Oakland artist Leon Kennedy’s iconic painting of Rosa Parks captures the historic legacy of the civil rights movement by depicting the courageous spirit of one woman who took a stand for an entire people.

Kennedy is a visionary folk artist who lives in Oakland now, but he was born in the South in 1945. 10 years before Rosa Parks was arrested for civil disobedience in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, after refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger.

“If kids want to know about their history, they need to know about Rosa Parks,” Kennedy said in a recent interview while discussing his imaginative paintings on display at St. Mary’s Center in Oakland. “I was from the South and she’s like a role model to me and to many people. She took a stand for Black people.”

“Now I take a stand in my artwork,” Kennedy added, explaining that his art is a way of honoring the courage and commitment of Rosa Parks and so many others who took a stand for justice and freedom. One act of resistance can trigger another in a chain reaction, so the initial moment of inspiration is passed from person to person down through the decades. That is why the legacy of the Freedom Movement reverberates to this day, and inspired an artist in Oakland 60 years after Parks took a quiet stand of conscience on a bus in Alabama.

Leon Kennedy’s portrayal of her determined and unconquerable spirit is an artist’s way of passing the legacy of Rosa Parks on to a new generation. “I am learning from people who have gone before me in history and have inspired me,” he said.

Kennedy also painted a huge, mural-sized tribute to African American women from many fields who contributed to American history. The women he profiled are “helping their people get to the Promised Land,” he said. The painting includes actresses Dorothy Dandridge and Cecily Tyson, activists Angela Davis and Rosa Parks, and many others.

“These women dreamed their dreams and their dreams came true,” Kennedy said. His painting was inspired by the book, I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America.

SHOWING THE BEAUTY OF LIFE

In an interview with Street Spirit, Kennedy said that when he begins to paint a person, he tries to show their beauty. “Life is beautiful and my art is a way to show this beauty,” he explained.

When he creates art, he wants to show people something more than they may be able to see in themselves — something beautiful, something positive in their life.

Art critics refer to Kennedy as a “spiritual visionary artist” and a “modern American master.” His paintings are highly original, with imaginative, eye-catching designs, a beautiful, vivid use of color and a dramatic sense of composition. One critic recently wrote that “Kennedy is a painter’s painter” with a “Van Gogh color sensibility” and “beautiful figuration.”

Leon Kennedy’s painting of Rosa Parks depicts the unconquerable spirit of one woman who took a stand.

Above all, Kennedy is a spiritual artist who declares his faith openly and without apology despite the prevalent cynicism of the modern era, and without concession to the secular sophistication of the art world.

“My inspiration and imagination come from God,” he said. “Love is the most important thing in life and the message I show is that God is Love.”

His art is rooted in the deep reservoirs of faith in the African American community, and he explains that his paintings radiate God’s love to others. “My message is the spirit of God and the spirit of the black community,” he said.

Kennedy said he has been especially inspired and influenced by his minister, Rev. Kevin D. Barnes, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Oakland.

‘LIKE GOING TO CHURCH’

Kathy McCarthy, a staff member at St. Mary’s, is so moved by the spiritual message at the heart of Kennedy’s art that she describes it as like going to church.

In an interview, McCarthy said, “I love Leon’s art. It is so spiritual. It is so uplifting. It brings me into the Holy Spirit and the light that we all need to have. And it is so colorful. Because of the intense color and the feeling that you get when you see his art, it’s like going to church.”

Leon Kennedy’s art has been displayed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Collection de l’Art Brut in Switzerland, Lowell Revolving Museum, American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, African American Museum in Dallas, Redux Gallery in Alameda, and many others.

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See Visionary Art of Leon Kennedy page 6
Human Face of Homelessness at Expressions Gallery

by Terry Messman

Expressions Gallery in Berkeley is displaying paintings, photographs and artworks in its “Homelessness” exhibit which runs until April 18. The exhibition is a collaboration between Expressions Gallery and two homeless service providers in the East Bay: St. Mary’s Center and BOSS. When I first learned about this exhibit, I was more than a little skeptical with all the talk of “outsider art” and do-gooder art patrons who want to vicariously experience the urban nightmare of homelessness through the safe vantage point of artists who have created decorative art works out of anguish and poverty. The very idea of a gallery serving the whims of upper-middle-class art patrons by hosting an exhibit that transforms human beings into art objects seemed alienating. I recalled how Richard Lisi, a Berkeley artist who actually had been homeless, once protested a museum’s frou-frou photographic display of homelessness by standing next to the framed photos of suffering human beings with a frame around his face. As art patrons approached, they found that one of the images of homeless people stared right back at them through the frame. Lisi’s protest was that human beings should not be objectified due to poverty, nor reduced to an aesthetic experience. And that exhibit took place in a bona fide museum, not anything as bourgeois or commercial as an art gallery.

