THE HORREUM, UT SACELLUM
(THE BARN, AS A CHAPEL)

THE ART OF MICHAEL WILSON
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Cover: Crucem Portare (Cross to Bear) (detail) permanent collection of Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art, David City, NE

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Dedication

To my Mom who took me to Church on Sunday morning, and to my Dad who took me to the farm on Sunday afternoon.
Acknowledgements

First I would like to acknowledge my parents, especially my Mom, who reliably handed out paper and pencils in Church and hand-built a drawing table for my sister and I.

I’d like to acknowledge my elementary teachers along with Nick Chiburis my drawing instructor at Iowa Western Community College. I’d like to thank all my family and friends who first purchased my art which encouraged me and helped to pay for more art supplies.

Last but certainly not least, I’d like to acknowledge my wife Denise. She has patiently endured the challenges of living with an artist and has been supportive, patient (mostly) and understanding as we plow through our adventure – together.
“Some of us have no experience with farmyards and barns. Some of us may have no relationship with the synagogue or place of worship. Wilson invites everyone to come to the place of intersection and work it out.”

– Amanda Mobley Guenther

Excerpt from article Michael Wilson Exhibits at Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art in April 2013 Prairie Fire (volume 7, number 4). Amanda Mobley Guenther is Curator at Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art in David City, Nebraska.
I believe landscapes and buildings have individual atmospheres or spirits. When creating the paintings for this series, much like in the Biblical account of the Nativity, I inject the reverent atmosphere of a chapel into a barn. This elevates a common, rural out-building into a spiritual place and gives these paintings their own special voice.

I've always been reluctant to include barns in my paintings. "Iowa Artist Paints Barns" (yawn.) They can come off as kitschy. Of course, the second I think that, I end up painting a barn series. But, I have to acknowledge that barns are major architectural structures in any rural landscape. So, I approached the subject more intimately, ranging from the atmosphere inside, or outside them at close range. All the while I acknowledging how they affected me on the inside and outside.

When designing these paintings, I considered length & width, but I also considered depth. These paintings can be appreciated at two levels: at the basic level you see barns painted in a traditional representational style. A clue, either a title or an object, leads the viewer to a deeper level of understanding.

The Vulgate is a Latin translation of the Bible and Latin was the primary language of the medieval church. Using Latin in the titles helps me keep that initial flash of emotion I felt when creating the first painting. The also serve as a clue into my thought process. I must admit, at times, it also adds a tongue-in-cheek contrast that I find entertaining.

I enjoy contrasts: barns as chapels, secular as spiritual and darks & lights. In order to heighten the effect, I isolated the space from the landscape. Even the darkest interiors have holes and cracks, and the larger openings offer the only touch of color in the de-saturated palette. These openings serve as metaphoric Hebrew shekinah (the majestic presence of God.)

BARNs AND CHAPELS

My earliest memory is sitting in a church pew sketching characters from my Sunday School lesson. One day of the week, for one hour, my sister and I enjoyed old people and an endless supply of paper to draw on in an atmosphere that was different than any other of the places we were forced to endure the other hours of our week. Vaulted ceilings; echoing voices; dramatic organ music and stained glass wasn’t just a colored drawing – but a drawing that glowed. It not only glowed, but beamed it’s colored prisms onto everything in its solar powered path. I remember watching this light move like a laser, creeping up the pews and onto people, turning them into otherworldly colors.

On Sunday afternoon, Dad would take us to his "home place", a Century Farm his Great Grandmother purchased. We would explore the barns and corn cribs with the same vaulted ceilings; echoing voices and beams of dramatic lighting. When I was a little older, I would spend a couple weeks in the summer with my Grandparents on that farm. I spent hours exploring inside the different barns alone, experiencing the smells, the sounds, the way the light came through the cracks, just looking and listening. This was the genesis of The Barn, as a Chapel.

