



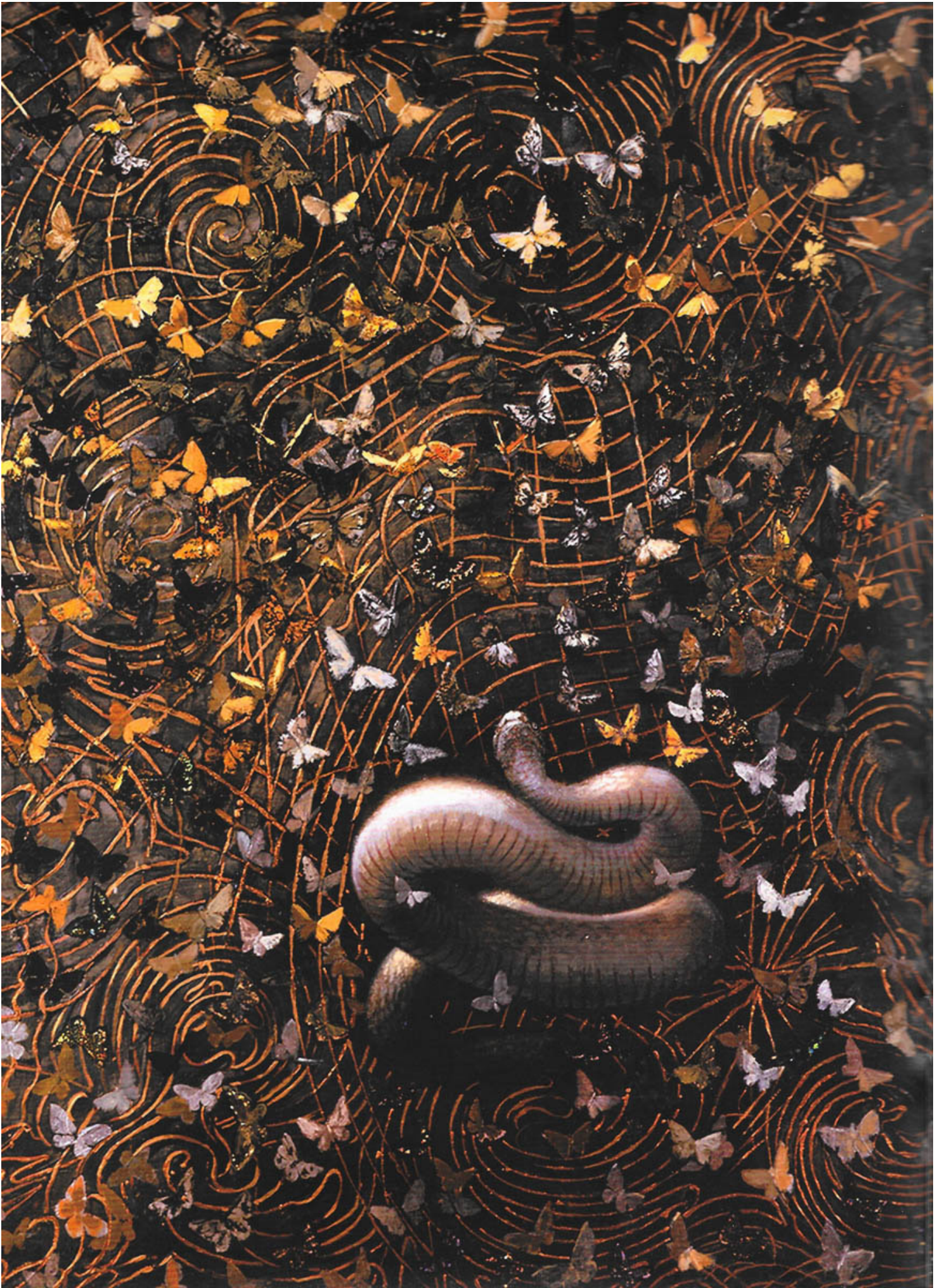
DIVINE  
INSPIRATION

Pope Pius XII's edict about the Virgin Mary — that she resided body and soul in heaven — didn't make much sense to eleven year-old **Domingo Barreres**. "I had a hard time with hearing that," says Barreres (Diploma '64, Fifth Year Certificate '65). "I worried, did she eat? Where did she go shopping for the clothes I always saw her wearing? Did she go to the bathroom? I had all of these questions but I couldn't ask anyone. I found it difficult to believe."

