

Spiritual Life

RICH BARLOW

Painting provides canvas for spirituality

Art, like faith, can be inscrutable to those unversed in its dogma. But painter Diego Jacobson isn't interested in dogma, be it the creed of a church or the lessons taught in art appreciation class. Rather, his concern is the singular interpretation that every one of us brings to what is on canvas or the soul.

The ritual of his childhood Judaism didn't stick into adulthood. Jacobson says he still believes in God, but that the deity is a personal matter for each of us. Indeed, seeking to express his own spiritual yearning was what led him into painting.

Bostonians can see the results in an exhibit of his work running through Tuesday at Arclinea, a designer of customized kitchens that periodically displays art at its St. James Street location. (You can check out the paintings without buying a new kitchen, says Chris Kelly, a spokesman for Arclinea. It's closed tomorrow, but open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday and Tuesday.)

Born in Argentina, raised in New York, and now living in Puerto Rico, Jacobson paints in an abstract expressionist style that has been likened to that of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Trying to discern meaning in seemingly random splashes and lines of paint might frighten off those who skipped art appreciation class, but Jacobson insists it shouldn't.

"My interpretation is not necessarily better or more correct than yours," in art or spiritual matters, he says by phone. What you see in a painting is what *you* see, and Jacobson applies this Rorschach test approach to spiritual matters, as well: "The way to communicate with the non-physical world is through intuition, through perceptions, through dreams."

Take one example from his Boston show, "Blood of the Christ," which splatters the canvas with red, black, and yellow. There's no discernible human form in the painting, though if you let your imagination loose, a crescent of black bisected by a yellow streak might be taken to be Jesus' beard



Artist Diego Jacobson encourages viewers to bring their own interpretations to his abstract paintings. "My interpretation is not necessarily better or more correct than yours," he said.

and mouth. The blood of the title is splashed throughout.

"Because I saw the Christ doesn't mean that's what someone else is going to see," Jacobson says.

Another painting, "Tibetan monk," is a little less abstract.

The monk's head and face are lightly etched in white against a fiery red background. Jacobson let his paint pool and congeal in spots, creating a type of relief surface, with a wart of paint on the monk's chin and a slight knoll

on his forehead. The monk's mouth is thin and stern, perhaps almost sad. Kelly, staring at the canvas, sees an evocation of Tibet's oppression by China. That kind of individual, emotional reaction pleases the artist, who says people have sometimes cried after looking at his paintings, feeling a personal touch that others would not.

Jacobson, 42, studied business administration at Clark University in Worcester and pursued a suc-

cessful career in manufacturing. Something was missing, though, and he took a workshop on living a meaningful life that got him asking, "What else is there?"

He went back to school, but this time he earned a master's degree from Peace Theological Seminary, a California-based, nondenominational institution that stresses the divine in each person. According to its website, "Knowing yourself as your Soul is true fulfillment."

Near the end of his studies, he saw an art exhibit by Paul McCartney. The former Beatle will be remembered for his music, but his sideline of abstract painting and an interview in which he discussed his creative process hooked Jacobson.

To this nascent interest in painting, he added "the basic lesson I learned in the master's class: Don't judge."

"He sort of gets lost in the moment when he's painting," Kelly says. "He just sort of shuts his mind off, doesn't judge, doesn't think about it, doesn't go in with any preconceived ideas, doesn't title the work until he's done. When he finishes it, he steps back and basically looks at it through the eyes of a stranger."

Sometimes, Jacobson demonstrates a gingerly touch, as if he doesn't want to muss up the canvas. "Holy Land" is a good example of this minimalist approach. He drips splotches and nicks of red, blue, and pink across the white background.

An observer might think that the three colors represent the three great religions spawned in the Holy Land and might further think that some of those spots of paint look vaguely like footprints. Could they symbolize the march of faithful pilgrims, out of and into this cradle of belief?

Actually, Jacobson chose the work's title because when he stepped back after finishing painting, "it kind of reminded me of some guy with a beard and the promised land."

But then, for him, meaning is always in the eye of the beholder.

Questions, comments or story ideas can be sent to spiritual@globe.com.