Preconceptions Blown Away

Yet, on March 26, several artists from St. Mary’s Center in Oakland — artists I care about — were speaking at a panel on homelessness and art, so I reluctantly entered the doors of Expressions Gallery at 2035 Ashby Avenue in Berkeley to listen to a panel discussion — and very quickly had all my preconceptions and doubts blown away. I was overwhelmed by the deeply moving paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures. Scores of fascinating artworks on the theme of urban poverty covered every wall in every room of the gallery. I hadn’t realized that the entire art gallery had been turned over to a study of homelessness in all its forms, and it was unexpectedly moving to see how many thoughtful artists, both homeless and housed, had devoted so much of their creativity and skill to the bringing of the hidden world of homelessness to light.

In a society that rejects and scorns homeless people and passes cruel laws to drive them out of sight, Expressions Gallery is a gift to a society that has too often allowed stereotypes about homelessness — art that has eroded their will to live, and have gone on to create art that dispels all the stereotypes about homelessness — art that is a gift to a society that has too often ignored and disowned them.

Each artist displayed an image or painting they had created as part of St. Mary’s art program. Rodney Bell shared the story behind his creation of “Homelessness Has Faces,” an artwork that challenges the dehumanizing way we have been treated in a homeless shelter. The shelter erased his basic humanity, and treated him like a faceless non-person. Art enabled him to reclaim his identity.

Ron Clark had two thought-provoking pieces on display. His drawing of a slump-shouldered and depressed-looking homeless man was entitled, “Standing in the Shadows of Love.” Clark used the title of a classic Motown recording by the Four Tops to describe the friendless existence of a man abandoned in the shadows. Clark, a talented artist who lived in St. Mary’s winter shelter in 2013, asked a powerful spiritual question in a politically charged artwork: “How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?”

The tour was a work of art

One other major inspiration was in store for us that afternoon when our large group from St. Mary’s Center was given a tour of all the artworks on display by Rinna Flohr, founder and director of the Expressions Gallery. Her tour was a work of art itself. Flohr was sensitive, compassionate and politically outspoken, absolutely nailing it when she described how many of the artworks are a scathing indictment of the gap between the rich and the poor.

As Flohr led us from painting to drawing to sculpture, it became even more clearly evident that these artworks are a beautiful testament to the creativity and determination of homeless artists, and the caring and depth of feeling that non-homeless artists have expressed about the injustice of poverty and inequality.

Rinna Flohr’s discussion of the art was the best part of the visit. She proved to be highly knowledgeable about the political and social issues of homelessness, and sounded more like a homeless advocate than a gallery director in her outspoken defense of the human rights of the homeless community. Support this art gallery!

She explained that the idea of holding a gallery exhibit of homeless-related art came about when a man walked into Expressions Gallery one day and showed Flohr a drawing he had made on a crumpled piece of paper. The man was homeless and he asked her, “Can you sell this for me so I can have something to eat?” Flohr was moved by this appeal, and was highly impressed by his art. She said, “I looked at the drawing and it was fantastic, it was really good. But I told him I can’t sell

Vacancy

by Joan Clair

How can we be housed and sleep at night when our brothers have no homes? How can we be housed and sleep at night when our sisters sleep on stones? What happened to the home we shared inside God’s heart? Whatever drove that home to vacancy drove us apart.

See Faces of Homelessness page 10


Tiphereth Banks' beautiful artwork shows the deep love between a woman and dog.

"Tiphereth makes the point that pets are very important to homeless people. It's their love of the life. It's the one thing that they feel is loyal to them and is truthful and is really there for them." — Rinna Flohr, Expressions Gallery
The world just got smaller for Melodie. The streets where she can park her RV, which has also been her home for six years, are now fewer and farther between because a year-old ban on oversized vehicles has been expanded to more neighborhoods throughout San Francisco.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency’s board of directors approved the expansion on March 4, 2014. In 2013, a pilot program was enacted prohibiting vehicles longer than 22 feet or higher than seven feet from on-street parking from midnight to 6 a.m.

Ostensibly, the program was intended to include commercial vehicles from residential areas, but SFMTA project manager Andy Thorley admitted that only half of the oversize vehicles could be described as commercial.

Advocates for the Coalition on Homelessness and allied groups said the measure would drive away people who live in their RVs or vans, or risk citations and impoundment.

The ban would add 61 new locations, covering about 10 miles of street space, and it would take effect once “no parking” signs are posted. Aides from Supervisors Katy Tang and London Breed’s offices spoke before the board endorsing the plan. However, those from Jane Kim and David Campos’ offices — opponents of the initial ban’s absence, even after contact by the Coalition on Homelessness.