The area inside a barn is prime real estate and so no space is wasted, it’s a maze of: grain chutes,
pens, stalls, trap doors and medieval sized latches. Threatening hooks, straps, ropes and pulleys are strategically placed or stored near the site of their specific function. These same tools prompt Helen Hunt’s character in the movie Twister (after running into a barn, hiding from a tornado) to wonder, “Oh my God, who are these people?” Like the church, it was fascinating and seemed otherworldly to me.

When I was around 14 or 15 years old, a couple of friends and I spent the summer working as a corn shelling crew. At that time, an empty corn crib meant our work was done and we were about to be paid. Along with shelling corn and walking beans, helping farmers “throw” hay was also a good summer job for any town kid. Stacking hay inside the barn is a hot, dirty job. Bales loaded from the field are hauled to the barn where they are pitched onto an elevator, which carries them to the top of the barn usually through the large hay door. When the bale falls to the floor of the haymow, it sends a billowing mushroom cloud of dust that makes you scratch your nose and breathe shallow. The dust hangs in the light that cascades from pinholes and cracks in the walls and ceiling. This effect makes these beams of light appear like lasers.

CLOSING

This series of paintings began innocently and unceremoniously. I was taking photos with my digital camera inside a barn to practice setting the aperture in dark interiors. I found that the resulting paintings spoke to me.

Part of an artist’s responsibility, is self education. Why do they choose a particular subject? Why do they care about it? When I was into this series, I began journaling and trying to explore why I liked them so much. I’ve since discovered that all the paintings in my portfolio have a common underlying theme: connect with the spirit of place to discover a sense of place.

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I believe we imprint with the landscape and people of our childhood and my art is irrevocably bound to my region and family heritage. I believe our sense of place (the intimate bond and awareness of where you are) manifests from the spirit of place. That connection is unifying and unique identity.

While I was working on the first set of paintings in this series, I was listening to an interview with the singer Neko Case. I forget the question, but I’ll never forget her beautiful answer:

“I really love the Eiffel tower, but I have popsicle sticks, so I have to make my Eiffel tower out of popsicle sticks – rather than steel, but I’m still gonna make an Eiffel tower.”

I thought to myself, “Yeah, I really love the Sistine Chapel, but I live in Iowa, so I’ll paint barns like they’re the Sistine Chapel.”
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This was the second, perhaps the third painting created in the series. I didn’t yet understand my attraction to the subject and we were just beginning our conversation. I remember the exact moment when I was almost finished with this one, and that I was struck by how the wall reminded me of the Sistine Chapel wall that has Michelangelo’s Last Judgement fresco. That lead to imagining the large beam at the bottom as the metaphoric altar of the chapel and the hay door being symbolic of the harvest of souls at the last judgement.
Viewed through the premise of the barn as a chapel, the pitchforks hanging in a grouping of three invoke the crucifixion (initially, the tines appeared to me as crowns.)

The Latin word furcas is defined as a pitchfork or hayfork, but may also be a pole, stake, or an instrument of punishment. Artists through history have depicted the Devil holding a pitchfork (or a trident) and therefore appropriately here they also symbolize transgression.
This piece caught my interest because of the light shining in through the upper row of windows that lands on the sills. The upper stage of a Cathedral, above the aisle roofs usually pierced by windows, is called the Clerestory.

It makes me smile every time I read the title of this painting simply because of the fact that a hog house would have such a fancy name.
I was attracted to this piece by the cool rolling dust seen only in the piercing light that punches through one of the panes of this barn's filthy "stained glass" windows. The light almost obliterates our view of the window frame and finally rests on the coarse hair of a sow standing directly beneath it.

Sifting the imagery through the barn/chapel premise, we're reminded by the Biblical warning to not throw pearls to pigs.

