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## Grave Images: A Faith Visualized in a Technological Age

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**GRAVE IMAGES: A FAITH VISUALIZED IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE**

INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING  
1997

KATHY T. HETTINGA

# GRAVE IMAGES: A FAITH VISUALIZED IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

Kathy T. Hettinga

## INTRODUCTION

The San Luis Valley, one of the largest mountain valley deserts in the world, is located in southern Colorado. The flat floor of the Valley spreads over sixty miles from the center to the base of the surrounding blue mountains. The cemeteries stand half hidden in the dazzling hot dust of the Valley; sage vistas stretching endlessly. The wildness and remoteness manifested in blinding sun and shadow place life, faith, and death sharply before you. The Valley is over a mile and a half high; the thin waterless air brings you close to objects and close to the reality of our fragility.

The San Luis Valley was first settled by Catholic Hispanics whose faith forever shapes the Valley by the western range of mountains they named Sangre de Cristo, Blood of Christ, and on the east by the San Juans, Saint John. The San Luis Valley has always been a poor area; the people familiar with the hard work necessary for survival in a desert that is remote, desolate and ironically, often the coldest spot in the nation during the winter months. Perhaps because of this, their tenacious faith is depicted in elemental forms in the cemeteries.

I remember my surprise and delight when I first saw my 'hometown' valley from the air. I know the Valley intimately from driving the roads to find--just to find and know its places. In the air, I recognized it from topographical maps and most recently from a National Geographic, aerial, computer-generated, thermo map. The aerial view surprised me, by its close resemblance to the maps and yet its difference. This was a new view of the beloved, an all-encompassing, God's eye view.

High above the earth, I saw patterns of fields with perfect circles where sprinklers turn. When I walk the fields, I see towering metal with water majestically dancing high against blue sky. Up close, it is a different view; the perfect circle is no longer visible. It is necessary to extrapolate to the now invisible circle. The invisible is in the visible. Similarly, overarching principles span high over distant details. The abstract is embodied in the concrete physical. The tangible image embodies meaning/ideas. It is a mystery how close, specific incidents, places

and images hold and reveal the larger, now invisible patterns; but, they do. Gregor Goethals, in her book, *The Electronic Golden Calf; Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning*, tells us that art makes visible the invisible.<sup>1</sup> Part of the artist's job is to 'see' the circle when on the ground below the spouting metal tower.

In art, images and symbols signify deeper meaning. Icons in the early church functioned as a stand-in for the represented and also as a direct line of communication to the saint. The grave images found in the Valley cemeteries 'speak' about the faith of the people who made them. It is a visual language which relies on symbols in a tradition--be it Catholic, Penitente, Protestant or Pentecostal. Often the cemeteries are divided into these categories and are found side-by-side. It isn't necessary to be a knowledgeable participant to 'hear' this visual witness. Their 'voices' move me when I walk the desert floor.

In personal stories are imbedded larger truths. Historically these are tied to place. (Now our technological culture is uprooted through great mobility; additionally, with the diminishing of distance due to e-mail and the internet comes the lessening of the value of place.) In the narrative about the death of my husband are other larger truths--flesh is like grass, the grass withers; time and chance happen to all, notes Ecclesiastes; man is a fragile earthen vessel; eternity gapes all around (Wendell Berry), anyone can step through at any moment. When mechanization at the dairyfarm killed my husband, Duane, a technical-impersonal-hands-off hospital practice kept me from being with him or even touching him. Equally, modern funeral practices meant only a few minutes by the casket. His story is one of tragedy in a technological age; the aftermath reveals our culture's denial of death. My faith, first rooted in the mountain valley desert where I grew up, gives me strength to respond to a technological society that denies suffering and death.

