



TONY ASKEW: BODY AND SOUL an essay by Siu Zimmerman

ON CREATING

I'm like a jazz musician.

To introduce the life and work of R. Anthony Askew — known to his friends, colleagues and students as Tony — it is best to begin with the creative process. His approach to the making of art springs from his rich life experiences and deep faith. To speak of his art is also to speak of his life. This creative mix is best summed up in his statement: “I’m like a jazz musician. I put things together and see how they play off each other.” When I look at his work, I see composition first and then think of music: there are harmonies of color and rhythmic energy between the parts. Music, culture and nature combine — and the form evolves as the work progresses.

During the 1980s, when Askew steadily produced one-person shows of large scale abstract watercolors, he liked to work on two or three paintings at a time and let the work itself influence him. He spoke of trying new relationships of space, contrasting the concrete and highly structured (a flat geometric shape) with the ethereal and loose (less form than color and movement). His art work reflected the joy and contentment he found in Santa Barbara, and his mid-career watercolor abstracts proved very popular. For Askew, most of the time the work precedes the theme — the titles come later, after the work is done. He notes, “I want to convey a mood, to create visual poetry.” Yet themes do sometimes appear, as in his series of assemblages reflecting on the season of Advent, a spiritual period of preparation and waiting.

Askew experiments with his process, and he sometimes combines his prints with collage and painting. He also likes to collaborate with other creative people, like the local poets who write in response to his art work. In whatever medium, he likes to employ three elements: the childlike quality and freedom of a five-year-old, whose approach is totally positive and totally uninhibited; an Asian awareness of the tradition and ceremony of the act of painting itself; and the sense of shifting away from the subject and realism toward the process of doing. Askew maintains that art is a learned skill, not innate talent, and the learning does not stop, because good teachers and good artists always look forward to something new. He states, “You have to be good at what you teach — so you learn and then you need to learn more.”

HEROES / INFLUENCES / WORK

Sister Corita was definitely a person getting her message out to the world.

Sister Corita Kent was a teaching artist at Immaculate Heart College in Hollywood, California when Askew, as a high school student, first met her. Her silkscreens combine powerful graphics with social justice and her special commentary on faith and life. One of her prints, gifted to him on Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, features the logo from Safeway markets accompanied with the words from the base of the Statue of Liberty and quotations from Martin Luther King’s speech, “I have a Dream.” Sister Corita broadened Askew’s visual vocabulary and influenced some of the ways he eventually chose to teach.

While a student in college, Askew’s work was influenced mainly by his professors at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB): Howard Fenton, who was representational but very abstract; Howard Warshaw, who was figurative; and Bill Rohrbach, a modernist, who he says, “probably influenced me the most.” When studying for his masters he worked with Robert Fiedler, Shiro Ikegawa and Leonard Edmonson.



In the early seventies, Antonio Frasconi, a woodcut master whose art addresses social and political issues, visited UCSB and as Askew says, “[Frasconi] taught me to express my current feelings, whatever they might be. If I wanted to tackle a subject that had been done often enough to be almost a cliché, I could do it — and still bring to it something fresh and important that would constitute my personal statement.” This view mirrors author Stephen Mitchell’s comment — “Just because someone used G-minor before doesn’t make Mozart a copycat.” Askew writes, “I want my work to reflect a happy spirit, whether I’m saying something profound or something light-hearted.”

While teaching high school when his children were young, Askew’s work was representational. He knew he could sell these works; he illustrated a *Montecito Guide* cover in 1982 and painted watercolors of Victorian houses and sailboats. “It was not where my love was, although children’s illustration for my kids was a natural thing for me to do,” he recalls. But when there was time to work for himself, he was drawn to Modernism and explored the “act of play” in painting. He also was drawn to the “Zen-like” quality that “allowed me to emerge and speak through my painting.” When freed from the requirement of subject matter rooted in realism, he looked to the New York School artists like painter Hans Hoffman and the Bay Area artists like Sam Francis and Richard Diebenkorn. From these California modernists he learned that composition — figuring out how to work the space — comes first. Askew also responded to the paint itself. “The message in paint is poetic, the activity of painting is what it’s really about.” He concentrated on his large-scale watercolors, and says “when people started liking what I was doing, I left figuration and realism forever.”

