

Studio as sanctuary: a place of 'delight and rest'

By Christina Capecchi

Brother Mickey O'Neill McGrath can't help but grin when he talks about his art studio. It's been a long time coming for the 55-year-old Oblate of St. Frances de Sales who grew up drawing but wasn't able to commit to a full-time art career until 1994.

When the award-winning painter first visited the row house beside Sacred Heart Church in South Camden, N.J., three years ago, it was gutted. But Brother Mickey had a vision for what it could become, and so did the pastor of Sacred Heart, and soon lumber was arriving and electricians were wiring.

"From day one," Brother Mickey said, "it felt like home."

Now the first level is his gallery and the second level, his beloved studio. The tiled floor is checkered, black and white, and the walls are stacked with baskets of acrylic paint and buckets of paintbrushes.

His desk is arranged around the window, where northern sunlight streams in, illuminating his canvas. He paints in the morning, standing up, working in silence or to the hum of NPR. From his perch he can see Sacred Heart - watch the comings and goings of parish life, admire the bronze Our Lady of Camden statue and the wide-eyed bloom of hyacinth.

"It's my perfect little place," Brother Mickey told me. "This is like a little piece of heaven on earth for me. It's a studio, it's a sanctuary."

Part of the perfection comes from the absence of Internet. "A lot of people are afraid of silence," Brother Mickey said. "We can't hear the voice of God unless we're silent. With all our texting and email and blah blah blah, we're constantly doing and

fussing. I find it's such a blessing anymore if I leave my house and realize I've forgotten my cell phone. It's, "Thank you, Jesus!"

The images that flow from Brother Mickey's paintbrush are full of whimsy and joy: mysteries of the rosary, scenes with saints, dark-skinned Marys. "All the big saints prayed before black Madonnas," he explained to me, "including St. Francis de Sales. They've always been associated with healing and new life ... the blackness of conception, creativity, fertile soil, seeds growing underground."

For centuries, he said, images of black Madonnas have offered special solace to those struggling to conceive and to those in need of a fresh start.

Brother Mickey's first black Madonna remains his favorite: a rendition of the Visitation, the second joyful mystery of the rosary, whose feast we mark on May 31. In it we see young, pregnant Mary embrace her pregnant older cousin Elizabeth, arms intertwined, bellies touching.

To their left Brother Mickey painted a quote from St. Jane de Chantal, who co-founded the Visitation order of nuns with St. Francis de Sales: "This is the place of our delight and rest."

The painting, titled "The Windsock Visitation," hangs above the mantel in a North Minneapolis home occupied by Visitation sisters. They hang a windsock on their front porch to invite neighborhood kids over, a refuge in an impoverished area uprooted by a tornado last May.

What is your "perfect little place," your go-to getaway? A screened-in porch? An open balcony? The corner of a coffee shop?

One of the gifts of my 20s has been an appreciation for solitude and the spaces that nurture it. Each of us needs a place to pray and play, to design and dream. A place to recite ancient prayers or utter something spontaneous. A place to think deeply or let your mind go blank. Delight and rest.

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