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Eugene de Leastar in conversation with Cornelius Edmund Sullivan;

The purgatory of Irish artist Eugene de Leastar was living through the worst of Modern Art. He survived the experience, emerging as one who is trying to understand what it means to be a Catholic artist in today's world.



Self Portrait as Saint Luke, oil, 30'' x 40'', 2011.

“As a teenager, being convinced of my own genius, I decided to forego art school because I believed the professors of painting in Ireland had nothing to teach me. I thought that I could paint and they, in the general spirit of abstraction and expressionism of the time, could not. I was wrong of course. The fact was that I could not paint, and neither could they. What I needed was to become an apprentice to a master. Unfortunately the age of apprenticeship was over because the masters were dead. For many years I was washed in the flotsam of modernism. I embraced and rejected the gratuitous contortions of Picasso, the pleasing decorations of Matisse and the faux spirituality of abstraction. I came to reject the notion of the artist as someone who expressed a ‘self’, on which the whole edifice of post religious and post ‘academic’ art is based, from the Romantic Movement onwards. For what is the value of a ‘self’ for its own sake, especially if that ‘self’ is so often of little talent and fatuously ignorant?”



Disrobing of Christ, oil and charcoal on canvas, 48” x 54”, 2001.

The

In *The Disrobing of Christ* de Leastar has used his understanding of the tradition of the figure and of drawing to make a moving work that nonetheless employs some aspects of contemporary painting. He has absorbed from Modern Art a freedom to use non naturalistic color, leaving aside both local color, and color derived from chiascurro in favor of color for emotional saturation.

The characters other than Christ are like the caricatures that one can see in the Renaissance painting *The Mocking of Christ* by Matthias Grunewald or the grotesques in a twentieth century depiction of Nazis in drawings by George Grosz. They are timeless sinister torturers. When Caravaggio paints the executioners of this or that saint they are painted with the same care as the saint himself. They are all painted from models, his friends from the street, and one gets the sense that he cares for them as human beings and that they are real individuals. De Leastar's torturers are not portraits of models but are archetypal and may be what he imagines as embodiments of "man's inhumanity to man".



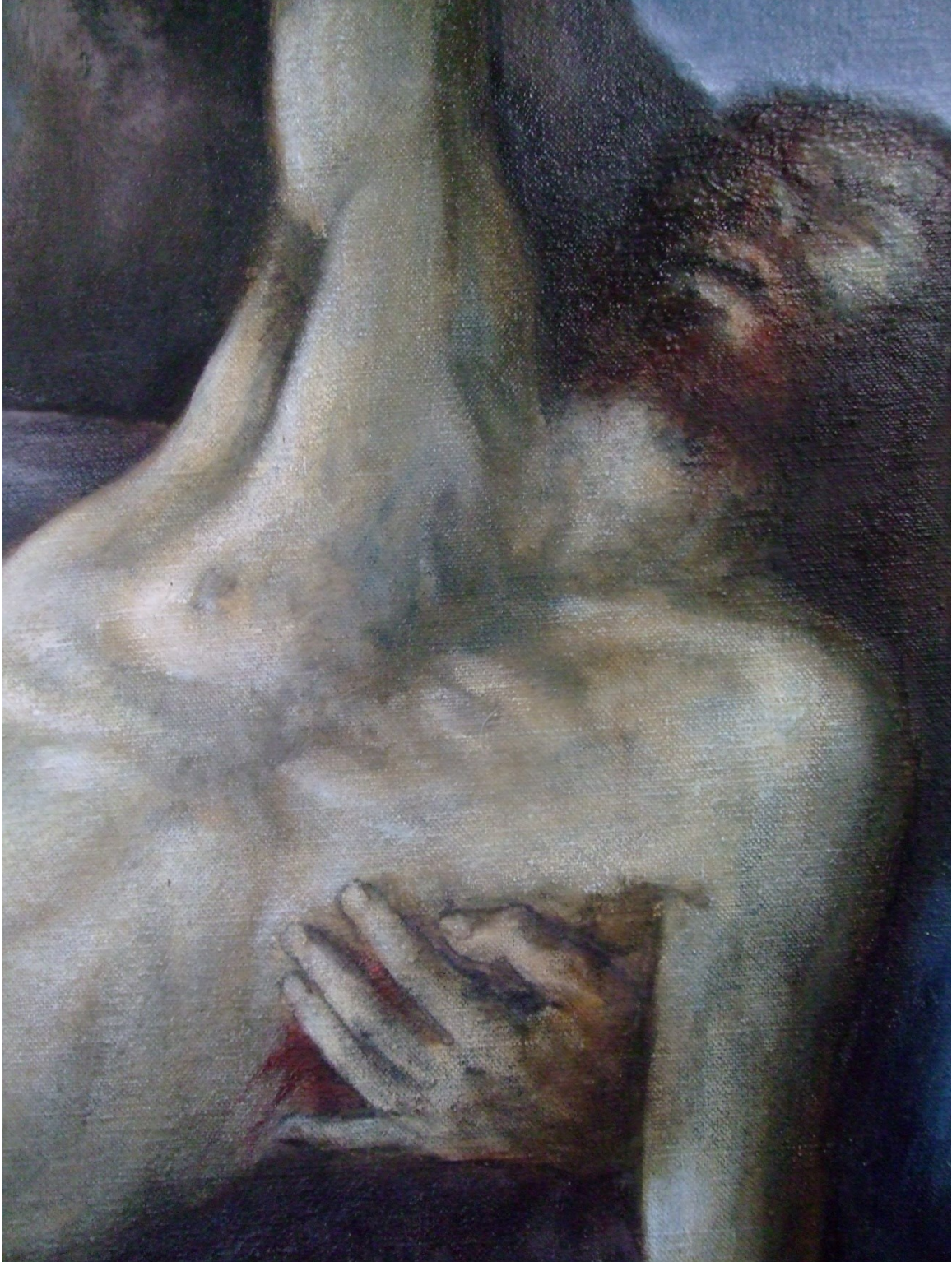
Crucifixion, oil, 24" x 30", 2011.