In seeking solace and reciprocity, I found comfort in the shared sorrow of the cemeteries. Phillippe Aries in *The Hour of Our Death* describes how "Death loves to be represented....The image can retain some of the obscure, repressed meanings that the written word filters out. Hence its power to move us so deeply."<sup>2</sup> The image is one of the richest and most satisfying

means that mankind has for expression when faced with the mystery of the end of life. These grave images are able to embody abstract concepts in a physical, tangible form in front of us. My latest art documents the historic faith images of the Church found in the San Luis Valley cemeteries and transforms these into new forms. I am interested in faith symbols that bear witness to stories of tenacious faith - the stories of what people found to be the most important when faced with our greatest enemy--death. In artists' books and computer prints I am tracing the vestiges of death, explaining in visual language for myself and others the reality of our fragility and mortality. I am using some of the latest computer technology to digitally capture the historic images, intensify their symbolic content and then mass produce them. From this small work, I know that technology can be used for redemptive purposes, for a witness to contemporary people.

#### NARRATIVE (DEATH)

Duane slips the rope over the calf's forefeet inutero. He braces one working boot against the cow's hindquarters and leans back. Waves of blond hair are held down with his Loveland Feed cap. The air is clear and bright; the soil in the pen naturally rich and fertile. The registered Holstein rolls her eyes till you see the whites and she groans. The yellow forehooves appear and Duane's gravity-defying angle increases. At a birth there is joy; I know it is a rare privilege that I participate in, standing at the three-rail-fence. The full sun is bright, the air cool, no noise except the cow's low moans. Steam escapes her nostrils, she is a beautiful pattern of black and white, the great black and white. Now the forelegs are out, the hardest moment here. The small wet head laid back over large shoulders is free and in one movement Duane rolls with the calf to the ground. He cleans the birthing fluid from its nostrils and tongue; he smiles at me, it is a girl. A purebred heifer with great spots, one we will keep and name and in time milk. He turns the mother around and helps the calf to stand. He presses her large wet nose to the wet calf and with broad strokes she licks her newborn.

During a birth time stands still. For me it is like the act of creating art or worshipping in the Alamosa Christian Reformed Church. All other extraneous realities lean back and chronos

lifts her demands.

We are in the church fellowship hall in Greeley, Colorado; the linoleum floor is bright under the high curved ceiling of the old gymnasium/cafeteria. It's Thursday evening volleyball and my main contribution to the game is a consistent serve. The space is filled with laughter, jumps, runs, swings, hits, misses, more laughter. Duane jumps after the ball landing on me. He holds me close, looking into my eyes "I don't want to lose you." Embarrassed, I quickly look around the brightly lit space. I wonder at his reaction, seemingly out of proportion to the incident.

The next morning we rise at 4:30 a.m. My gift to him is I get up too, to eat the breakfast that he prepares. He slices granny smith apples into thick oatmeal. At the door he is leaving, his strong arms hold me, between kisses I say, "Please don't go", as I do every morning at 5:15 a.m. He tenderly says, "Don't make it harder than it is." Into the dark he goes.

As herdsman of a large dairyfarm of over 600 Holsteins, Duane is the only permanent worker. Occasional wetbacks who can't speak English come and go as the owner hires them. Duane worked his last Christmas Eve when the scheduled illegal immigrant never came back after receiving his paycheck.

The mechanization of milking machines and the large feed truck which automatically lays feed in the trough while driving along electrified fences makes it *almost* back-breakingly possible to single-handedly run this dairyfarm. Especially working everyday from sun-up to sun-down as our Christian brother who owns the farm expects. Dairyfarming is one of the most time-demanding kinds of farming; the cows must be milked twice a day, everyday. They never take a holiday. Technology makes it possible to run it alone; an overwhelming realm of machines and large animals.

Lately I have been going to the farm to work beside Duane. I bottle feed the calves - they receive powdered milk so people can drink cow's milk. Sometimes I use the loader to move feed into the shelter or I fork hay in rows up to the electrified lines. The wind comes up and suddenly I am afraid the heavy bales stacked high will fall on Duane. Last week two of his ribs were cracked when a frightened Holstein pinned him between the metal overhead automatic

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feeder and the concrete wall to the exit ramp.

Two weeks ago during the snowstorm he was clearing snow with the loader. His beloved brittany spaniel, Nimrod, still a young hunter, was playfully there and then under the wheels. Duane brought the dog home, over his arms, the ground was too frozen for a burial. Tears laid frozen tracks down his face.