Barreres still questions the rigid Catholicism that shaped his childhood in Spain. These days, however, painting allows him to investigate himself and those early religious themes with his own style of artistic irreverence. "It's not possible to proselytize with my paintings," Barreres says, "but it is possible to provoke."

Museum School alumni express themselves in myriad ways. Sometimes their origins and influences are strongly

spiritual. And, as is the case here, their artwork reflects their ideas about their faith—the rejection of it, the warm embrace, or their changing senses of devotion. Whether it's Barreres' gilt-toned paintings with their "ornamental rhetoric," textiles, collage, performance, or rubbings, their art illuminates beliefs that grow from tradition and ritual, childhood memories of church, synagogue, or mosque, and adulthoods shaped by catastrophic illness and terrorist attacks. →





Egyptian heritage," he says. "Its complexity is based on some of my own experiences."

Abdalla's clay and wood *Tower of Pigeons* draws from a political incident in Egypt in 1906, when British soldiers and local farmers clashed after some soldiers shot pigeons. "The tower is a friendly, humble form built specifically to raise pigeons," Abdalla says of the structures he photographed in Egyptian fields. "It has a religious and spiritual connection to other architecture like the pyramids, obelisks, minarets, and bell towers. It has power because of the mystery that exists in these forms."

Abdalla doesn't sit down with the intention of making a spiritual piece of art. Rather, spirituality infuses his art because of his upbringing and his education. "It is the way I believe," he says. "It is the focal point of everything."

The Buddhist teachings that inspire **Teryl Alden Smith** (Master of Arts in Teaching in Art Education '94) are similar to Abdalla's beliefs in the power of each individual. "*Golden Tara* expresses the energy of compassion that I have received through teachers and the practice of Tara for almost 20 years," Smith says. "*Dakini Dream* refers to the Tibetan word for female skygoer, unborn expanse, fertile possibility, wisdom energy inherent in all things. It is the expression of infinite possibility as our true nature and potential versus being born sinners."

Everyday Smith tries to live Buddhist principles: recognizing the preciousness of being born a human; karma, or the connections between people; and using one's limited time on earth wisely. "I try to express the expansiveness of possibility through color, form, line, and space," she says. "I try to transmit the blessings of energy."

Her artwork grows out of her diagnosis with breast cancer, her mother's own cancer, and her travels to China, India and many others countries where she says she "surrendered to the universe," realizing that all life and experiences are intertwined.

"The way each person is engaged with the arts is based on how each individual relates to the world," Smith says. "Some are driven by the heart or the mind—by intuition or intellect—or by a mixture of all. I find that the information conveyed and the energy inherent in the relationships created by those factors speaks more directly to a viewer than words. Words can have preconceived notions that block new understanding." →



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Being Muslim affects everything about **Ahmed Abdalla** (Master of Fine Arts '97)—his actions, his thoughts, his art. "It stimulates intellect and imagination," he says, "and it inspires me to think about larger issues." His work revolves around invented language and communication,

ambiguity and contradiction. His tools for painting derive from summers spent in *kotab*, or religious school, writing verses of Koran on a metal tablet with a pen and ink.

"When the sheik corrected our writings we would wash the tablet in a nearby canal and then rewrite the lesson," says Abdalla, who grew up in Cairo. "To me, this is a poetic image. Whatever we erase, some evidence will remain. We just add more layers of meaning."