Margaritas ante porcos
(Pearls before swine)
Oil on Canvas
10 x 30
The red paint on this barn door reminded me of the Exodus in which the lamb’s blood marked the door posts of Israelites homes. Other Passover symbols are the sheep door (from the Gospel of John, “…I am the gate for the sheep”) and the straw on floor (Pharaoh commands the taskmasters, “Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves”). The feed trough represents the Nativity. (The Greek word, translated as manger (Fr.), literally means “feed trough.”), the studs above the feed trough are highlighted to form a cross, symbolizing Christ’s crucifixion, the stone foundation symbolizes “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone…” and the barn swallow’s nest surely contains eggs, and here becomes a reference to Easter eggs.
I isolated this corn scoop to give it greater significance; to symbolize the ornamentation and implements of a Temple or Cathedral (ancient temples used knives, tongs, basins, snuffers, fire-pans, etc. made of gold.)
The barn window paintings are a subset of The Barn, as a Chapel series. After I had a grasp of the premise of the series, I discovered that the windows of the barn, in this particular composition, reminded me of Mark Rothko’s abstract expressionist paintings specifically his “multiforms” of symmetrical rectangular blocks. While Rothko painted in vertical formats, and these are horizontal, their purpose is similar. Rothko used the large-scale designs to overwhelm the viewer, or in Rothko’s words, to make the viewer feel “enveloped within” the painting and invited viewers to position themselves as little as eighteen inches away from the canvas so that they might experience a sense of intimacy, as well as awe, a transcendence of the individual, and a sense of the unknown.1

In my barn window pieces, the recurrent theme is the play between a chapel’s stained glass window and a barn window glass that’s stained.

I enjoyed the previous window so much that I made another “stained glass” window. This painting is unique in that there is another piece in the collection, titled *Sepulchrum Mortuorum (Tomb of the Dead)*, which shows an interior more sinister view of this particular window.
At this point I’m officially obsessed with the play between “stained glass” and “glass that’s stained”, and accept that I’m having fun with the concept.

For whatever reason, the smears on the window in this piece make me think of images of the solar system.
A sister piece to the white washed window in the painting titled *Infectum Vitrum Numerus Duo (Stained Glass #2)*, this piece is darker and felt sinister. I gave it a sinister title taken from the book of Matthew: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean."

I especially like the vintage wavy glass in this piece. If the glass hasn’t been broken and replaced, many vintage barn windows are original and date to the time the barn was built. The glass panes have waves, not because of the settling of the material, but because they were originally hand blown as giant cylinders and then cut & laid out on a table to cool.
An example of enlarging a small subject to give it greater impact. This three-inch tie ring is used to hold horses while they are harnessed for the day's work.

In true fashion of our premise of The Barn, as a Chapel, the tie ring now becomes an ornamental knocker on the door of a medieval Cathedral.
Palpate Me et videte (Handle me and see)
Oil on Canvas
16 x 20

This composition is so closely cropped, much like the barn windows, that it borders on abstraction. Door imagery is frequently used in sacred texts, but the handle on this Dutch door is tightly rendered making it the obvious focal point.

The title is a play on the word “handle”. The resurrected Christ appears to the apostles and tells them, “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.”

NOTE: Once I saw the face in the mechanism of the handle, (the top two screws are the eyes) I couldn’t unsee it.
A Levite is a member of the Hebrew tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi served in the temple. The temple had vessels used for various religious activities including: trumpets, lavers, firepans, snuffers, tongs, basins and shovels.

Levi was also my Grandpa’s name.
This painting depicts grain bin chute. At chore time, you would place a bucket under the chute, slide the mechanism upward and grain would pour out.

Sifting this imagery through The Barn, as a Chapel theme, it symbolizes the “storehouse” or treasury in the Jewish Temple where the tithe was placed to support the temple priests. If this was done faithfully, God promised to “... open the windows of heaven, and pour out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”
The painting features a barn’s Dutch door and latch. The open, unlatched barn door represents “… an open door …” mentioned in Rev. 3:8 that can only be opened by the one who holds the key of David.

The “key of David” that opens and shuts these metaphoric doors is the Christ, symbolized by the red color of the door. At one time in history, Church doors were painted red for symbolic reasons such as: reference to the lambs blood painted on the door posts during the Passover, symbolic of the blood of Christ and the symbolic of the blood of martyrs.
A squint is the hole cut in a wall to allow a view of the high altar from a place where it would not otherwise be possible. In medieval architecture, squints were often a low window in the chancel wall and were frequently protected by either a wooden shutter or iron bars.