Today I'm not going with him to help at the dairyfarm. I stay home to prepare for his family who will arrive around noon. At nine a.m. I receive an incoherent call from the elderly mother who is staying at the dairyfarm while her son, the owner, and his family are out of town. There has been a terrible accident and I'm not to come to the farm, but to wait. I wait. I wait. I pray. My mind is working through the possible accidents on the farm. I pray. In my mind's eye flashes Duane crawling under the huge white feed truck to slip it into gear; I see across the rear shute in large capitalized red letters the brand name - HARSH. I have abandoned the prayer that he will be okay, now I pray only that he will be alive. I tell God that I can take care of him, even if he is completely paralyzed. Over an hour later the pastor arrives to take me to the hospital. I don't know what this means; how could I know in a culture that denies death?

He was without me. If only I'd gone to the farm. At the hospital in Loveland I am ushered into the chapel. No one says a word to me. The new farmhand that was starting that day tells me that he was sitting in the passenger seat and Duane driving, when the feed truck quit. Duane jumped out, suddenly the huge machine lurches forward over a bump and simultaneously Duane cries out. He cried out. I wasn't there. Tears fall down my face. From the chapel I ask to see Duane, medical personnel tell me he isn't ready yet and perhaps I shouldn't see him. I wait. I wait. I weep. I ask to see him. Finally they lead me into the hall where a nurse asks me if I want a tranquilizer. I remember thinking clearly if I wake from not facing this now, moment-by-moment, then the loss will overwhelm me. He is laid out in a crowded room where medical technology in the forms of tubes and paraphernalia failed. I was denied being with him in his death. I reach instinctively to pull the sheet down which comes up to his chin. A nurse pulls my hand away, then propels me out of the room. I read on the death certificate that his



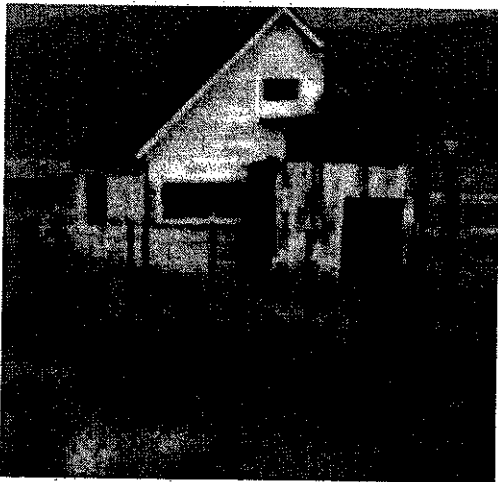
heart was fibrillating upon arrival to the emergency room. When hospital personnel tried to revive him, I wasn't allowed to be there. I read in the local newspaper that firemen jacked the HARSH feed truck off of him. I wasn't there; the Church told me to wait for the Pastor. Later, I am told he died instantly and he didn't suffer. I never saw his wound.

Eight days later and three hundred miles pass before I see Duane again. The mortician is advising a closed casket. My mother-in-law is urging me to agree. I insist it be open. The viewing is early morning, sunlight streams in from the left beveled glass doors in the mortuary. I have selected a casket with an open bible printed on the inside lid. Perhaps he will read it when we close the lid. Duane is painted with bright orange make-up, his waves of hair sprayed stiffly straight back. I guess the mortician didn't know that Duane's natural face color is Dutch pink. The mortician has placed a heavy white veil over the casket to further disguise death. The room is filling with people; I haven't been left alone with him once. I stand at the casket. As I stand beside him a tear of red blood courses from the corner of his eye. I lift the veil, I wipe away his tear. I use his handkerchief with the initial D. sewn in bright green thread by his mother. I look at the bright red drops of blood with smears of orange make-up. I recall him saying the night before his death, "I don't want to lose you".

