

Proclaiming the “Palace of Life” Philip Bakula, Chicago

IN the past thirty years, I’ve worked in such a variety of styles that people often wonder how one artist could do all of it. I lacked focus and direction, and I was angry and frustrated. I never seemed to have been able to tie my life together.

In 1986, when my friend approached me about Buddhism, I thought I’d try it. At the time, I was attracted to Eastern culture, but I still didn’t understand what I was getting into. Eleven years later, I realize that the practice is a very gradual centering process. I used to chant for miracles. Now I practice to “decorate the palace of [my] life” within.

Before I began practicing, I received a full-tuition scholarship to the Art Institute in Chicago in 1970. My graphic art was rich and colorful and highly developed. However, my work at that time was also overworked and dark, with details tightly knotted in the center. I was driven to fill the smallest spaces with decorative details. I was so taken with what I was doing that I had a hard time seeing the work as a whole.

Since my practice, I’ve seen my art become brighter, clearer and more structural. In my latest creations the largest, undivided areas are frequently in the middle, with the more detailed areas pushed further out. Now I can see the piece as a whole and create harmony in my work. Through my practice I have come to realize that the law of cause and effect is creation itself.

I really believe that my art and my practice are tied together. It is difficult to overcome ingrained negative thinking and to love yourself. It is more difficult to go even further and to reach beyond yourself and to love others. But my Buddhist practice gives me the clear vision, strength and motivation to keep working on that goal.

I AM seeing this process of change in my life reflected in my art as well. I am presently working in two styles: “scribble style” and “dot style.” In my scribble style, I work intuitively, even scribbling with my eyes closed. I approach the work from many different angles, distances and lighting conditions. Sometimes I’ll awake from sleep and work spontaneously when my rational guard is down. In this style I usually create multifaceted cartoon-like figures. I delight in finding that I’ve made a nose or an eye function simultaneously as parts of several different, overlapping faces. Isn’t that who each of us really is—multipersons?

My dot style is slow, deliberate and meditative. I become a neutral observer. Because maps fascinate me, I usually set aside the Renaissance concept of perspective and work intuitively on a two-dimensional grid. I hang an urban fantasy of facades, towers, windows and other architectural, geometric shapes on the grids.

My dot drawing “Glory” is a departure from my dot drawings in that I started with a conscious thought. I was taken by the horizontal structure of the “L” train and decided to use that as a basis for a dot drawing. I saw “Glory” shining out to me through reading President Ikeda’s thoughts on glory in our lives. The drawing presents a beautiful Buddhist idea in a twentieth-century urban setting.

Over the years I’ve learned that if I don’t practice consistently, I start focusing on myself and my art suffers. I forget that whatever ability I have is a gift. I feel isolated and cannot express myself clearly. This is ironic because I am supposed to be telling the human story through my art.

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I must remember that my creative vision is a reflection of a transcendent force I express through my life. I return to the Gohonzon every day and am reminded that my consciousness is but a temporary part of an eternal karmic tapestry. I have always been weaving my individual fabric, but now I can do so with bold confidence and a sense of direction that I have never experienced before. □

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