Melodie, who is 55 and goes by just one name, spoke out against the ban’s initial phase — and its consequent penalization. “We can’t get rest and we are perpetually stressed,” she said. “This enforcement feels like terrorism, and I haven’t done anything wrong.” She added that people living in their vehicles do not have the luxury of getting their lives in order in time to keep in compliance with the law.

Melodie recalled that officers last year did not even wait before the initial ban took effect, demanding that she move her RV. Also, she said the tires on her camper were sabotaged by officers, while she was inside.

“Everything depends on the humanity of the police and meter maids. Because we have no rights, everything can be taken from us.”

.advanced change in the provi

d to clients faster as a result. Last year, the system went live, 128 reservations were assigned they are already in CHANGES and can park their RV, which has also been their home for six years, are now fewer and farther between because a year-old ban on oversize vehicles has been expanded to more neighborhoods throughout San Francisco.

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Melodie recalled that officers last year did not even wait before the initial ban took effect, demanding that she move her RV. Also, she said the tires on her camper were sabotaged by officers, while she was inside.

“In my mind, this is displacement,” he said. “It’s just not getting to the root of the problem, and the problem is people living in their vehicles, and they’re being criminalized for it.”

The city is also seeing more folks making homes of their rides. According to last year’s homelessness survey, 13 percent of people without housing, or about 120 people, reported sleeping in their cars, trucks, vans and campers. That represented a jump from 2011, when 3 percent — some 30 people — said they camped in their vehicles. The figures could actually be higher than the city’s estimates because the biennial tally is regarded as an under-count, according to the homeless advocacy community.

Vehicularly housed people risk their wheeled homes being confiscated if unpaid citations pile up. Their vehicles are often the last line of support before living on the streets or in shelters, and Melodie fears enforcement will put car dwellers on the fast track to homelessness.

“There is a frightening thoroughness and deliberateness that terrifies me,” she said. “Everything depends on the humanity of the police and meter maids. Because we have no rights, everything can be taken from us.”

Homeless people may use the 311 telephone system to reserve a bed for up to 90 days, using a unique identifying number to determine their spot on a waiting list.

A long-awaited change in the provision of shelter services in San Francisco started taking place recently so homeless people won’t have to wait in line to use them. After a year and a half of meetings between city officials, service providers and homeless advocates on how to reform the emergency shelter system, the San Francisco Human Services Agency unveiled the centerpiece of their collective efforts.

Homeless people may use the 311 telephone system to reserve a bed for up to 90 days, using a unique identifying number to determine their spot on a waiting list. Originally, during a series of shelter access workgroup meetings, stakeholders agreed that reservation holders shouldn’t be shut out of the waitlist because they might need more than reservation’s allotted 120 days — 90 plus an automatic 30-day extension — to secure housing.

Community members were concerned this would force people out of shelter for extended periods of time between each stay, causing further destabilization. City officials had originally said it is not fair for a newly homeless person to be behind someone already in shelter on the list.

“We understand there is an issue of equity accessing 90-day reservations, but we feel going through the process once is equalizer enough,” Friedenbach wrote.

Her point was that if people could get on wait list again while in shelter, it would mean everyone would have a longer wait to get in initially, but once they were in, would be able to repeat stays if needed.

The Coalition also suggested speeding the process by dedicating an option on 311 to shelter reservations. Prompts on the system ask users to press 1 for Muni service and 2 for all other services, which range from licenses for pets to graffiti removal to sidewalk maintenance.

Reservation centers now have phone lines directly connected to the 311 system and post the assigned ID numbers online at sf311.org/waitlist.

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How Change Happens: The Immigration Uprising

“When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role, which is to push and challenge the politicians, not to fall meekly behind them.” — Howard Zinn

by David Bacon

Two weeks ago, hundreds of people inside the Tucson Detention Center launched a hunger strike against its private operator, Geo Corporation, demanding better conditions and a moratorium on deportations. Activists, who had held vigils outside the center for years, now gather every day to support those inside.

A week later, the strike spread to another Geo facility in Texas. According to Maru Mora Villapando of Latino Advocacy in Tucson, in both locations the company has isolated the strikers and, in Tucson, threatened to force-feed them.

This is only the most dramatic action of a wave of activity around the country, in which community and labor activists, and now deportees themselves, have refused to quietly endure increased immigration enforcement.

They are mostly young, deriving much of their inspiration from the Dreamers who forced a immigration act two years ago to begin providing legal status to some of those who would otherwise be deported. These activists refuse to wait for Congress to act on its immigration reform proposals, and in fact many reject them as fatally compromised. Instead, they’re organizing actions on the ground to win rights and justice.

In Tucson, San Francisco, Phoenix, Chicago and other cities, people sat down in front of ICE buses and vans, and chained themselves to vehicles, to block deportations.

In Tucson, they stopped the Operation Streamline anti-immigrant court, which every day sentences dozens of young border crossers, brought before a judge in chains, to months in prison.