EDUCATION

I think I see my art as an extension of my faith. I think the creative process feeds me. I think artwork takes on a life of its own.

It was not as if Askew always planned to be a printmaker/collagist/painter. He liked to draw as a child and took a ceramics class in high school; while there he designed a float for the city of Glendale, which won a prize at that year’s Rose Parade. He loved the art he experienced, but there was little time for taking electives in art when preparing for college.

It took two years as a pre-engineering student at UCSB for Askew to realize that this was not how he wished to spend his life. He changed his major to sociology in his junior year and enrolled in an art appreciation course to fulfill a general education requirement. He wanted more, and speaks of his first drawing class, as a college senior, where he got a “C.” “I realized that I had learned and acquired artistic skills; art could be taught and learned.” In his next class he earned an “A.” He strongly feels that “every person has the potential to be creative — some are encouraged to start early in life. Others, often with mentors and fine teachers, learn through hard work as adults. I’m an educated artist more than a natural-born artist.”

He decided to double major in sociology and fine art and ended up adding an extra year to his time at UCSB in order to complete the art requirements. Of his mature work, one could say that sociology informed his art and that his art has influenced his personal sociology.

His parents were not happy about the major in art. His father, a mechanical engineer and businessman, liked music, but had little appreciation of the visual arts. Askew once took his father to see Morris Louis’ Color School paintings — his father “didn’t get it.” But, years later, bedridden, his father read *Time* and *Fortune* magazine stories on contemporary art and became interested in avant-garde art. The son is grateful that he could eventually share with his father what art-making meant to him as his life’s work.



After college Askew served in the Army National Guard, where, as a field lineman, he climbed a lot of telephone poles; he then worked in his father's Los Angeles-based engineering firm. Desperate to get out of that line of work, he did graduate work in art history and ceramics, earned his secondary teaching credential and from 1967 to 1969 taught high school art classes in Glendale, California. During this time, he also fell in love, and married Barbara Dibbs. From 1969 to 1972 he taught college level drawing, painting and design in Huntington Beach, California.

Those were his day jobs. In the evenings he worked on his Masters of Art at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), initially in painting. Disheartened when his committee rejected his painting exhibition, he took a year off, but later was urged to return by his printmaking professor, Robert Fiedler, who thought Askew was one of his best students. Askew did return and received his M.A. in printmaking in 1971. His capstone exhibition of intaglio prints was titled *Carriage Trade*, which addressed his own emerging interest in environmentalism and employed machine and automobile images as well as gaskets on the etching plates. He says "the M.A. experience changed my whole direction in life."

When Askew showed his wife Barbara, originally from Minnesota, where he had gone to college in Santa Barbara, she wanted to move there. They did so and he got a job teaching secondary art, becoming art department chair at Santa Barbara High School, a position he held from 1972 to 1981.

CHANGES

I always prayed that I would end up at Westmont College someday.

After eleven years at Santa Barbara High School, Askew felt secure as the tenured chair of the art department, but then the school district laid off sixty teachers and he was one of them. Two years later, the family home was lost in the 1977 Sycamore Fire, leaving him disoriented. Askew has been committed to his Christian faith since high school and after these trials, he entered a period of discernment over the direction of his life. It was during this time that several influential mentors came into his life, among them Lyle Hillegas, Bart Tarman and Walter Hansen. He found a new goal — to teach in a Christian college.

"I always prayed that I would end up there some day," Askew said. Acquainted with Westmont College since buying his home near the campus, he had made friends with some faculty members. Invited to visit the campus by one of the deans, he met John Carlander, then in his second year and the only art teacher at Westmont. Carlander asked him to teach an art class in the evening. Developing his popular general education course, Principles of Art, Askew taught students not only art history, but also how to make art, with all of its attendant joys and frustrations. He loved that class and never tired of teaching it. His greatest contribution as an instructor, as he saw it, was "to introduce art to students who had not studied art at all I think they are enriched, because of the seeds that are planted in the general education tracks." For some Westmont students this was their first exposure to the art world, and some became art majors.

