

***Darren Waterston's paintings give a feeling of transformation***  
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Inman Gallery

Darren Waterston's "Ecstatic State" is among works on view at Inman Gallery through June 22.

**By Molly Glentzer**

May 26, 2013

Sometimes art and life converge in ways that seem almost divine. Giovanni Pergolesi's 18th-century "Stabat Mater" was on my mind Monday when news broke of the apocalyptic tornado in Moore, Okla.

I hadn't come to the music casually.

Two days earlier at Inman Gallery, artist Darren Waterston played the first movement, "Stabat Mater Dolorosa" (which translates from Latin as "the sorrowful mother stood") through an iPhone speaker dock. He's collected versions of the sacred music for years, and it inspired his latest body of work.

"Stabat Mater" originated as a 13th-century hymn about Mary, the mother of Christ. Artists have explored its meditative aspects for centuries, yielding some of the most iconic images in Western art and contributing to the "cult of Mary," as Waterston calls it, in the Roman Catholic faith.

He's fascinated by the look on Mary's face. "She's perpetually in this repose of overwhelming sorrow, but she's always depicted in this ecstatic state, as if she's hit some sublime level of experience through this portal of profound sorrow," he said. "The music always marks this transition ... and transcends into something extraordinarily beautiful - a passageway opening."

The theme was good fodder for Waterston's contemporary paintings on wood, which draw you into mysterious realms that are simultaneously beautiful and repulsive. Even before you know the story behind them, they have a slightly "ewww" quality: Is that blood? Bone? And what is it doing floating in that magnificently hazy atmosphere?

Waterston said he's often looking for a place "where sky becomes flesh and flesh becomes sky, so there's a sense of the corporeal, all these veils. It's all in a state of transformation. It's very volatile in some way." Some of the paintings have deconstructed physical forms that appear to be equal parts bone and bracket fungus (fan-shaped tree fungus with concentric rings). The figuration aims to show "the internal and the metaphysical body happening simultaneously," he said.

His figures also riff on Yves Tanguy's bizarre stone forms, Waterston added. "His are almost always referencing landscape in some way; these play off the body." Some of them have faint halos. (To fully appreciate Waterston's art, you must see it up close, in person.)

Waterston borrows techniques from early Renaissance painters. He starts by coating wood panels with eight to 10 layers of a gesso made with calcium carbonate, chalk, marble dust and rabbit skin glue - a concoction he cooks and applies warm. After each layer cools and dries, he sands it to create a chalky surface before sealing it with a thin wash of red clay.

He also mixes beeswax and tree sap into his painting medium - materials more common in museum conservation labs than contemporary art studios. This gives his paintings a luminous quality.

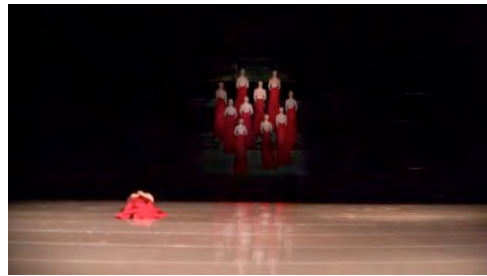
"The cellular form of the beeswax is extraordinary, like a cut diamond that's very irregular," he explained. "So light comes in and out."

He then adds details and marks to the luminous surface he's created. "So after taking all this time on this seemingly precious surface, I always want to mar it in some way, disfigure it, split the lark. I always want to split the lark."

Waterston was referring to Emily Dickinson's 1864 poem "Split the Lark - and you'll find the Music -," another of his inspirations. It describes a lark whose body has been ripped in two.

"It's this gruesome, grisly scene, but she's describing the music that comes out ... which is very much the Stabat Mater," Waterston said.