A half year later I have designed his tombstone. It is the available wedge of gray granite with a flat back and sloping face. Across the bottom: Galatians 5:1, For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free; Duane had written a paper on Galatians in one of his pre-seminary courses at Calvin. Across the top: Jerusalem the Golden with Milk and Honey Blest. Duane William Tolsma, the herdsman, herds his award-winning Holstein across the center portion using his full name for solid footing. Irises, symbol of the resurrection and my favorite frame both sides. (I feel slightly self-indulgent since gladiolus are his favorite). After the design is complete the monument maker traces it to a rubber mat, cuts and removes the areas to be incised, then sandblasts these to different levels and finishes. The stone faces east to Mount Blanca. The majestic mountain rises above the stubby line of constantly trimmed willows, snow virtually year round on its peaks. The desert alkali dirt rises. Crows call and fly overhead.

## IMAGES

I began doing art with ghost figures. Collagraphs and lithographs of ghost figures, distant fading - pentimento people almost disappear into structures and fields. Duane appears holding a lamb in *The Bridegroom*, near the base of the cross-shaped key of a timberframe structure, then fades. He stands in front of a trellis and garden gate holding Nimrod as a puppy. The young dog is very faint, hardly discernable; Duane's figure is merging with the pines which rush skyward. Next, I created computer prints of abandoned farmhouses found across the San Luis Valley. The small farmhouses built by poor farmers often serve only a generation. The bleakness of the land, time coupled with smaller farms being swallowed by larger ones equals transience. In this desert we see that man is like grass, his glory like the flower; the grass withers, the flower fades - before us in a season, in a day, like the day lily. The isolated deserted structures are empty. They stand, windows open to sun and air. In *Desolate I*, the piercing pink abandoned farm house reminds me of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. (Seen below: *Desolate I* and II)



My latest art is about the historic faith images of the Church as I find them in the San Luis Valley cemeteries. Cemeteries - places to lay the dead. This is how I am tracing the last known vestiges. I see a transition, albeit a slow cathartic movement of explaining in visual language the reality of loss, the reality of our mortality. Something denied in the technically sterile hands-off experience allotted me during my husband's death. Mechanization on the farm didn't keep him from hard work and long days; it took his life. Not only did medical technology not

save his life that day; it kept me from his side. I believe these are instances of mismanaged, misdirected uses of technology, not because my husband died that day, but because of the morass. Properly managed technology would take into account our basic need to be *present* in life (birth and death processes) and to work a fair day in community.

By Goethals' definition, I am an activist artist. She writes, "Alongside those who reject cultural forms are thinkers and activists who do not isolate religion from culture or reject its institutions. For such theologians or artists, religion has the inherent power to invigorate and transform experience at all levels".<sup>3</sup> When artists construct visual meaning, they work with malleable form/material, be it paint, stone, paper or digital binary code; and they infuse/breathe their desired content into form. The two become inextricably bound; as Ben Shahn tells us in *The Shape of Content*, even a simple gestural line bears information and begins to speak to us. Inseparable are form and meaning---like the body shaped from dust and brought alive by the breath of God.

Art images communicate through form and content. Yet the distinction of form and content allows a platform for discernment. Existing communication forms can be filled appropriately with different content. There isn't any medium, digital or otherwise, that is inherently evil, that can't be shaped and claimed by a Christian practitioner. The artist knows that the various media possess intrinsic qualities that, when shaped, both accept and resist the artist's work at forming meaning. This inherent resistance involves a struggle; it is work to create form that is fitting to the artist's desired content. A coarse grained block of wood resists delicate cross-grain cutting, but in the hands of the German Expressionists it became the perfect medium for jagged, raw, expressive pain and anger. The perfect medium for work created between the World Wars. How successful an artist is at discovering a certain medium's potential and utilizing it is directly proportional to the effective communication of the infused/breathed-in content. Just as a student in writing a paper may have potentially valuable ideas, but if the paper is poorly written then these ideas will be stymied in form, and thus, not communicate the student's content, certainly not at the desired level. The artist/designer must be sensitive to the possibilities of a particular

medium and then direct the physical properties for communication.