Askew and Carlander envisioned an art major with fundamental courses in art history, two- and three-dimensional arts and also a dynamic art gallery. To house that program they needed to renovate an unused building, formerly part of The Deane's School, a preparatory academy for boys. (Westmont acquired the property on the lower campus in 1967). Challenged to raise funds for the renovation, they started a children's art camp, *Arts Ascent*, which in its first year attracted 150 children. The camp also served as a means to meet community people interested in the arts. Carlander and Askew formed a steering committee to brainstorm ways to raise funds and write grants, and Askew presented a paper to the Dean in which he outlined why Westmont, as an



excellent liberal arts college, should include the visual arts as part of the general education curricula. He had both a vision and a sense of mission. He was hired at Westmont College full-time in 1984. "I was blessed I got that offer," he recalls.

When Westmont College established an art major in 1984, the two professors taught all of the courses. Askew taught Principles of Art, Drawing, Watercolor, and Art for Children, and, in 1985, after receiving donated equipment from the community, added printmaking to the course offerings. Carlander also carried a heavy teaching load including Art History. Askew recalls the close friendship he developed with Carlander. "The challenge was all of those courses at the same time. So we were really jacks of all trades, and trying to do many, many different things ... we had to share ideas." They also had administrative work. Carlander was chair of the new art department and Askew was director of the new Reynolds Gallery. A special guest for the gallery dedication in 1985 was Corita Kent, who was also the subject of the inaugural exhibition.

Askew's objectives for the new gallery were ambitious: "The idea of bringing the best community, national, and international art to our students is the first thing I thought about." He brought in visiting artists like Kent Twitchell, the Los Angeles muralist, who offered many opportunities for students to work on his murals. Gallery owner Frank Goss also came to Westmont to review the graduating senior's exhibition, meeting Westmont's young artists, and eventually hiring a few as interns. So, as well as supporting student artists and art faculty, the Reynolds Gallery became a community resource from the beginning.

He planned to complement exhibitions at the Santa Barbara Art Museum, UCSB, and Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) and anticipated showing art "that covers many avenues of history, both currently and past." He related the February exhibitions to Black History Month, showing primarily African American artists like La Monte Westmoreland, a nationally known artist of assemblage. Also designed to involve community, *The Angel Show*, an annual fall competition that began in 1991, invited artists from the Tri-County area to submit an image reflecting the idea of an angel, spiritual growth or inner awareness. The gallery hired jurors (artists, critics and teachers) from out of the area so that they would be totally unbiased in the selection. The first year prominent Santa Barbara philanthropists Lord and Lady Paul Ridley-Tree sponsored the prizes. Other exhibitions followed: *The Art of Devotion*; *Storytellers: Children's Book Illustrators* and community themed shows including the popular *Shoe Show* and *Cup Show*. Outreach continues today with Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo County artists in the annual Tri-County Juried Exhibition, and in programming symposiums and community days, now organized by Museum Director Judy L. Larson. The museum was and is supported by the community and an active support group initiated by Askew known as the Westmont Art Council.

From a program founded by two full-timers in 1984, the department, by 2008, had five full-time professors, and four adjunct teaching positions. Tony Askew dreamed of a position for a gallery director, which would be an endowed chair — an important step, because that assured that a professional gallery program would continue forward. He envisioned a new art center designed specifically for both a museum and the teaching of art. At the time of his retirement in 2008, the funding and architectural plans for the Adams Center for the Visual Arts were in place.

COMMUNITY

Success as an artist is measured by the ability to communicate your own passion.

Tony Askew's response to his community, culture and current events informs how he makes art, and the art, in turn, affects his view of the world around him. He has been greatly successful in winning those in the community to his causes, whether it be to teach a class, to volunteer or to fundraise. Most importantly, Askew gives back. He has served on the boards of Art



Affiliates of UCSB, Theatre of the Handicapped, Art from Scrap, SBCC Adult Education, Santa Barbara Museum of Art Education Committee, Santa Barbara Art Association, and Santa Barbara Printmakers. He also serves as juror for various art competitions in the Tri-County area. After more than fifty years in art education, he still lives to teach. Currently you will find Askew guiding students at the Santa Barbara City College School of Extended Learning, part of his engagement with the arts community.

