Alfonse Borysewicz's lonely struggle gives Catholic art a modern face

by David Van Biema

June 20, 2016

(RNS) Whenever Alfonse Borysewicz addresses a fresh canvas, a daunting set of issues stares back at him.

First, there is the fact that Borysewicz is painting from faith, when, for the most part, it doesn't pay. Few galleries and museums are interested in explicit, non-ironic religious art. It can be hard to find a place to show, let alone to sell.

Then there is his Roman Catholicism. No other Western religious tradition has produced such a rich legacy of artistic inspiration and ideas; but none exerts the same kind of anxiety of influence, described by one journalist as "the insane, neutron-star gravitational power of Catholic artistic tradition."

This is all the more unnerving because the church, nervous about modernism, has not supported contemporary Catholic artistic expression. Modern practitioners must contend with a grandly defined past while inventing the present.

Yet Borysewicz (pronounced Boor-ish-SHEV-itch) garners raves from those who know his work.

Aaron Rosen, author of *Art + Religion in the 21st Century*, praises his "sophisticated, studied naiveté." Gregory Wolfe, editor of *Image*, a glossy quarterly dedicated to the intersection of art and religion, describes Borysewicz as "the greatest living Catholic painter" and predicts that he will someday "renew the tradition" the way bad-boy painter Caravaggio did in the 17th century. Christopher R. Brewer, with the Colossian Forum on Faith, Science and Culture, said "Borysewicz is the genuine article," creating "art beyond the end of art, and perhaps also the path to faith beyond the death of faith."

Borysewicz, 58, grew up in a pious Catholic family in working-class Detroit. He attended seminary for four years but eventually opted against ordination.

Bishop Kenneth Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, encouraged him to paint. By the mid-1990s Borysewicz had galleries selling his work in New York's art meccas, Chelsea and Soho, as well as elsewhere in the States and abroad; in 1995 he received a received a John Simon Guggenheim painting fellowship.

His art initially fit into the neo-Expressionist school that distorted the human figure to indicate psychological and political realities. Then, after a stay in Japan, he began experimenting with abstraction. His paintings still display some of the former's fierce emotion and the latter's fascination with flatness and a repeating private visual vocabulary.

In the mid-1990s, however, he changed his subject matter. People occasionally remarked about his paintings' spiritual qualities, a compliment Borysewicz interpreted as something of a challenge to treat faith in a more straightforward way.

He attends mass weekly and serves as a Eucharistic minister. He tries to pray the missal daily.

Of Jesus, he says: "I have all kinds of questions about who he was or is, and how we've interpreted his life event, but there's something very steady in all of it. I mean, it's life itself."

One day, picking up a book of Orthodox icons, he decided "there was this large tradition that I needed to have a dialogue with." He began painting religious subjects. A turning point was an installation called *Your Own Soul*; a chapel constructed of paintings and collages that viewers entered on their knees.

Subsequently, he says, "the art world began to freak out a little bit." His representation melted away. "I was doing very well," he says with a rueful smile. "And then it collapsed."

But, he says, "My heart was in it, and I ran with it."

Borysewicz is tall and soft-spoken, slightly stooped. He receives guests in his large Brooklyn apartment, where the bedroom doubles as his studio. He compares the room to the cave in which St. Jerome, the church father and Bible translator, lived for 28 vastly productive years.

The paintings that stud the walls are all about faith; at the same time, they speak fluently and powerfully in the language and palette of contemporary art.

“One of my favorite theologians,” he said, “talks about the ‘undertow of mystery’ in our lives. This is what I have experienced, and this is the hope I have for my paintings—to reveal this undertow to those ‘who have eyes to see.’” (Borysewicz’s next show will be in October at the Dadian Gallery at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.)

The shorthand for the calling that gradually expressed itself is Borysewicz’s signature motif: a honeycomb.

Built out of what he calls “deflated hexagons,” it produces acceptably modernist geometric structures. But it also intentionally evokes the sweet community of the church, and the moment in the Gospel of John when the risen Christ proves he is not a ghost by eating a piece of comb. Early on, Borysewicz incorporated an actual honeycomb into his art.

This past May, he offered a reporter a dynamic illustration of the dance of influences in his art.

In 2009 Borysewicz decided to do three 69-inch-square paintings representing the Triduum, the time between Jesus’ Last Supper and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. One of them, depicting Holy Saturday, would not let him go.

It would take two years and four versions before he arrived at the painting he wanted. Eventually, he says, “I began to think of it sort of as a meteorite, evolving and changing as it went through space.”

Borysewicz shared photographs of the painting, called *Triduum II*, on its journey. They provide a time-lapse overview of the shifting and balancing of impulses—Catholic liturgy and iconography, the mandates of modernism, and Borysewicz’s own sensibility.

On Holy Saturday, Jesus is in the tomb. With one of his deflated hexagons, Borysewicz portrays the stone that famously blocked the entrance. But what dominates the canvas is Jesus’ face. The artist is nervous about frontal portraits, a bit like the ancient Eastern Orthodox iconoclasts who forbade likenesses as incapable of displaying Jesus’ perfection.

But over the last decade Borysewicz's art has become more Catholic in its emphasis on Jesus' human incarnation.

"I needed an image of God made flesh," he said. The elongated head and nose refer to Orthodox icons. But "the eyes are closed; the skin is ashen: Death is real," he says. In the painting's upper left is another signature Borysewicz image: a processional cross.

Borysewicz returns to the canvas a few months later and, as he puts it, "I efface the face." He has a less literal way to invoke Jesus' incarnation: Within the frame of Jesus' hair, he installs the vermillion red outline from Michelangelo's Pieta, which famously portrays Mary cradling her son. He wants to include an image that the average viewer can connect to Holy Week.

He edits himself again. The oval is now is starker, almost Munch-like.

"Sometimes," Borysewicz said, "I accuse myself of being too pretty," a defining modernist bugaboo and a common slam on contemporary religious painters. He is aware that he has also flattened the image, simultaneously recalling icons and 20th-century art.

Now Borywicz brings back the Pieta, but against the background of a bare skull. "With hair, Jesus' face was still recognizable from life," he said. "But on the Saturday all you are left with is bones."

At this point, as far as he knows, the painting is done. The only indicator of more possible change is his replacement of the cross in the upper left hand corner with a field of purple honeycomb. Purple is the color the church uses to cover its statues during Holy Week, to be unveiled only when Easter celebrates that Christ is risen.

The painting then hangs above Borysewicz's bed for over a year. One day he pulls the bed aside, gets on a stepladder and lays into it again, "and it abruptly explodes."

Jesus' body, previously the least prominent part, now stands out: not only because the figure has acquired a brilliant yellow-orange halo, but because the Virgin—except for hints of her supporting hands—and the skull have been subsumed into a sacred heart, an image denoting Jesus' love for humanity that first became popular in the 17th century.

The heart is black. But it is now nested in a vast swath of honeycomb, Borysewicz’s personal symbol of community and hope.

The comb obscures most of the burial stone. This is the first time Borysewicz has painted it in white, which reminds him of the sea-sponge sometimes used in Catholic baptism. And instead of the cross on the upper left, two angels now look on from the purple rectangle.

It is no longer a Holy Saturday painting: It is Borysewicz’s own variation on life out of death through Jesus, untethered from the specifics of the sacred calendar. “Now it’s modern,” he said. “The whole kitchen sink is in there.”

Told that it’s beautiful, he conceded: “Without being pretty. Hard-won, not just beauty for beauty’s sake.”