

A Life Influenced – the Art of Janet McKenzie

My paintings celebrate our inherent similarities rather than our differences. What lies beyond skin and gender, within the depth of our universal soul, is more alike than we'll ever know.

My mother lost her battle with cancer early in her life. As a result I felt called to try to provide a voice through my art not only for myself but for others as well - those unable to speak for themselves for many reasons, including death. I made a commitment to work for good through strong and inclusive imagery of women, children and men - art that comes from my heart. A visitor to an exhibit of mine shared that my paintings reminded her to stand up a little straighter – an affirmation that encourages me onward and something I carry with me.

My painting “Jesus of the People” was selected First Place Winner of the National Catholic Reporter’s global competition at the Millennium by Juror, Sister Wendy Beckett of BBC fame. My journey with this painting has been nothing short of life altering. “Jesus of the People”, dark and modeled by a woman, includes and pays homage to people of color and women, two groups traditionally under-represented or left out of iconic imagery of Christ. “Jesus of the People” however was not created to be sensational or to create controversy - I simply hoped my then-fifteen year old nephew, a young man of color, might find renewed joy seeing a version of his beautiful, dark face reflected back in my interpretation of Jesus. “Jesus of the People” was revealed for the first time on the “Today Show” in New York generating a firestorm of negative and hateful responses. My mail was separated for fear of letter bombs, the model’s identity was kept a secret and I was told if I painted Mohammed the same thing that happened to Salman Rushdie would happen to me. Westboro Baptist Church wrote a hate-infused letter in response to the painting tying the work to Vermont’s Civil Union Bill and sent copies to Senator Patrick Leahy, Rep. Bernie Sanders, then-Governor Howard Dean and me threatening to picket in front of my studio in northern Vermont. People called and told me to read the Bible and I found out later The National Catholic Reporter kept the worst of the letters and emails they had received from me. Eventually the hateful responses to the painting slowed although they have never completely stopped. Over time however many people embraced “Jesus of the People” and carried the work forward into the world through museum exhibitions and inclusion in documentaries and film. The painting has been discussed, reproduced and featured in books, magazines and online from South Africa to Iceland, Vietnam, Australia and Russia and beyond. Requests for prints from all over the world are constant.

“This was a Jesus for the dark Continents, the dark spaces in society, the darkness in our lives. This Jesus was definitely one with the poor, the outcasts; the marginalized and women.”

Valerie Maysie D’Souza (India) “Jesus of the People” – The Role of Art in Theological Reflection, “In God’s Image, Asian Women Doing Theology” (2002-12, Vol. 21, No. 4)

In 2013 I was invited to be the William Belden Noble Lecturer at Harvard University's Memorial Church in Cambridge, MA. While waiting to speak I looked up at "Jesus of the People" on the altar. I was reminded not only how long it had taken for this inclusive image of Christ to gain acceptance but how far we still have to go to eradicate racial and gender prejudice and violence.

I was born in New York City and now live and work in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, an undiscovered place that speaks to my soul and inspires my work. I have one son who is the joy of my life. I have received many commissions, some are: The Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at the University of Dayton, Carlow University, Pittsburgh, The Thomas More Chapel at St. Mary's University of MN and Loyola Chapel at Loyola School, New York, among others. My work has been featured on the cover of "America Magazine" many times. Mountain Lake PBS (Plattsburgh, NY) did an 11-minute feature on my work for "Art Express" in a segment called "The Sacred and the Profane". I have had solo exhibits at the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Loyola University Museum of Art at Loyola University, Chicago and The Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington, DC, among other venues. In 2009 Orbis Books, (Maryknoll, NY) published "Holiness and the Feminine Spirit – The Art of Janet McKenzie" and 27 incredible writers and theologians – all women – joined forces with my art, each writing about one work in whatever way called to them. The book won the 2010 First Place Award for Spirituality (hardcover) from the Catholic Press Association. In 2013 Orbis Books published my 14 Stations of the Cross and The Resurrection as a hardcover book, "The Way of the Cross – The Path to New Life" with text written by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. In 2014 Sr. Joan and I presented a talk and exhibit, The Way of the Cross – In and Out of Our Lives, at the Houghton Chapel, Wellesley College.

Janet McKenzie, the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont

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