In 2004, the Santa Barbara County Arts, Culture and Education Forum gave Askew the Leadership Award and Certificate of Appreciation in acknowledgement of how he has cared about Santa Barbara, and how his community cares about him in return.

SUMMERS AND SANTA FE — RINGING THE CHANGES

Pursuit of art is work, but play is essential... discomfort also.

Askew happily teaches, but he also loves to learn something new. That's what summers are for — from a summer for studying art history at the Tyler School in Rome in 1967 to, more recently, the College of Santa Fe and the Institute of American Indian Arts Santa Fe, where he loves making prints. During one of those learning summers in 1988, at the Graphics Workshop in Santa Fe, Askew was working on traditional etchings when he encountered something new. There, in a back studio, artist Ron Pokrasso was making monotypes. Beyond the techniques of traditional printmaking was another way to engage — to produce a unique print, never to be repeated. A singular print requires the same technical skill, concentration and ability to build an image as does painting. The image changes during the making and the unexpected outcomes during the press operation itself add to the excitement of the process. As Askew notes, "the reason I like monotypes so well is that I can combine my love of painting with printmaking."

Askew spent his 1991 sabbatical at the College of Santa Fe Print Center where he made large monotypes with the spatial dimensions and compositions of his watercolors, but with new bold colors inspired by the southwest landscape. His chine collé became more important and his abstract drawing on the plate strengthened.

After a series of summers in Santa Fe, Askew spent a second sabbatical in 1997 as Artist-in-Residence and encountered the developing area of non-toxic printmaking. When he returned to Westmont, Askew changed how things were done in the print room, noting that, "Acid



etching is not good for the students or the environment and we're not going to teach intaglio that way anymore." Askew began to use oils and citrus cleaners instead of solvents for cleanup and made intaglio plates with photopolymer methods as developed by Dan Weldon: sun exposure and water etch in place of nitric acid etching solutions on zinc.

Over many summers, Askew has also worked with his artist friend and colleague Michael McCabe at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and the Fourth Dimension studio in Santa Fe, with their focus on viscosity printing. It is a method that increases the element of surprise and allows more personal mark-making with each layer. Askew's viscosity monotypes, more textured and complex, are saturated with rich colors and his gestures are bold and painterly.

THE TEACHER

I got to share my enthusiasm and encourage people to become artists, and I really think that is my strength.



“Do fifty more!” That was Askew’s advice to a young artist seeking to master a new technique. “Artists grow when they force themselves to work. Growth occurs best in painting by those who do forty imperfect pieces rather than the artist who does five perfect ones. You can do fifty little paintings of flowers. Then you’ll have learned how to *look* at flowers so you can refine the painting of them.”

Askew explains, exhorts, emphasizes. He challenges students to see ordinary objects differently — to look in a focused way. He speaks of *conviction* (passion) and *technique* (skill and tricks); “the mind and the heart connect to the hand and affect your mark in both art and life.” He is concerned that some students lack confidence as artists and he wants to make sure they realize that what they are doing is extremely important. When he teaches technique, he says, “always draw the format and work within and to that edge.” He also gives artists advice on how to live with the isolation of being an artist, as well as the distractions of everyday life. He tells students that “the fear of failure keeps us in the safe zone of repeatable art. We need to work for our pleasure and excitement.” He recommends that artists ask themselves, “What is art doing for me now? What is my purpose in doing it?” Other meaningful questions are: “Is this process? Is it a product? For whom? My audience, or money, or me?” He cautions students that “the process still is work; it doesn’t just happen. How you create is more important than what you create.” Often Askew will start a class by reading a poem or talking about current events of the art world and then, while the students begin their work, he plays music. “It brings me to a creative place — where the intellect and heart meet,” he says.

