



Opening up the Present to Eternity

by Kim Luisi

In this turbulent time of marked cultural fragmentation, we interviewed two artists whose visionary work and lives are lived in complete syntony, stepping beyond the cultural disarray to find—and share—an uncommon harmony.

It is rare to spend an evening with an artist and not have his own work be the main topic of conversation. Rarer still is spending the evening with two artists in the same room speaking not of their own vision and accomplishments but of those who came before them. Yet New York City was witness to such a unique occurrence on March 8th courtesy of Crossroads Cultural Center, The American Bible Society, and Hearts Home, USA. Because of their generous desire to educate the culture from the seat of the soul, those in attendance were treated to a panel discussion with Rev. Thierry de Roucy, Founder of Heart's Home, promoter of the arts and supporter of NY artists, and recipient of the French Légion d'Honneur; Dr. Francis Greene, Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Fine Arts at St. Francis College; Makoto Fujimura, founder of the International Arts Movement (IAM) and 2003–2006 Presidential Appointee to the National Council of the Arts; and Etsuro Sotoo, sculptor of Gaudí's La Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, Spain, since 1978. La Sagrada Familia will be consecrated by Pope Benedict XVI on November 7, 2010.

The wife of Sotoo, pianist Hisako Hiseki, opened the evening by performing pieces from Isaac Albeniz, a Catalan pianist composing in the late 1800s—the same period that the Sagrada Familia was being built by Gaudí. Fresh from International Art Movement's annual gathering, this year called "Encounter 10" (March 4–6), both Etsuro Sotoo and Makoto Fujimura spoke of the inspiration of other artists for their work. Some may be already familiar with Sotoo, his work on La Sagrada Familia, and the influence of Gaudí on his life and work, and of NY's own Fujimura as well, and the unparalleled accompaniment he has found in the French painter Georges Rouault.

In this interview, both Sotoo and Fujimura spoke with us about this inspiration and companionship on their road in search of truth and beauty, sharing many of the same insights and hopes on the creative journey—ultimately a journey of faith for them both.

Etsuro, what was it about working on La Sagrada Familia that caused you to convert to Catholicism?

Etsuro Sotoo: I wanted to understand Gaudí, but as much as I studied him I nonetheless couldn't reach him—there was still one final step. Without taking that final step, I couldn't continue to work. This is because there were projects to be done where Gaudí had not left us anything—he hadn't started the project, he hadn't left any data at all. I was very distressed about this, as I

wondered how to take this final step to come closer to Gaudí, but I understood that the problem would not be solved by looking at Gaudí. At that point, I decided to look not at Gaudí, but in the direction Gaudí was looking. And then, I was not waiting for it for but suddenly something wonderful happened: I had a very strong feeling that Gaudí had entered into me, and I had entered into Gaudí. In other words, as much as I looked at Gaudí, I could get no closer to him, but when I looked in the same direction as Gaudí, incredibly, we became one. In order to correctly look in the same direction as Gaudí, you must stand in the same place as Gaudí. And that place is faith.

Makoto, I understand it was the creation of art that helped bring you to Christianity. Specifically, the beauty of the materials you used to create your art brought you to an encounter with true Beauty, the Divine.

MF: What brought me to Christianity was also frustration with myself, both in terms of my lack of capacity to reach something that I felt I could reach, but also, on the other side, it was the fact that these materials had inherent beauty and light that I felt I didn't deserve in my own life, my own path up to that point. I was humbled by these beautiful Nihonga [traditional Japanese painting] materials. I knew that it fit my expression, so I kept getting better at being able to communicate something that I always wanted to express, but what I felt was that I didn't have a paradigm inside of my heart that allowed me to accept the extravagance of that beauty. I felt convicted by them.

When you're talking about extravagance, you are not necessarily talking about the price of the materials, are you?

MF: Nihonga materials are expensive, so price does have something to do with it. You work with azurite, malachite, and gold, but it's not just price. When you look at water and you see the beauty of just water, you become aware of how far your own heart has strayed from that beauty. And you don't feel worthy of it, if you truly understand water. But I didn't get to that point immediately.