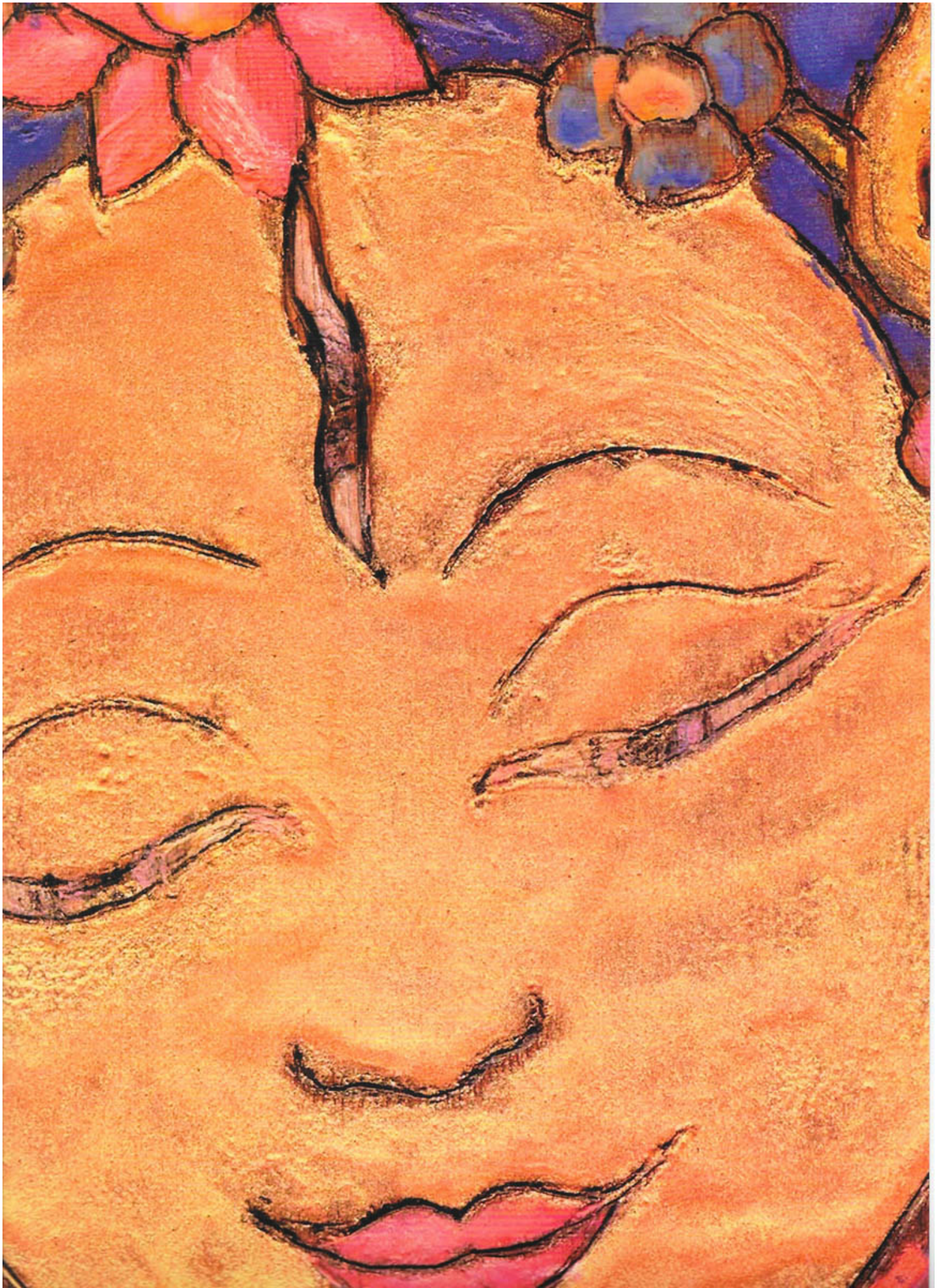
Now Abdalla paints his canvases aquamarine blue to represent the water from that canal, and he uses a calligraphy pen and pigments for ink. "The writing is secret, a sacred documentation, a metaphor for time and a marker of my



TOP: AHMED ABDALLA. *Poetics of Memory #11*, 1996. Mixed media on paper. 96 x 71½ inches. Courtesy DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA.

