

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST, VIRGINIA MAKSYMOWICZ
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Saint Mark's is currently exhibiting Virginia Maksymowicz's Stations of the Cross, cast sculptural reliefs in a tradition of religious imagery that dates back to the 13th century. Maksymowicz worked with a variety of models, culled from a wide range of ages and ethnicities. She represents the narrative of Christ's passion and death in a way that embodies both the specific and the universal. The work is on display for the season of Lent in the Cathedral Nave. Visual Arts Ministry Leader Vi Lynk interviewed Maksymowicz in advance of the exhibit opening on February 18, 2018.

What led you to create these Stations of the Cross pieces?

In the year 2000, I received a commission from St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Lancaster, PA to design and produce sculptural reliefs of the Stations of the Cross. At the time I received the commission, I was about to begin a new teaching position at Franklin & Marshall College. Since I would be have to be evaluated for tenure (and since a commission for a church, which is a "nonprofessional venue," wouldn't count in an academic context), I asked that I be allowed to cast a second set of the Stations so that I could show them in galleries for review. It is this second set that is on display at St. Mark's. The other set remains at St. Thomas.

This commission gave me the opportunity to apply my own contemporary vision to an artistic form that dates back to the 13th century. It is said that St. Francis of Assisi popularized the devotion after it became too dangerous to make pilgrimages to the holy places in Jerusalem. Since that time, the well-known iconography of the Stations has played a significant role in the canon of western art history, one that has enthralled artists from Jan van Eyck to Damien Hirst.

What sort of conversations did you have with the church as you were making these pieces?

I first made a full-scale series of drawings, showing what the finished panels would look like. I presented them at St. Thomas, and spoke after Mass. There was a lively interchange of ideas and comments, and I made a few minor adjustments.

I often describe the rest of the process as an "artist's dream commission." As I worked on the panels, I invited members of the arts ministry to see them as they emerged from the molds. Hardly anyone took me up on it! They completely trusted me.

Such complete trust on their part made me somewhat nervous. What if, when I delivered the fourteen finished panels, they said, "Oh no! We weren't expecting that!" Thankfully, the community's response was just the opposite. They loved them.

How did your own spirituality influence this work?

As a Roman Catholic, I can attest to my own deep-seated operating assumption that the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul are one and the same. This unity was emphasized throughout



At left and above: a close-up look at several of the stations, which are cast sculptural reliefs, now on display in Saint Mark's Cathedral Nave, flanking the pews on both the north and south walls.



Above right, Maksymowicz leads a group through the stations at the exhibit opening, giving visitors an idea of what it was like to create these pieces. Above and at right, ministry leader Vi Lynk works with a professional to install the stations.

my religious education as a child, and reinforced by the stories, the rituals and the dogma of the Catholic Church. Dualistic beliefs like Manichaeism, which separated the physical and the spiritual, and elevated the latter over the former, are not part of my world view. So I wanted to use "real bodies" in my depiction of the Stations, not merely abstracted representations.

Although I don't normally make "church art," it seemed clear to me that this commission would allow me to work much the same as I do in my "secular art." How is Station XI different from Andy Warhol's *Electric Chair*? The cross was a method of state-sponsored execution in Roman times, the electric chair in ours. This kind of cultural critique is absolutely grounded in my faith's teachings. The religious base of my work is drawn from Jesus's teaching of social justice.

How would you invite viewers to experience this work?

For both aesthetic and conceptual reasons, I felt it imperative to work with a variety of models—a total of eleven—culled from a wide range of ages and ethnicities. I wanted the narrative of Christ's passion and death to be represented in a way that is tensioned between the "specific" and the "universal." The process of life casting captures nearly every detail of the body from which a mold is made, resulting in im-

ages that are highly specific and true to each individual model.

I want viewers to engage very directly with the life-size images, to experience their "reality" in an immediate, but meditative way. I am not interested in recreating the goriness of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

I also hope that the mixture of models and the anonymity implied by the fragmented figures push the imagery toward representation of the human community in its universal aspect—often called in theological terms, "the mystical body of Christ".

I hope that this tension will enable interpretations to change over time and resonate with each new instance of human cruelty. Mary's anguish at encountering her tortured son in Station IV could be the anguish of a mother of a U.S. soldier, of a Syrian child, of a street cop in Brooklyn, of an infant in Darfur, of an urban teenager in Baltimore, of a daughter killed in a London bombing, of a child murdered at his grammar school, and more.

Rev. Bill Eberle, the pastor of St. Thomas as when the Stations were made, said it well: the Stations serve as an ever-present reminder of "how poorly we human beings continue to treat each other."