These special windows, sometimes known as “leper windows”, were made in an external wall so that lepers and other non-desirables could see the Mass without coming into contact with the general populace.
In the early 20th century, corn cobs were stored for drying and used to start fires in the home’s cook stove and furnace.

Sifted through the theme of The Barn, as a Chapel, the drying cobs waiting for the stove become symbolic of “... the present heavens and earth” which the Bible states, “... are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment.”
This is one of the newer paintings in the series and I notice my work is becoming more abstract and looser. In this piece the light shining through the corn crib cascades into the alley and reminds me of being in church as a child. I used to watch the light, cast from the stained glass windows, move like a sundail shadow (or a laser) along the pews and creep-up on people turning them shades of otherworldly colors.
Throughout the series, there have been paintings don’t have particular symbols or meaning. This one just reminds me of baling hay and, when all the hay is in the barn, the joy of being done (and getting paid!)
In the textile art of rug making, a latch hook is the name of the tool and a technique. In this painting, the barn door’s latch hook “knits” together the door and the door post. Being knit together in love is a term used throughout the Bible to denote Christian fraternity.
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PRIVATE OR PERMANENT COLLECTIONS
As I progressed through the series, I wanted to demonstrate the progression of darkness through the barn’s rafters. I imagined this as Noah’s view from inside the ark.
Edere, Bibere, Labore (To eat, to drink and labor.)
Oil on Canvas
24 x 48

A draft or work horse is a horse bred for labor. There are different breeds, but all share common traits of strength, patience, and a docile temperament.

It was standard practice to rest the animals (and the farmer) after plowing a furrow 1/8 mile long. An eighth of a mile therefore became known as a furrow-long or furlong. 80 furrows was considered a good days work with a walking plow. The area plowed became the standard unit of land area called an acre.

In this painting, the horses rest after a “good days work.” The feed troughs and the rain barrels are symbolic of eating and drinking. All of this represents what the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes has observed as the only good: to eat, to drink and be satisfied in a good day’s work.
Builders added “cross ties” in corn cribs to help the structure bear the great weight of the harvest. The idiom “cross to bear” is defined as an unpleasant situation or responsibility that you must accept because you cannot change it. If someone has a cross to bear, they have a heavy burden of responsibility or a problem that they alone must cope with.

The Latin Vulgate uses the phrase crucem portare in Luke 14:27, “et cum ducerent eum adprehenderunt Simonem quendam Cyrenensem venientem de villa et inposuerunt illi crucem portare post Iesum. The King James Bible translates the verse as: “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”
XII - Numerum Signatorum  (Twelve - number of those who were sealed)

Oil on Canvas

24 x 36

Corn cribs are mazes of light and shadow. With a little imagination, being inside a corn crib can make you feel like you’re behind prison bars. Sifting that imagery through this theme, led me to think of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt.

The twelve rays of light projected onto the floor of the corn crib are symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel that are sealed as recorded in the seventh chapter of the book of Revelation.
This is part of the first group of paintings created in 2012-2013 and the first exterior piece. I had painted a several pieces in the series and started thinking of an exhibit. A gallery full of raw umber paintings of dark interiors would make a rather forboding exhibit, so I considered trying an exterior. Resisting the bucolic farm scene, I stood close to the barn and looked up. Putting the viewer close and intimate and looking up fit with the premise. I did not want a kitchy cerulean blue sky, so I thought to turn the color palette inside out. (Instead of color peeking in through the earth-toned barn interiors, now the color is on the barn and the sky is earth-tone.) This gave the sky a ominous pre-thunderstorm-hue which to me is symbolic of an apocalyptic event.

Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament. It is categorized as Hebrew poetry. It’s opening statement reads, “Vanity of vanities ...all is vanity.” (Vanity is defined as lacking real substance and value.) A play on the words vain and vane, I added a weather vane to the top of the barn. Roosters on weather vanes are historically steeped in meaning. They symbolize watchful vigilance against evil. A papal edict from the 9th century A.D. declared that every church in Christendom must be adorned by a cockerel, a symbol to remind Christians of the Apostle Peter’s betrayal of Christ.