BOTTOM: TERYL ALDEN SMITH. *Mt. Kailash Dream*, 2002. Encaustic, copper tacks, oilstick on cedar. 9 x 10 inches.

OPPOSITE: TERYL ALDEN SMITH. *Golden Tara (detail)*, 2002. Encaustic and woodburning on oak. 17½ x 22¼ inches.





I believe in the transformational power of ritual. I am interested in making art that affirms life and has a healing intention.”

✦ Catherine Tutter, Bachelor of Fine Arts '84, Diploma '85

For Catherine Tutter (Bachelor of Fine Arts '84, Diploma '85), art is another vehicle for revealing truths. “The arts allow people to engage on a deeply personal and intimate level,” she says.

“With our civilization on a precipitous decline, artists have an opportunity to work with the overwhelming forces of loss and destruction in our world—and use that to fuel and give substance to a powerful counterforce that generates healing and perpetuates life.”

Tutter grew up in an observant Catholic household with religious objects and images in every room, “judiciously placed by [her] mother with a palpable intention.” Like some Catholic girls, she went through a period when she wanted to be in church every day, wearing that frilly doily on her head, dreaming about being a nun.

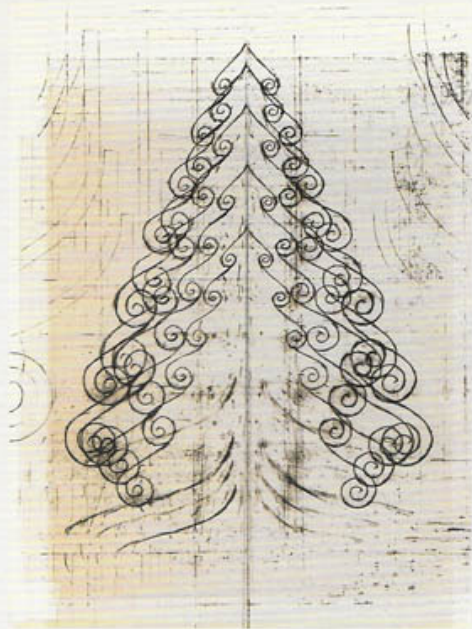
Now she's now part of an interfaith marriage and she, her husband, and daughter attend synagogue. “It's not my tradition, and I do have some feelings of separation, but this is now my community,” says Tutter, associate director of the Artist's Resource Center at the Museum School. “I can relate to the exploration of being devotional and being connected to the sacred.”

Recently, Tutter's rabbi asked her to make a new cloth cover for one of the synagogue's torahs. “I couldn't imagine a higher honor or responsibility,” she says. But she knew she wouldn't do

it alone. “I wanted the words of the congregation to come into contact with the torah,” she says, adding that she'll likely use cyanotype or another vehicle to bring the text to life.

Tutter's earlier work involved the Virgin Mary (an investigation of motherhood and the divine) and Santa Lucia (an exploration of sight). She also makes mixed-media shrines that juxtapose the dichotomy between the sacred and profane. Several of these projects explore sacred space while honoring her family history and memorializing a loved one.

