



Abide

*Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.
—Abide With Me*

This three-part painting was composed with biblical symbols for Christ in mind; namely: light, living water, and vine.

These symbols are repeated throughout the series.

Mary Abma, a resident of Bright's Grove, Ontario, is a contemporary artist who works in a variety of media. A full-time artist, Mary has exhibited in several group and solo exhibitions at galleries over the past 20 years. Mary's artworks, which consist primarily of idea-based works executed in a variety of artistic forms, explore themes that allow her to incorporate her interest in the humanities, her passion for science and theology, and her desire to find visual expression for her thoughts about the human condition. "I visit themes that relate to universal experiences that are present in our own life narratives. These layered works examine connections, or bridges that are integral to our stories. I am especially interested in exploring the bridges that bring us into a connection with our past, those that identify our relationship with the natural world, and those that lead to an awareness of God's presence."



Milagro Prayer Shawl #1

In the spring of 2012, I began to work on an outdoor installation. Our grapevine which had enfolded our deck for twenty years had suffered a great shock due to a very early bout of warm weather, followed by a heavy frost. All of the growth that had begun this year, had died. Despite all of the tests we did to determine if the vine had any life in it, we could find none. Spring had come to the rest of my yard, but the vine remained dry and brown. I was inspired to make an artwork out of the vine. For this artwork, I invited people I knew to make or to find a small object that they would associate with a prayer (milagro) and then hang it on the vine.

The goal was to cover the vine with visual representations of an entire, diverse community of prayers. Objects came from all over Sarnia, where I live, from London, where the artwork now resides, and from as far away as South Africa!

In July of that year, the vine sprouted back to life. This natural act became symbolic of healing and the vine became a living metaphor.

After a year and a half, I brought the installation indoors and fashioned it into a prayer shawl, inspired by the shawls that some church groups make in prayer for those who are in need.



If We Walk

This labyrinth is set into the floor of the Chartres Cathedral, where people have been walking it since the Middle Ages as a substitute for pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The labyrinth is a pre-Christian symbol, adopted by Christians, and also by others. It is often used to help people find clarity and peace and is a tool for spiritual growth.

Convinced that there must be more to the labyrinth experience, I travelled to Trinity Anglican Church, in Cambridge, where my brother is priest. His church had installed a labyrinth in the park next door. So I went to Cambridge to walk the labyrinth with my sister-in law.

Gillian told me that I should enter the labyrinth with a question on my mind and that by the time I reached the centre, God would provide the answer. I was skeptical, but because I wanted to understand the labyrinth experience, I did ask a question. "What is the labyrinth all about?"

And so I began to follow the labyrinth. Right away, I became annoyed. My "spiritual" experience was interrupted by the drone of traffic on the street next to me and by the noise of construction nearby. Worst of all was the loud swearing and coughing of a group of men near the church. When I reached the middle of the labyrinth, I expressed my frustration to Gillian. "This is the WORST place for a labyrinth! It isn't meditative at all! And the worst is that group of men over there with their swearing and their coughs."

Gillian agreed that it is very noisy. Then, looking over at the group of men, she said, "They'll go inside soon. They're just waiting for the soup kitchen to open."

When she said those words, I felt as though I was physically struck. My entire perspective changed and I said, "I take it back. This is the PERFECT location for a labyrinth!"

And so I added fragments of the path, painted onto soil--the grit of the journey.



Preparing for the Journey (Boat With No Oars)

There is a story in the Celtic tradition of St. Brendan and his followers, who by following Christ's leading, stepped into a boat and set off. The boat, which had no oars, carried them to destinations unknown. This story is symbolic of a journey of faith. The destination may not be known, but the journey is not aimless.

I photographed an antique rowboat with no oars. In it, I placed objects, such as three stones, honeycomb, antique nails, etc. From this photo, I made a lumen photograph--a photograph which is developed by being exposed by the sun. The boat is on the water among images of grape leaves. Next to the boat with no oars is an antique valise filled with objects. I approached this part of the work with humour. As I hunted for antiques to fill the valise, I asked myself this question: *If I were to take a spiritual journey, what would I bring along?*



In Communion

When I was working on the series, “In My Own Back Yard”, I became acquainted with a local beekeeper. His passion for bees was infectious and I became increasingly interested in bees and in what they symbolize for us on many levels. The most potent of these symbols for me is that of community. Of course, these days, along with an appreciation for bees and all that they do for us, come feelings of fear and sometimes helplessness in the face of the number of honey bee deaths each year.