Images communicate in ways that words do not. The cliché that 'a picture is worth a thousand words' becomes numerically demonstrable in binary code when you see that a single letter in ASCII (American standard code for information interchange) equals one computer byte. Taking the typographic assumption that an average word is five letters, a thousand words equal five thousand letters, thus five thousand bytes. Five thousand bytes is a very small black and white image, roughly one square inch and at the low resolution of 72 dpi (dots per inch), monitor resolution. An image one inch square, in full color at a printing resolution of 300 dpi would consist of 250,000 bytes and thus be equivalent to 50,000 words! The point is that images have compacted complex information that communicates in a non-linear fashion, like hypertext which is non-linear also. Hypertext is a densely layered text that is accessed in a non-linear way. Images are like a hypertext, except that all of the text is exposed at once. In waxing about the loss of traditional linear text Sven Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies* says this about hypertext, "If it is indeed a need-driven development - a reflection of a will to break out of a long confinement, to redefine the terms and process of expression - then we may be in for an epic battle that will transform everything about reading, writing, and publishing."<sup>4</sup> We are at this point now with images; I believe we are seeing the need in action to break out of a long confinement to the preeminent word (word with a lowercase w). Our culture is using more images to communicate more information in a shorter period of time. Because the information is compacted and non-linear, different viewers receive different aspects of a visual communication. All this makes visual communication a challenge for the artist to shape his/her chosen medium, yet, also a delight in rich possibilities.

In thinking about the way images work, Goethals states, "... both high and popular culture artists construct visual meaning, attempting in various ways to render visible invisible truths which illuminate experience."<sup>5</sup> She describes how the arts give visible form to the *intangible values* of a culture. Traditionally the arts were used to render "visible invisible religious truths." Secular culture, as well, relies on images to embody in *vivid memorable* form its

beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Both high and low (popular) art now serve functions once ascribed to religious institutions. Later we will look closer at how high and low art seek to serve not only the latent function of religion, but also the central role of salvation. With the historic loss of images after the Reformation (in the Protestant church), our secular society began then and has continued at an alarming rate to use images to fulfill the latent function of religion. The latent function of religion, "in contrast to its manifest role of salvation... (is a) mediation of norms, authority, and information."<sup>7</sup> Traditionally religion offered the believer "an account of reality which enabled individuals and groups to place themselves in a social as well as an eternal scheme of things."<sup>8</sup> In contemporary secular society other authorities have taken over this latent function. These authorities-- political, economic, scientific, technological--provide society with answers to questions of identity, answers to what is valuable (thus worthy of our life-time work) and they supply us with information--loads of information. Now popular culture images perform this work of identity, norms and information -- primarily through television and they are quickly moving into various other electronic media i.e. computer games and software, the internet, and the World Wide Web.

Throughout history artists have shaped form using the available techniques of the day to embody content. Liturgical art belongs to what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the 'work of the tribe' which is art created for the elite and the non-elite alike. Until the seventeenth century the 'works of the tribe' consisted almost completely of liturgical art. The democratic society of the United States began without the traditional patrons of Church or State for the arts.<sup>9</sup> Without institutional support to form public symbols which have a shared meaning, the popular culture of mass media has taken over this function. In the past liturgical art, art for the Church, constituted the main share of art for our culture. Now "the marketplace has replaced the Church as artistic unifier" and commercial (popular) art rather than liturgical art constitutes the main share of the 'work of the tribe'.<sup>10</sup>

Not only has popular art/images (sometimes referred to as low art) taken over many of the latent functions of religion such as providing a source of identity, authority, cultural norms

and information, but high art often takes the role of salvation for the individual artist. Wolterstorff defines our institution of high art as that art found in our society which is used almost exclusively by the cultural elite. The cultural elite is defined as follows, a group which "finds the perceptual contemplation of high art to be ... a rewarding experience ... the group is limited in its membership, and there is pervasive in society the attitude that its taste in the arts is... more elevated than that of those who find nothing rewarding in high art."<sup>11</sup> A basic characteristic of our institution of high art is the way in which the art is intended to be used. The works are intended mainly for perceptual contemplation; in other words, the works are made to be looked at and so are often housed in museums and galleries. This seems obvious to us, but in fact, it is not the case in other cultures and even in our history of Western civilization. We need only recall the Byzantine mosaics or great Gothic cathedrals where art was at the service of worship.