Her more recent works—performance art with large-scale installations—continue to encompass repetitive visual iconography coupled with physical acts of ritual. During a performance last May at Boston's City Hall Plaza, Tutter, Mari Novotny-Jones (Faculty), and Anna Wexler presented *Object/Object*, which explored the cycle of creation and destruction. Using a mold shaped like a white bomb, Tutter spent hours in a meditative, prayer-like state of trance casting human-like shapes out of warm wax. “I believe in the transformational power of ritual,” she says. “I am interested in making art that affirms life and has a healing intention. This is what works for me personally and what feels connected to the way that I was brought up.” →



LEFT: CATHERINE TUTTER, MARI NOVOTNY-JONES, AND ANNA WEXLER, *Object/Object*, 2006. Interactive and mixed-media installation with tent, plaster, wax, metal parts, detritus, conifer sprigs, flowers. Approximately 7 x 6 x 9 feet. Photo: Bob Raymond

TOP: CATHERINE TUTTER, *Tree of Life*, 2006. Working drawing on acetate overlay. 8½ x 11 inches.

BOTTOM: AHMED ABDALLA, *Tower of Pigeons*, 2004. Mixed media. 20 x 60 x 50 inches.



## TWENTY MINUTES, TWICE A DAY

Viewers of David Lynch's (*Attended '64—'65*) *Mulholland Drive*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Eraserhead* have an intimate understanding of imbalance. The unease builds slowly inside, twisting and turning, touching who we are at our core, until we're literally squirming in our seats.

Lynch draws from within to build his art. By practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM) for more than thirty years, the critically acclaimed director has been able to keep his own life from coming too close to the heightened states of madness he presents on the screen.

Lynch laughs at the idea that his TM practice is counterproductive, especially when artists believe they must suffer in order to create art. “Yes, you've got to understand suffering, but if you're really miserable you can't create. [Then] what's the point?” he told *Wholife Times* magazine in August 2005. “All negativity does is cripple you.”

Meditating for twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening, Lynch says, builds consciousness of oneself and the world. Ultimately, through the David Lynch Foundation For Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, Lynch hopes to bring the practice of meditation to children. TM, he says, alleviates school-related stress and helps each child maximize their potential for success—on all levels. Lynch told *Hemispheres* magazine in March 2006 that these pockets of meditation are “peace-meditating groups like factories that pump peace around the world.”

To learn more about Transcendental Meditation, visit [www.davidlynchfoundation.com](http://www.davidlynchfoundation.com).

Notions of awakening and discovery are central themes for **Karen Schiff** (Master of Fine Arts '06). "I think people turn to religion to rekindle in themselves things that are buried or latent, or having to do with mortality," says Schiff, a visiting artist at the Andover Newton Theological Seminary who is Jewish and practices Buddhist meditation. "My artwork doesn't illustrate any of my religions, but it taps into the rhythm or sensibility of being awake, being alive and sensing what surrounds us. My art is about the various circumstances in life that are always buried."

Consider some of the rubbings Schiff did of the metal grates that surround trees planted in the sidewalk. Her finished work reveals a circle or blankness in the middle where a tree would have been, surrounded by spokes or rays. "There's a resonance around the thing that is the source that you can't really see," she says. "It's clear that there's something there but you can never really articulate it."

Similarly, Schiff created a series of paintings made to resemble the spaces newspapers devoted to the obituary for

the late Agnes Martin, a minimalist painter whom Schiff greatly admires. The spaces in Schiff's works are empty. "The suggestion is that as much as you learned about Agnes Martin, you'll never really put your finger on who she was. The artwork shows her spirit. It's the same way people talk about religion. You can't actually define God or say what spirituality is. There's a source, but it's ephemeral or evanescent."

As for defining herself, Schiff laughs then becomes reflective when asked which box she would check to pinpoint her religious identity. "If I could only check one box, I'd check Jewish," she says. But the reality is much more complex. Even the word Buddhist doesn't exactly apply because she aligns herself more closely to a related tradition called *Shambhala*, which rarely appears on a questionnaire. "I resist the tendency of people to put religion into boxes, to categorize and identify them easily," Schiff says. "Whatever energies and forces can be identified as spiritual or divine are, by definition, beyond categorization."

