

Alone With Ghosts:

David Barnes / Artist Teacher Statement



Recently I've been thinking about the process of making art as a kind of pilgrimage. The artist seeking some kind of aesthetic revelation journeys towards a visual *temenos* (a sacred place). In our culture we tend to think of this space as metaphor or symbol for the psychological processes of the mind. In other cultures this space is very concrete. Artist

shamans create upon the very face of the earth a map or doorway into the realm of spirits, the realm of ghosts. These artistic markings are ways to create a center, a focus, a moment of concentrated emptiness; where we can sense something greater than ourselves reaching through.

I have seen Australian aborigines make patterns of concentric circles on traditionally sacred spots to enter into *dreamtime* and celebrate with the cosmic primogenitors. Their designs, made of raw earth pigments, are not mere decorations but are part of a verifiable technology of consciousness changing. The artist who draws them upon the living earth opens himself up to the creative power of the ancestors who live beyond space and sequence.

I once spent several days observing a team of Tibetan Buddhist monks painstakingly construct a huge circular *mandala* on the floor of the Field Museum in Chicago. They used tiny glass tubes to delicately distribute small increments of tinted sand. Once completed, this cosmic map, talisman and visual prayer, was swept up and thrown into the Chicago river, allowing its incredible power of positive intention to spread and bless the created world itself.

I have been privileged to assist Native American Church road men construct elegant clay alters shaped like the crescent moon upon the dirt floors of the peyote lodge. I have sat with them though the all night *meetings* and marveled at the artistry of the *fire man* who carefully arranges the glowing coals of the central fire into the glowing scintillating feathers of the water bird, a central symbol of connection with spirit.

In all these ways, artists create a place of connection between this world and the world beyond. I once asked a Crow artist friend, "Why do you make art?" He answered after a long pause, "To be alone with ghosts." That is probably the best explanation for why I make images. To help students understand that the processes of making art are part of a journey towards a *temenos* of meaning and not a destination in and of itself is the best explanation for why I teach art.

Endless Mountains, PA