Another definition of a weather vane or “weathercock,” is someone who is very changeable or fickle, who readily adopts the latest fads or opinions.
This is the very first painting I completed in the series. At this point the paintings and I were just starting our conversation. I was simply absorbing the space, and discovering the language we were speaking, and searching to learn what the artwork wanted to say.
A choir loft is an architectural space in a place of worship set aside for the choir. The choir loft may be found in a balcony, at the rear of the main worship area, or at a level higher than the worship area.

Here, a choir of 12 sparrows are perched on a hog house’s rafters and on the bottom half of its Dutch door. They are waiting for their cue from their choir director – the sparrow with outstretched wings.
On the surface, this piece depicts two pitchforks hanging in a barn. In all, the two pitchforks have seven prongs commonly known as tines. The number seven holds plenty of symbolism in many religions, but I enjoy the play between the words tine and time.

In my mind, seven tines turned into seven times. I researched biblical references and stumbled upon a selection that was appropriate in my allegory of The Barn, as a Chapel.

The title of this painting is a quote from the Gospel of Matthew in which Peter (here symbolic of the Church) asks Jesus how often he is to forgive a brother that sins against him, “till seven times?” Peter asks. Jesus answers, “Until seventy times seven.” Therefore, the two pitchforks represent two people and our duty to always forgive one another.
The viewer stands in the alley of a corn crib which, using the premise, becomes the nave of a church. A nave is the central, open space reserved for worshippers. The ear corn is a metaphor for the ears of those who listen, or worshippers.

The words nave and knave are homophones, specifically heterographs (same pronunciation, different meanings.) A knave is defined as a young man of humble birth or position, or a tricky deceitful person. A knave is also slang for the Jack in a deck of playing cards. Giving a nod to the Jack of Hearts of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, I included a carved heart, arrow and lovers names (carved with a “jack knife.”) I chose the names Jack & Diane from singer-songwriter John Mellencamp’s song of the same name. He describes them as “Two American kids growin’ up, in the Heartland.”
ART STATEMENT
I believe we imprint with the landscape of our childhood. Even when removed, we judge all other horizons through our mental and emotional filter of “home.” I paint rural subjects because they speak to me, and I feel a responsibility to translate.

BIOGRAPHY
Wilson was born into a farming family in Persia, Iowa. After majoring in lunch, shop and art classes in High School, Wilson served in the Iowa Army National Guard.

Wilson has worked as a beef packing plant laborer, warehouse laborer, a print shop bindery clerk and a graphic designer. While attending continuing education classes at a local community college, Wilson rediscovered his early love for drawing.

In 2011, Wilson began his career as a full-time artist, working primarily in oils on canvas. His work is representational and regional.

Wilson is an associate member of the American Plains Artists (APA) and associate member of the Oil Painters of America (OPA)

MISSION
To create, illuminate and translate.

Create
I love everything about the process of art making. I love the flash of inspiration, sketching, drawing, squeezing color from tubes onto the palette and the nuances and subtleties of the application of paint. The discipline, the challenge of a lifetime of learning that the trade demands, is intoxicating as it is elusive.

Illuminate
To illuminate literally means to make clear or shine a light on – like a display. I love to see a themed exhibit hanging in a room and people standing in front of the artwork just absorbing it. Illuminate can also mean to enlighten, as with knowledge.

Translate
I love openings and talking about the artwork. I especially love it when someone asks about a specific piece. I enjoy journaling and asking myself why I created it, and translating that to the viewer.

OTHER WORK
Within my portfolio I have three main areas of interest. Along with The Barn, as a Chapel, the other two are:

• Prairie People
• Tallgrass Wildlife

Each of the three areas of interest has a common underlying theme: connect with the spirit of place to discover a sense of place.

I believe we imprint with the landscape and people of our childhood and my art is irrevocably bound to my region and family heritage. I believe our sense of place (the intimate bond and awareness of where you are) manifests from the spirit of place. That connection is our unique identity.