His largest painting, "Tondo," is round, based on a Renaissance format for the frescoes of chapel ceilings. The figures float in a space that looks a little like the



Shen Wei Dance Arts. [www.stephaniebergerphoto.com](http://www.stephaniebergerphoto.com)  
In the final moments of Shen Wei's "Folding," the magnificent painted backdrop goes dark and splits open as dancers in red ascend a mysterious ramp. The dance was recently presented in Houston by Society for the Performing Arts. The Park Ave. Armory presents the Shen Wei Dance Arts performing in the Wade Thompson Drill Hall on November 28, 2011. The evening-length program includes the restaging of two of Shen Wei's most celebrated works: Rite of Spring (2003), a study of deliberate versus reflexive movement set to Igor Stravinsky's intricate music; and Folding (2000), which combines highly stylized movement with the ethereal melodies of John Tavener and traditional Tibetan Buddhist chants. The evening will culminate with Undivided Divided, which will take over the entire drill hall. Rite of Spring Premiered: 2003 (American Dance Festival) Choreography, Sets, and Costumes: Shen Wei Music: Igor Stravinsky (Four-hand piano version recorded by Fazil Say) Lighting: Jennifer Tipton Folding Premiered: 2000 (originally created for China's Guangdong Modern Dance Company) Choreography, Set, Costume, and Make Up: Shen Wei Music: John Tavener and Tibetan Buddhist Chants Lighting: Jennifer Tipton Undivided Divided (world premiere) Commissioned by Park Avenue Armory Concept, choreography and set design: Shen Wei Original score: S? Percussion Lighting: Jennifer Tipton Video design and animation: Josh Horowitz, Layne Braunstein, and Blair Neal Costume design: Austin Scarlett Sound design: Lawson White Wade Thompson Drill Hall. The evening-length program will also include the restaging of two of Shen Wei's most celebrated works: Rite of Spring (2003), a study of deliberate versus reflexive movement set to Igor Stravinsky's intricate music; and Folding (2000), which combines highly stylized movement with the ethereal melodies of John Tavener and traditional Tibetan Buddhist chants.

moon's surface, but Waterston has highlighted some of the wood grain in blue, which also makes it look like Earth. Near the shadowy bottom is just a hint of a winged shape. Heaven, hell, Earth - it's all there, and yet not.

Dealer Kerry Inman, who's shown Waterston's work for 15 years and pushes him to experiment, looked at "Epiphany No. 2," a brooding, horizontal painting with a few tiny stars. Some of this work feels atmospheric to her, as if it's "raining really hard and really loud," she suggested. "There's that transformation to music. It feels like it sounds like something."

That wasn't accidental. Waterston identifies with synesthesia - the neurological condition of "seeing" sound or "hearing" color.

A few hours after his talk, the idea came alive again in a performance at the Wortham Theater Center. Society for the Performing Arts was presenting Shen Wei, a Chinese artist who works in New York, for the first time. Wei is an all-around genius - a choreographer, director, designer, painter and filmmaker - renowned for his ability to "paint" with his dancers' bodies.

"Folding," one of his best-known dance-theater pieces, takes place in front of an atmospheric backdrop that could represent an underwater world (there's a fish) or a hazy heaven. The dancers wear headpieces that extend out backward, giving them the appearance of bald aliens. But it's all very Zen, especially among a corps that glides on swift, flat steps, their feet mostly hidden below voluminous red skirts.

In the finale, the backdrop goes dark. And through some magic of stagecraft, the dancers ascend invisible steps. Sublimely, as the curtain drops, they're suspended there, halfway to Nirvana.

Wei, I realized, was splitting the lark. How to explain it, one of these odd moments in time when art sharpens the lens through which you see everything?

The tornado seemed to split the lark on a horrific scale, eviscerating the town as everything in its path flew: Shingles. Bricks. Trees. Grass. Horses. Flesh and bone. The clouds swirling in the gray hulk mirrored Waterston's atmospheres. I had to turn off the TV.

I needed music. I needed "Stabat Mater."

***Darren Waterston: Stabat Mater***

***When:*** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays or by appointment

***Where:*** Inman Gallery, 3901 Main

***Admission:*** Free; 713-526-7800, [www.inmangallery.com](http://www.inmangallery.com)



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