Art for the Church relinquished its former role of artistic unifier providing communal symbols which embody societal values. High art followed the modernist dream of a continually progressive avant garde which became composed of a smaller and smaller elite group talking amongst themselves. In the high art tradition, artists often develop work with private meaning for perceptual contemplation in places set apart from mainstream society - with a faith "in individualism, ... and in the art market."<sup>12</sup> High art often serves a salvific function giving meaning for the individual artist and fulfilling a role previously fulfilled by religion. I heartily agree with James Ackerman as he strongly encourages, "contemporary artists to address the function of art and its responsibility for the communication not of private symbols, but of social values and meanings.... to move again into the public domain, recovering a role both communal and communicative."<sup>13</sup>

The marketplace, the driving force behind most images created today, and where we find communal and communicative images, is not intrinsically structured to show profound truth. There is no place for suffering and death. The mention in this context is laughable. In fact, the laws of consumerism demand that the buyer be supplied images of quick fixes to relievable

pain. This is not the reality we experience of inevitable death, lived in time and fraught with human suffering. Goethals succinctly sees to the root:

In Judaism and Christianity, the problem of suffering - individually and communal - is paramount. That insoluble, unbearable mystery of existence weaves its way through biblical narrative and the psalms. In the eucharist, Christ's passion is central. Yet in our day-to-day symbolic world, the litanies of a consumer society - the commercials - banish suffering altogether or resolve pain in a matter of seconds.<sup>14</sup>

I can't help but think this denial of suffering is inexorably tied to our culture's denial of death. Phillipe Aries in *Images of Man and Death* states, "From the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1970's, death became a forbidden subject among the "Americanized" middle class."<sup>15</sup> Further, "people in the United States have a history of devaluing "the significance of death [;] it has been disguised, suppressed and denied in a way unprecedented in the history of human culture."<sup>16</sup> My experience with our culture's denial of death was personally devastating. The Church sent the Pastor to intervene between death and myself. The science of medical technology tried everything in the Loveland emergency room to revive him. Science took precedence over mine and Duane's needs; when science failed, it was time to rush me in and out. The mortician cleaned and dressed Duane's crushed body. Then implored me to have the casket closed. Had I succumbed I would have missed the only goodbye left, the blood red tear. Science has a technical word for this - hematoma. However, I can see the circle when standing under towering metal.

My work about grave images is a stand against a culture that masks and denies suffering and death; a culture that has trouble remembering the importance of place. Our society is extremely mobile; the internet connects us in communication; we talk in the placeless space called cyberspace. Birkerts notes that the "physical and psychological distance between individuals has been shrinking for at least a century....There are no more wildernesses, no more lonely homesteads."<sup>17</sup> Few places remain like the desert of the San Luis Valley. The World Wide

Cemetery found on the Web offers a 'place' for remembering the individual. This site declares that it is "an ideal place to announce the loss of someone we cherish and to erect a permanent monument to their memory;" since, it will be shared with over 30 million people and since "such virtual monuments, unlike real ones, *will not weather with the passage of time* and can be visited easily by people from around the world (italics added)."<sup>18</sup> I wonder about the benefit of a possible 30 million visitors to one's grave site, but more so I lament the loss of place. I think of the grave images in the San Luis Valley; these reveal people living and dying in the profound reality of place. There you cannot forget about the passage of time. I am thankful that I can see in front of me each time I go back the weathered wood, the broken concrete, the passage of time. Our time is short; I don't want to forget.

Not only is the work a declaration of the value of place and the reality of death; but, it is also a work of love and hope to re-connect to Christian images that have power. Images that contain faith and "make visible invisible truths;" images that reveal the worldview of people of the desert - predominantly poor Hispanic Catholics in the Valley; images crafted and selected when people are in the crisis or sorrow of death. The artisan's faith, the families faith about ultimate mysteries, about life and death is made tangible in physical form.