You were inspired by one who came before you?

MF: Yes, the work and person of the French painter Georges Rouault has had a great impact on me. There are many things that attract me to his work. One of these is that he chose all manner of subjects, often suffering, for his paintings. But ultimately they, especially the misfits, were celebrated as God's chosen manifestation of light into darkness. I think one of the world's greatest masterpieces is *Christ on the Outskirts*.

And so this "relationship" with Rouault gave rise to your recent exhibit, "Soliloquies."

MF: Yes. I realized that if you seek truth and beauty, you will often find yourself alone, but what you thought was a soliloquy is not. It echoes throughout time, in company with others, and hence the plural, "soliloquies." This is an invaluable companionship for me in my work and life. I felt, from the moment I went to visit Rouault's home and studio, that he was with me. I understood how the space he inhabited spoke to him, how he held his tools, what he saw out the window...

Etsuro, in your presentations, you too always devote some attention to the space inhabited by Gaudí, the tiny room where he dried flowers and copied plants in clay, and slept.

ES: This speaks of the humility of the man at work. An artist can only be great if he is very humble, if he is following another. In the case of Gaudí, he was following Nature, the creative sign of Another.

Makoto, in your book, *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture*, you wrote that an artist's journey to believe in heaven can create works mirroring the hope of heaven and can give others the permission to speak of "that redemptive possibility."

MF: Art, in general, gives permission for something. It opens a door, opens a window. And it is about a journey, an encounter. You move from one place, meander in life, as we see people walking about, and I think God gives that permission or possibility to ponder that there is something other than this gray world, this nine-to-five reality that people feel trapped in. That's what I mean by that. I think, on one hand, because I do believe in God and I do follow Christ, that conviction allows me to also be bolder than others about that reality, that possibility of art. I'm not just talking about Christian art; I'm also talking about all of human expression: music, art, dance, theater. There's something about the nature of humanity that brings us to want to express hope, and want to discover new things; to move beyond ourselves. I think the interesting thing is that we have this dichotomy between now and eternity, between heaven and earth, but, in reality, in my mind, the connections are real and immediate. And I know, obviously, we're not there yet, but there's something about art that opens up even the permission to think of the present reality as eternity.

I'm reminded of St. Paul when he talks about "looking through a glass darkly now." Is art that glass?

MF: Yes, I think in some ways it's a small window that is maybe a little bit clearer because we are focused on communicating to others. Hopefully, our discipline as artists will allow us to focus on a tiny little hole where you can peak in to see the reality that is beyond.

At a recent conference, you said that for the Japanese beauty is more significant than love.

MF: Yes. In the Japanese language and culture, love doesn't have the same connotation as in Western society; it's more of an emotion. In the West, it's more rational, which is also a problem. The biblical definition is sacrificial, *agape, eros*. It is a full definition of love. But, in every culture, there is a deficiency somewhere. In America, it's either too sensual or too rational. What the Japanese have very well articulated in their history is that the depth of reality has this beauty to it. It's a cultural understanding. So if you try to communicate the Love of God to the Japanese, they say, "Well, that's nice." But when you communicate the Beauty of God, they say, "Of course." That's what I see in Bach, in Rouault. Beauty.

Etsuro, you were entranced with Gaudí's sensitivity to beauty. When did you notice that he was different from non-Christian artists?

ES: It was when I realized that Gaudí was not merely an architectural genius. When I started working on La Sagrada Família, nobody liked Gaudí. He was thought to be half-crazy. Nobody recognized his genius, not even in Catalonia. But after 20 years, and now it's been 32, no one thinks Gaudí was crazy; people today recognize his architectural genius, but without knowing what kind of architect he was. Gaudí was not only an architect, but an architect who created people, who created human society, who created the future.

He was an architect who recognized the Other?

ES: Yes, that's why he's known as God's architect. He wanted to work as an instrument of God.

Is there a difference between someone who creates art from a source of faith, and someone who does not recognize the source of beauty?

ES: Yes. The reason is that, in Gaudí's words, beauty is the brilliance of the light of truth. So art without truth is not beautiful. Art without love is not possible.

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