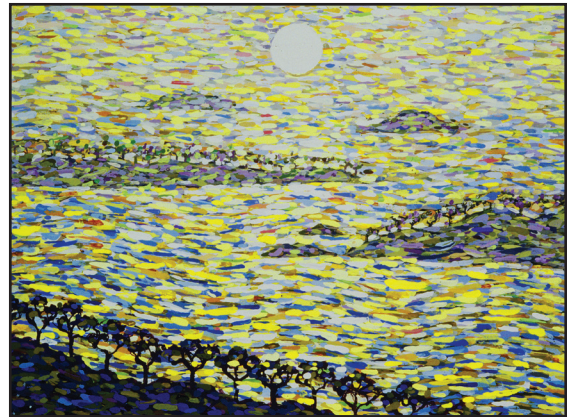
Father Arthur Poulin, *Sunset*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36", 1998

landscape art, a visual conduit to the understanding of God's presence. In his own words:

My painting style obviously has influences from Impressionism and Pointillism. Van Gogh, Pissarro, and Seurat are among my favorites. I don't consciously try to paint in any of these particular styles. I start with a canvas composed of 20-25 layers of black gesso. At a certain point I begin to add layer after layer of paint starting with darker tones and shades, and ultimately journey to lighter colors. It is a very meditative and contemplative practice. The tiny dot that I use represents the small mustard seed of the gospel. It has the potential, power, and energy to grow into a great tree of life—something marvelous, wonderful, and even greater than itself. The tiny dot is the One that the Many are wanting to be.⁴

In his book *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (2003), Alejandro García-Rivera discusses issues of spirituality in this artist's conceptions: "The beauty of Fr. Poulin's paintings emerges from his own personal spirituality, a spirituality that is nourished and formed by his monastic community" (48).⁵ His community is that of the Camaldolese Congregation of the Order of Saint Benedict, a joint order of hermits and cenobites, founded by the Italian monk, St. Romuald. St. Romuald received his monastic formation in Classe, Italy, at the Benedictine abbey of St. Apollinare. In the years following, modeling a life spent in solitude and prayer, he founded several hermitages and monasteries. During the latter years of his life, arriving to the Diocese of Arezzo, he sought to establish a new hermitage. The Sacred Hermitage of Camoldoli was built here, in the early 11th century, later confirmed under Pope Paschal II in 1105, and again in 1113. Under the reformed model of St. Romuald, based on Benedictine tradition,⁶ the order was constructed as a community of two to five hermits: a religious order of hermit-monks. In 1958, the Camaldolese congregation extended into the U.S., and established the Immaculate Heart Hermitage, otherwise known as the New Camaldoli Hermitage, in Big Sur, California. Twenty years later, the Incarnation Monastery was founded in Berkeley, California, in 1978. This is where Father Poulin has carried out his ministry through personal spirituality:

The role of my art in society, religion and Catholicism, are one and the same. At one point, I realized that my art was a way to preach the gospel in a non-verbal way. Through the 'ministry' of my paintings, which are sacramental and contemplative in their approach and message, I can 'speak' to all people about the transforming power of beauty, the primacy of God's love and presence in our lives, world, and creation. Through painting, I can also reflect to people what is most profoundly human and divine within, and among, us. For these reasons and many others, I intentionally sign my paintings, Father Arthur Poulin. My role as a priest is at the heart of this creative ministry and work.⁷



Father Arthur Poulin, *White Sun*, acrylic on canvas, 6" x 12", 1998

This artist's innovation is more than the science of optical blending or an exercise to prove theories of color. It is an experience for both the artist and the viewer—a journey from darkness to light. Everyday landscape is re-created as a new experience, a new awareness, a new perception. The artist's visual language appeals to the deep-rooted spiritual essence of the viewer. The viewer becomes more aware of the interconnectedness that exists with nature. Each brush stroke creates a connection between art and faith, revealing the beauty and truth of Creation. Thus, Father Poulin's art becomes a fitting tribute to the philosophy and theology of Alejandro García-Rivera.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Visit the artist's website at: <<http://www.fatherarthur-poulin.org>>.
- 2 For a brief history of Pointillism, also known as Post-Impressionism, see <<http://www.studyarthistory.com>>.
- 3 Pope John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." *The Vatican*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 4 Apr. 1999.
- 4 Personal communication, April 2013.
- 5 Alejandro García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 48.
- 6 The characteristics of the Benedictine Rule are written as a guide for a path between individual zeal and the institutionalism of a community environment. See <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02436a.htm>>.
- 7 Personal communication, April 2013.