

**Les Yeux du Monde Gallery**

500 West Main Street
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11—5, Tuesday — Saturday *hours*

Clay Witt

Artist's Statement

The Peaceable Kingdom is best known as a series of nineteenth century American paintings by the Quaker artist Edward Hicks. I have chosen this title for the largest painting in my show, and the show itself, because to me, Hicks represents the essential mystical folk artist of our country's nineteenth century adolescence, an artistic genre to which I feel a great aesthetic affinity. While it was never my intention to be a religious painter, I do traffic in mystical symbolism that, although primarily associated with Western Christianity, can be found throughout the mythology and art of humanity's varied expressions of theology. The burning bush, holy fire, and anthropomorphic themes can be found in religious art throughout history, but it is specifically our nineteenth century folk artists' use of these symbols to comment on contemporary ideas and events, which so appeals to me. In addition, I take inspiration from memorial art of the period, often made by the bereaved as an act of formalized mourning; a *memento mori* rather than a purposeful work of art. These genres of artistic expression often incorporated what are today sometimes dismissed as "artisan" (as opposed to "artist") techniques: calligraphic drawing, early cut paper collage (*Scherenschnitte*), and the formalized art of theorem painting, all of which have inspired my work in both process and theme.

While my works may at first glance resemble straightforward paintings, they are in fact expressions of an idiosyncratic technical style that I have developed over the past two decades, one that incorporates intaglio print-making, collage, gilding, and polished varnish layering into a final product that recalls the visual tropes of religious art as much as it does anything else. The idiosyncratic congregation of materials and technical processes that serves as the framework for the development of my work's conceptual form is ritualistically linked to the final product in that its physical limitations are defined by those of the material, both as a function of *tromp l'oeil* verisimilitude and as a defining set of visual characteristics.

If the medium is the message, then I find myself on a sort of mystical artistic quest, one that exploits the meditative qualities of my laborious and time-consuming process (I make no more than five large paintings a year) to create a self-revealing series of contemporary icons that, while not allied with any particular creed or dogma, do in fact reflect my interest and research into the artistic expressions of religious faith (of my many courses of study, most significant in this respect was the year and a half I spent apprenticed to an Arabic calligrapher in Damascus). In the last two years my work has taken a more representational turn, in that I place my golden symbols (idols?) in a sort of dreamlike context, one that combines familiarity with a jarring strangeness, all intended to further engage the viewer in my personal imaginings.

Thematically my paintings refer to the narratives most associated with humanity's religious and mythical expression. In a highly undisciplined and peripatetic way, I have compared analogous stories from a number of dogmatic systems, looking for the non-specific commonalities: for example, the tree alight with a fire that does not consume it, or the congress and cooperation of various species of animal in an all-too-human activity or quest. I have situated these pregnant symbols in an unspecific dark and wooded place (in itself a somewhat threatening mythic trope), the familiar form of which stands in unsettling contrast to their ill-defined and unlikely sources of illumination. It must be winter for the trees are denuded of leaves, which both saves me the trouble of having to address the foliage, and allows the lace-like filtration of light. The light source is internal, subject to the reflective qualities of gold, mica, and translucent glazes. There are, however, no human forms in my work, which in my opinion allows the viewer to participate in the image as a witness rather than voyeur.

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The Peaceable Kingdom

5 – 31 December 2008