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The Gift of the Artist: A Review of Art and Faith

Abstract

"In a culture of haste, busyness, and distraction, attention is one of the most important skills we can cultivate, one of the best gifts we can offer —to the Lord, to our loved ones, and to the world."

Posting about the book *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

https://inallthings.org/the-gift-of-the-artist-a-review-of-art-and-faith/

Keywords

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Comments

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in all things

February 4, 2021

The Gift of the Artist: A Review of *Art and Faith*

Justin Bailey

Title: ***Art and Faith: A Theology of Making***
Author: Makoto Fujimura
Publisher: Yale University Press
Publishing Date: January 5, 2021
Pages: 184 (Hardcover)
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A few years ago, our university had the privilege of hosting accomplished artist Makoto Fujimura. He spoke eloquently to the student body, exhibited his work in our gallery, and took questions at a smaller gathering in the evening. At the latter event, the first question from the audience went something like this: “how does your art present the gospel?” I felt myself cringe with embarrassment.

My embarrassment has a backstory. I teach a course on Aesthetics, and part of the burden of that class is to free students from an instrumental view of art. In such a view, the only value of art is in ornamenting ideas, making messages more attractive, or selling products. Fujimura’s art is non-representational (he rightly rejects the label “abstract”) and thus it was hard for this student to see how it could effectively represent the Christian gospel.

I’m confident that Fujimura has encountered this sort of question more times than he can count. But if he was annoyed by the question, it didn’t show. He patiently explained the connections between the extravagance of God’s grace and the way he approaches

his craft. I'm not sure if the student was satisfied with what he said, and yet the best answer was the artist himself. Here was a gifted artist, generously sharing work that was profoundly human and unspeakably beautiful, even if the gratuity of the offering was lost on those it was intended to bless.

Thankfully for the rest of us, Fujimura has developed something like the answer he gave the student into a book. *Art and Faith* is part personal testimony, part theological aesthetics, and part aesthetic theology. Fujimura's aim goes beyond asking the church to take the arts seriously. What he is after is a paradigm shift in the way Christians construe the life of faith and our relationship to the world. As the "evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1), faith requires a disciplined imagination, the ability to see beyond ordinary human possibilities. As the human vocation, culture care requires our creativity, the commitment to unfold the potentialities of creation to the glory of God. The common thread is the centrality of the imagination as a site of discipleship.

Christians have often taken apologists, activists, or politicians as models of cultural engagement. But Fujimura gives us reason to believe that our best models may be artists. Fujimura offers a "theology of making" which trains us in "awareness, prayer, and praise" (3), a posture of tearful hope that anticipates and instantiates God's promise to renew all things through Christ. Awareness, prayer, and praise—perhaps these words can organize the gifts that artists offer the larger church.

Awareness: *artists teach us how to slow down and pay attention*. As Fujimura writes with respect to the paintings of Mark Rothko: "It takes about fifteen minutes before we can feel settled to truly see something. Most of the time, we are trained not to see, but to categorize and move on. But if you allow yourself to simply sit and stare, the eye can open up to take in beauty in a way that is rarely experienced in life" (120). In a culture of haste, busyness, and distraction, attention is one of the most important skills we can cultivate, one of the best gifts we can offer —to the Lord, to our loved ones, and to the world. Here too, Fujimura argues for the long game, for generational thinking alongside generative making: "it will take generations of committed craft folks of culture care to incarnate the fruit of the Spirit into culture. Theology, too… must grow and be sown into the soils of culture, be fed by spring rains of love to be cultivated into multiple generations" (72).

Prayer: *artists teach us how to live with costly hope*. Cheap hope—instantiated in kitsch—denies the presence of radical evil and seeks a painless resolution to our problems. It has little to offer in the midst of trauma or in aftermath of tragedy. And yet, the ability of artists to name brokenness without being defined by it, moving through the brutality towards beauty, testifies that beauty is the deeper reality. Fujimura's favorite metaphor is *kintsugi*, the ancient Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with

gold. Here is a crucified beauty, one that acknowledges brokenness while also seeking its transfiguration. As we pray and work, our lives can testify to a God who renews, not apart from our losses, longings, and laments, but through them.

Praise: *artists teach us how to be constructive, for the glory of God*. In a polarized time, it is tempting to say, "a plague on both your houses!" But artists teach us to criticize by creating and move culture forward by making beautiful things. Fujimura offers his theology of making as an antidote to what he calls "plumbing theology", where the value of things is reduced to their utility, and where value is almost entirely determined by the practicality and marketability.

By contrast, the theology of making teaches us that the most essential things may be those we see as the most use-less, things done "just for the heaven of it." To undergird this, Fujimura selects the shortest verse in the Bible as a cornerstone verse: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). Jesus' tears are utterly gratuitous; they have no "practical" purpose, especially since Jesus is about to raise the dead! And yet his tears are also priceless, testifying to an abundance out of which Jesus can both weep with Mary and raise Lazarus. His tears fully identify with the pain of the world and point beyond it to the abundance of grace.

Artists teach us to imagine a world defined by abundance rather than scarcity. Their work is not reducible to its market value, but first takes its place in a "gift economy." In a gift economy, gratitude gives birth to generosity and generativity. This does not replace the market economy; rather, it humanizes it. It insists that "a truly humanized market economy cannot exist unless a pristine river of creativity runs through the heart of our cities." Art continues, even without a market; but as poet Lewis Hyde puts it: "where there is no gift, there is no art" (67). We may thank Makoto Fujimura for his ministry of making: a gift to the church.