I believe that redemptive uses for images and especially now in our technological age exists. Christians can infuse/breathe meaning into new forms; forms that have staggering potential to communicate to the masses. Art created with the computer exists as transformable binary code that can travel the world and take many output forms: print, monitor, installation, sculptural or artists book. With lessening constraints on the physicality of images and location, along with the possibility of widespread dispersal, images are the ideal means for communicating values. Michael Heim in *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* speculates that:

Perhaps the essence of VR ultimately lies not in technology, but in art, perhaps art of the highest order. Rather than control or escape or entertain or communicate, the ultimate promise of VR may be to transform, to redeem our awareness of reality - something that the highest art has attempted to do and something hinted at in the very label *virtual reality*.<sup>19</sup>



Sacred Christian art in the past was about the majesty of God and His redemptive work through the incarnate Christ. Today's challenge is to find ways to use contemporary technological forms to embody Christian faith. Goethals notes that "an affirmative, yet realistic (acknowledges the fall), view of culture may drive transformers of culture to seek interactive, dynamic relationships between technologies and faith (parenthetical information added)."<sup>20</sup> We are awash with a deluge of images in our culture. The ability of images to make "visible invisible truths", to contain compacted complex information and the non-linear manner in which images communicate is both the power and the bane of images. Ultimately, in standing against and working towards, activist artists "will be called upon to play dual roles as symbol makers and users as well as symbol destroyers - iconifiers and iconoclasts."<sup>21</sup>

My work stands against our culture's preoccupation and satisfaction with its overwhelming cache of images filled with the trivial meaning of consumption. The *Grave Image* series uses technology to create the form. Image technology greatly enables the process: captured images are placed on PhotoCD; then graphic software is used to select, crop and intensify symbols; output prints are thermal wax, inkjet, or larger archival Iris prints. Faith is the content.

#### GRAVE IMAGES (Selected vignettes from the larger project)

*Concrete Cross, San Acacio, thermal wax*



*Macario Torrez, Capulin, thermal wax*





*Head of Christ, Del Norte, Iris print*

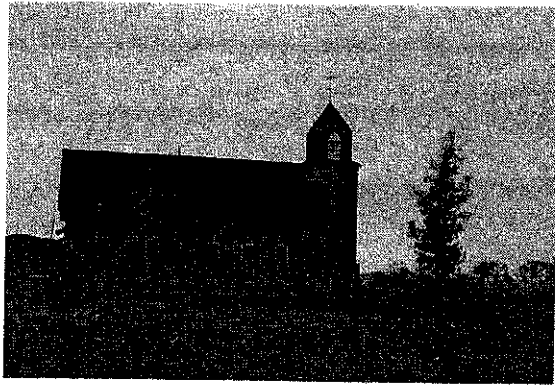
The project began as documenting the historic and disappearing gravestone art of the American Southwest. But the core that speaks to viewers is the underlying issues of faith. How do people respond in times of greatest crisis and sorrow? They reveal what is of ultimate importance to them; they reveal their worldview about life and death; they reveal their faith. Jesus, Incarnate Christ, Man of Sorrows; He has born our sorrows. He is with (us) the people of the Valley in poverty, drought, desolation, and arid cold.

#### THE CHURCH IN THE LANDSCAPE

Seen here in the distance is the rounded form of Mount San Antonio which is actually just over the border in New Mexico. It forms a comforting shape which appears in many of my images. The southern most part of the Valley was settled in the 1850's by Hispanic Catholics who braved Indian attacks and harsh weather to settle the land.

*Mt. San Antonio, thermal wax*





*St. John's Church, Canero Creek, thermal wax*



*Mission of San Jose, Agua Ramon, thermal wax*

The Church of St. John is near LaGarita and Carnero Creek. In the 1870's the Jesuits decided to establish a parish here to serve the many Catholics in the area. The Carnero Creek Cemetery sits just to the east and the Valley stretches open and effortlessly to distant mountains. If you look closely perhaps you can see the six armed cross atop St. John's Church which points to all directions of the Valley.