Nudity in religious subjects does not always work well. But in the *Crucifixion*, where Christ is part of the tree, the nudity becomes intertwined with the content of the work and the symbol is complete.

De Leastar explains the debt that a Catholic artist owes to the life of Tradition: “It was only after visiting Rome and engaging with the masters of the Renaissance that, over the years, I began to gain a foothold on my craft and eventually to have the temerity to call myself a *'painter'*. The art of painting is a kind of dialogue with the masters but this is not merely a relationship with the past, but a living tradition, a continuing conversation of brushstrokes. While T S Eliot imagined tradition as *'monuments forming an ideal order'*, I prefer to see it as an immense forest, a breathing canopy, with great exalted trees reseeding and nourishing new plants. But in the western world and especially in Europe where religion is being rejected through a crisis of belief, art has been corroded from its very centre. As Hilare Belloc noted, *'the decay of a religion involves the decay of the culture corresponding to it'*.”



Gethsemane, oil, 38” x 44”, 2006.



Deposition, detail, 1998.

In his *Deposition* the artist does what the greats do. He does not give us a boring photo detailed image of the face of Jesus, but he does give us beautifully observed realism in the hand which makes it all believable for us. Meanwhile the face of Jesus has all the pathos, all the story, all the truth of Him who gave everything.



Noli me Tangere, oil, 33" x 33", 2011

In *Noli me Tangere* we do not get great detail yet we understand immediately the story because the gestures are so right. The color which is such a personal, emotive, special quality of de Leazar's paintings tells us that this is a transcendent event.

Let's conclude with de Leastar's answer to the conundrum of what it means to be a Catholic artist in the modern world:

How can one confront the empty aesthetic that lies within installation and conceptual art?

The answer lies in the ineffable relationship between beauty and truth in which true art finds its redemptive value.

One day I would hope to be able to number myself among those painters who could be called, most especially when they have been humble workmen, the visual custodians of the Incarnation.

Therefore when the Christian artist occupies himself with the image of Christ, his responsibility is profound, not least in the learning of his craft. Religious painting is not born in the odour of sanctity, but of turpentine.

Cornelius Sullivan is a Marble Sculptor, Painter, Journalist and Art Critic. He has taught at several universities including the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. His work can be seen at www.CorneliusSullivan.com