Barreres shares Schiff's disdain of narrow definitions and wholesale truths, though he opts to expose the forced "spectacle" of organized religion through plenty of gold-toned paints and ecclesiastical devices. "I want people to feel a certain discomfort in not knowing exactly what is going on," he says, noting how he sometimes portrays a snake in white, like the Virgin Mary, in the process of elevating itself like an ascension. "The snake is an impostor of a ritualized symbol. But because of the way it is painted, the artwork is saying believe in me, I'm real, despite evidence to the contrary."

Barreres is also fascinated by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. "It is on a pedestal, an object of reverence in museums thanks to epistemological rhetoric," he says. "But in reality it is still a urinal." In his own series of paintings, Barreres' urinals were inspired by the current and previous popes. One of the urinal paintings is blue because Pope Paul was a champion of Mary, the source of Barreres' early days of uncertainty about the church. "The urinal is such a wonderful device to talk about so many things about the papacy," he says. "It's also the perfect vehicle for erasing all possible evidence."

Ironically, Barreres deliberately "erased" another series of paintings he started after the September 11 attacks. "I destroyed them because they were too visual and they didn't have power," he says. "When I painted over parts of them they became less specific and more universal. They were no longer about just 9/11, but what people have done to people in the name of a great spiritual cause."

After September 11, Abdalla says he expected artists to react to and realize the profound importance of spirituality. Instead, he felt disconnected from his own work and critical of the lack of introspection in others. He also began to question some of the people of his faith and culture.

"A lot of people are not using their brains," Abdalla says. "They have so narrow a mind about life, their religion, and what they learned. I feel fortunate in that I know I have to use my mind and that I can see what I believe in clearly. And that what I believe has no conflict with any other people."

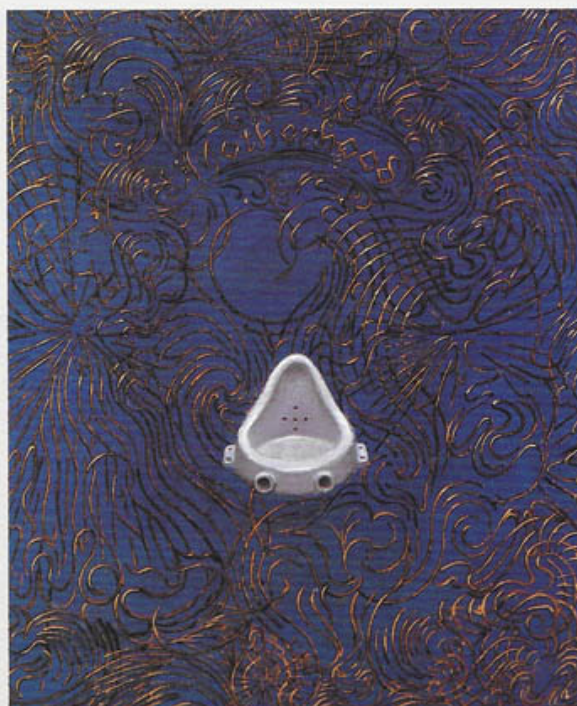
So Abdalla continues to paint what he believes. "The most you can do in this world," he says, "is to be yourself and discover what is so specific about you." ♦

Visit [www.smfa.edu/alumni](http://www.smfa.edu/alumni) for a list of more alumni who address spirituality in their artwork.



My artwork taps into the rhythm or sensibility of being awake, being alive and sensing what surrounds us."

♦ Karen Schiff, Master of Fine Arts '06



RIGHT: DOMINGO BARRERES, *Motherhood*, 2005. Mixed media on wood. 40 x 33½ inches. Courtesy Howard Yezerski Gallery.

TOP OPPOSITE: KAREN SCHIFF, *Grate*, 2005. Ink stick on paper. 42 x 90 inches.

BOTTOM OPPOSITE: KAREN SCHIFF, *Floor* (from the "From Here" exhibition), 2005-2006. Graphite stick on mylar. 14 x 21 feet.