This church at Agua Ramon, the Mission of San Jose Catholic Church is located in the northern part of the San Luis Valley. A road just past the church takes you to the small cemetery and a half hidden morada, the meeting place of the Penitentes, the Brotherhood of our Father Jesus of Nazarene. This religious order took a firm root in Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado due to isolation and infrequent visits from priests. The Penitentes are known for their methods of penance which included: "self-flagellation, standing on cacti, placing stones in their shoes, and being bound to wooden crosses".<sup>22</sup>

#### LAMBS OF THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

*Patricia Heckler, Fox Creek, thermal wax*



*Hartley Children, Foxcreek, thermal wax*

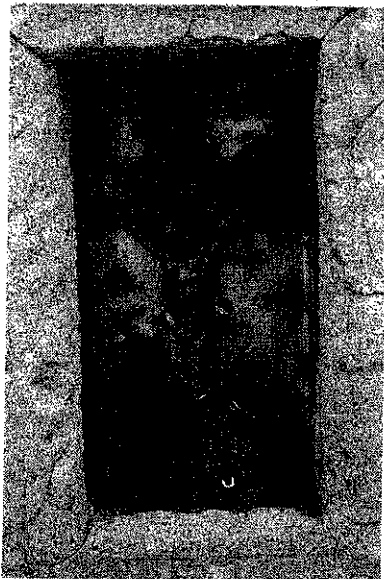


## FIGURES IN NICHE

The frontier was hard on women and children. Women were literally worked to death or died in childbirth. Epidemics took many children. The cemetery above Fort Garland is called the MacMullen Cemetery because the four MacMullen children died within five days in 1886 and are buried there. Five year old William died on December 3rd, followed by ten year old Rachel on the 4th, three year old Dominic on the 5th and two days later on the 8th, by eight year old Annie. The children probably died in a diphtheria epidemic. Charles MacMullen, father of the children, was a soldier at the Fort, later ran Ferd Meyer's store, was a postmaster, a county commissioner, superintendent of schools and a practitioner of medicine. He died at the age of fifty-four followed by his wife, Jane, several years later. She was forty six.

Found also in the MacMullen Cemetery are the graves of the five Wilcoxin children who died over a period of five years. Two months after Agnes gave birth to Ella, her four year old, Lizzie, died in 1885. Five months before Dick was born, two year old Ella died. Three months before Baltus was born, one and one-half year old Dick died. Baltus lived one day and Agnes A., who was born nine months later, lived only one day. The mother, Agnes, died shortly after this birth in 1890. She was twenty nine.

*Crucified Christ, Seven Mile Plaza, thermal wax*



*Mary, Mother of God, Alamosa, thermal wax*



## SUMMARY

In photographically documenting the grave images I saw the faith of a people visually depicted, seemingly for all time in this mountain desert. In actuality, this fragile folkart of wood, carved sandstone, cast concrete and plaster dressed with marbles, beads and plastic statuary is here for only a short time. And, in this short time, bears witness to those of us who will 'visually hear' the stories of tenacious faith - the stories of what people found to be the most important when faced with our greatest enemy - death. These grave images 'speak' in spare words and shapes to those of us who are here now to receive this witness.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gregor T. Goethals, The Electronic Golden Calf: Images, Religion, and the Making of Meaning (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Phillippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death, as quoted in Jay Ruby, Secure the Shadow. Death and Photography in America (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Goethals, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>Sven Birkerts, The Gutenberg Elegies. The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 154.

<sup>5</sup>Goethals, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Art, Religion, and the Elite: Reflections on a Passage from Andre Malraux," in Art, Creativity, and the Sacred, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1985), p. 267.

<sup>11</sup>Wolterstorff, "The Christian in a Secular Society" CIVA Conference Address; Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Goethals, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>15</sup>Aries, Images of Man and Death as quoted in Secure the Shadow, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>Stannard, p. 44 as quoted in Secure the Shadow, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>Birkerts, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup>"World Wide Cemetery" (World Wide Web, 1996).

<sup>19</sup>Michael Heim, The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 124.

<sup>20</sup>Goethals, p. 179.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>22</sup>Virginia McConnell Simmons, The San Luis Valley, Land of the Six-Armed Cross (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 1979), p. 56.

<sup>23</sup>Robin Collins, "Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory" Presidential Inaugural Lecture; Messiah College, Grantham, PA, 1995, p. 14.

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