I used honeycomb for three of the pieces in this series. In this painting, I had a communion serving tray set into the top of my painting board. These trays are used in some churches to serve the communion wine, or juice. I am fascinated by the symbol of communion, or Eucharist. Eucharist means “Thankfulness” and this tradition is one in which interaction between us and God is centred on the symbol of a meal taken in community. The communion symbol is also one which brings together images of life and death.

For this painting, I fashioned communion glasses out of honeycomb. They are set in a tray covered with beeswax.



*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God. (Psalm 42:1)*

This artwork took two years to complete. There were many stages to the creation of the piece. It is based on Psalm 42. The psalms were meant to be sung and so I searched out the oldest accessible form of this song. I found a plainsong (Gregorian Chant) version. Plainsong chants are nearly as old as Christianity itself. I found a 13th century and asked a musician to sing this version of the psalm. We recorded the waveform that his voice made. I was playing with the idea that songs, stories, traditions, and expressions of belief were initially transmitted primarily by sound and it fascinated me that hundreds or even thousands of years after a song is first sung, it can be reproduced and that we can hear it as others have for so many years.

The next thing I needed to find was a player piano roll version of the praise song, “As The Deer”. I chose a piano roll because it is historical and represents one of the first ways in which songs were reproduced mechanically. These rolls were punched out by machine and fed into a player piano. They were mass produced so that anyone with a player piano could hear the same song, played the same way. Words appeared through a little window so that the listener could sing along. Player pianos were out of vogue by the time “As The Deer” was written, so I commissioned a piano roll from someone who still has the machinery to punch them out. The song was recorded as an mp3, then emailed to New Mexico where it was transformed into a piano roll, and then mailed back to me. I found this tension between old methods and new, and between the tangible and intangible to be fascinating.

Once I had the piano roll, I stencilled the words of the song alongside the notes as they appeared on the roll.

Underneath the piano roll are four CDs, the latest technology to be declared passé--and one of the last that we could actually touch. It doesn't escape me that we now save our music on “clouds” on the internet. This is almost as intangible to me as sound waves.

Around the piano roll, I simulated stained glass. The symbols are fairly obvious. Look for mirrored concepts, top and bottom, left and right.

The last step was to etch the waveform of *Sicut Cervus* onto the plexiglass that would hang in front of the piano roll. The light in the room casts a shadow of the waveform onto the piano roll.



Ashore

This painting was completed after all of the other works had been finished. Conceptually, it ties in with “If We Walk” and “Preparing for the Journey (Boat With No Oars)”. Like the boat with no oars of Celtic tradition, driftwood embarks on a journey solely by being carried along on the water. It journeys without a clear destination; however, the journey does have direction--towards shore. Along the way, the wood is washed. Hard edges are softened; what began rooted to the shore is set free to follow the water to an unknown place.

The watery course is veiled--shrouded in mystery. Once ashore, a pear tree sprouts from the driftwood. Antique nails, bent and rusted from use and re-use long ago, stretch along the edge of the painting. They, too, appear to have found rest.

TOGETHER, WE JOURNEY



In the fall of 2011, Mary Abma was commissioned by Forest City Community Church to create a series of works for the wall of the atrium. The proposal she submitted, to create a series of seven meditations that touched on our inward spiritual journey and on our journey out into the world and in community was accepted. For two years, she worked to create works of great depth and integrity, remaining faithful to her own artistic practices, while fulfilling the goals set out in her proposal.

In the fall of 2013, the works were completed. They were installed at FCCC on December 5, 2013.

This guide was designed not to tell the viewer how to interpret these seven works; but, rather, how to approach them. The artist's thoughts and processes are outlined in order to help the viewer to see the works with fresh eyes.