What is it like to be in the studio with Askew? Let me share a personal anecdote: back in the 1990s we printers worked, often at night, in the open patio that then served as the printing studio at Westmont College. The space between the corrugated roof and head level walls was open and it could get cold — really cold. The wind blew through the space and sometimes the rain flowed through the patio gate, down the cement floor past us, between the acid bath and the hot plates, to the drain. I don’t recall anyone complaining. Mastering new techniques, making new images, praying to the great printmaker in the sky for a miracle to come off the etching presses; we were on fire, we were focused, we were having fun. Such was the atmosphere, making art around Askew.

“I think I learn more from my students than they learn from me” says Askew after five decades of teaching. His receptivity to all forms of art is shared with his students whether in college or adult education. Over the years, many students have passed through art classes led by Tony Askew and a good number, spread out over the country, have become teachers, and others are well-known artists. Their ranks include a former high school student, Erling Sjvold, who is now a professor of art in Richmond, Virginia; Westmont College graduates Nicholas Price, who is a master printer in San Francisco; Daniel Barnett, who directs of the Santa Barbara VADA [Visual Arts and Design] program; Chris Rupp, who teaches ceramics at Westmont as well as serving as Collection’s Manager for the Ridley-Tree Museum of Art. Two painters who have achieved success are John Morra, a New York-based still life painter and Robin Eley, a contemporary realist who lives and works in Los Angeles.

Askew’s continuing education classes on creativity and criticism attract both novices and working artists as well as experienced teachers who seek interaction about art making and new knowledge of the art world; his classes offer an infusion of energy needed to make personal work. Teachers and artist professionals who have benefited include Ron Robertson, former chair of the art department at SBCC; Joyce Wilson from Brooks Institute, Robert Burridge, Judy Neunuebel, myself, and many others.



ROADSIDIA

Collage is a playground for new connections in a land of endless possibilities.

Askew speaks of finding “stuff” — “roadsidia” is his term for what he finds in the street. He discovers new meanings by linking together old objects: stamps, cigarette packages, old game pieces, bits of measuring tape. They all become part of collage or assemblage where they change into “new treasures as they meet.” He uses everything — bingo cards, matchbooks, targets, numbers, words, piano hammers, toy taxis and archival photos; he employs tape measures in *And 7* and Muybridge’s motion studies in *Take 5* (the title surely a nod to Dave Brubeck). Who ties all the bits together? Askew feels that “the role of the audience is vital.... Sixty percent of the work is the viewer.” After he makes a work, it is important to him that the viewer incorporates his or her own memories and meanings into the art.

Tony Askew’s son, John, wrote a poem titled *Driving with my father/sitting in the passenger seat,/having a conversation with myself* in 1997 in which he observes:

[...]

It’ll just be me that knows.

From this passenger seat
behind the windshield.

Watching my father in the dark, collecting,
his knees folded into the pavement,
on this road.

(He doesn’t know what I’m thinking. That I’m watching it all.

That I’m going to keep it.

My little wallet picture.)

He starts the car again and we’re back on the road headed home.

The sun is gone now.

I ask him what he found and he tells me,

“It’ll be good for class tomorrow. Assemblage.

Then I’ll use it for this piece I’m working on.

It’s perfect.”

THE STORY OF ROOM 23

One of my main goals is to make sure that students realize that what they are doing is extremely important.

When resuming art after many years away, I met instructor Tony Askew, teaching in Room 23 at Schott Center for SBCC Adult Education in the 1980’s. Walking into his class was to enter a force field where he taught, challenged and supported so many students who were starting or continuing to make art. He later encouraged me to revisit printmaking twenty years after my University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) class, inviting me to print with him at Westmont College. A few years later he nudged me to teach. Now, I have taught over twenty years of studio art classes — watercolor at Westmont and printmaking in adult education — including sixteen years in that very same classroom where we met — Room 23 at the Schott

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Center. In that studio, I try to pass on to my students the hope, attitudes and work ethic of making art as learned from him over the years. The gift from Tony Askew to his students continues on.

Siu Zimmerman is a working artist and former instructor of watercolor and printmaking at Westmont and was mentored over the span of thirty years by Tony Askew. She now teaches printmaking at the SBCC School of Extended Learning. All quotes from Tony Askew are taken from her class notes and personal interviews between Zimmerman and Askew.