Supervisors in Los Angeles and San Francisco passed resolutions demanding a moratorium on the huge wave of deportations — two million people in five years. The San Francisco resolution also demanded an end to the tens of thousands of immigration-related firings.

Jhun, a young immigrant whose deportation was deferred in the White House’s executive action two years ago, challenged President Obama at a West Coast fundraiser, telling him, “You have the power to stop deportations.”

In Burlington, Washington, immigrant indigenous farm workers from the Northwest went on strike repeatedly last year for labor rights, better pay, and to stop a grower from using the H2A guest worker program to replace them.

In Jackson, Mississippi, immigrant rights activists helped elect a radical Congresswoman who has people in her office five days a week, and have stopped the deportations of dozens of people in her district.

The Comprehensive Immigration Reform strategy has always been based on a dangerous trade-off. Immigrant communities are promised some kind of legalization, which gets more and more limited with every proposal. In the last bills, S 744 and HR 15, possibly half the undocumented population would fail to meet all the requirements in the tortuous and lengthy legalization process, or simply refuse to come forward.

In exchange for this, communities and unions must agree to increased enforce- ment — escalating militarization of the border and greater repression in work- places — and expansion of guest worker programs.

Employers see immigration policy as a way to satisfy their desires for workers at the lowest possible wages, with the fewest possible rights. Whether they’re looking for farm workers, construction workers or high tech workers, their objective is to ensure that wages go down as workers compete for increasingly insecure jobs.

This CIR strategy, therefore, trades immigrants’ civil and labor rights, includ- ing those of the bureaucrats employers want for the legalization of some of the undocumented. Leaving aside its morality, even as a practical strategy it’s proven to be unsuccess- ful. For the third time — 2006, 2009, and now 2013-4 — the tradeoff tactic has been unable to deliver progressive change.

Punitive immigration enforcement, and more guest workers and a new free trade agreement are no solution to the problems facing immigrants and working people. It is long past time to move away from the Comprehensive Immigration Reform approach.

The activists who are organizing widespread protest actions are fighting the impact of anti-immigrant policies, while at the same time they point to deeper and better solutions. When people stand in front of the buses, or go on hunger strikes to protest firings and deportations, they are calling for something fundamental — the right to live as equals in this country, full participants with rights.

A powerful, principled movement, based on the efforts taking place on the ground, cannot only challenge existing policies, but can win a new and better bill.

This is the lesson of the civil rights movement. That movement sought more than legislation, although it eventually produced two of the country’s most important laws — the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts.

But it won those laws by organizing people for change where they lived — in their communities and workplaces — and because it fought for equality on the ground. It resisted the pressure to compro- mise for anything less, and grew so large and strong it forced Congress to pass leg- islation that embodied its demands.

Despite pressure from Washington to line up behind the CIR bills, many groups have advocated alternatives, including the American Friends Service Committee, the Dignity Campaign, the Hermandad Mexicana Latinoamericana and many local unions and labor councils.

There is growing agreement among them that in order to halt the deportations and detention quotas, end employer sanc- tions and workplace enforcement pro- grams, and protect family-based migration from the creeping loss of laws and labor schemes, we have to change the way we think about immigration reform.

An alternative based on rights would offer permanent residence status quickly to all the undocumented, with a clear path to citizenship for those who want to exercise political rights. It would increase the number of family visas while ending guest worker programs — the humanistic vision of the 1965 immigration act that passed at the height of the civil rights movement.

It would end mass deportations and hugely, privately run detention centers, and enforce labor rights instead of firing workers because they don’t have papers.

It would end the militarization of the bor- der and restore civil rights in border com- munities and the friendship with those on the other side. And it would stop new trade agreements and renegotiate old ones, like NAFTA, to prevent them from causing poverty and dislocation.

Figuring out the alternative isn’t really the hard part. It’s building a movement strong enough to force Congress and the administration to enact it. But this is pos- sible, as our own history tells us.

Historian Howard Zinn warned: “When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role, which is to push and challenge the politicians, not to fall meekly behind them.”

Zinn believed people have the power to win radical demands. “If there is going to be change, real change,” he said, “it will have to work its way from the bottom up, from the people themselves. That’s how change happens.”

For more information on these issues, see the following books by David Bacon:


Illegal People — How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants (Beacon Press).

Immigrants, workers, union members, people of faith and community activists demonstrate in front of the Mi Pueblo market in East Palo Alto, California, calling for a moratorium on deportations and on the firing of undocumented workers because of their immigration status.
Corporate Takeover of Berkeley’s Public Housing

by Lynda Carson

A ccording to the Berkeley Housing Authority (BHA), a notice was sent on February 11, 2014, to all of Berkeley’s public housing residents advising them of the transfer of ownership of all of its public housing units to the Related Company, owned by billionaires Jorge M. Perez and Stephen M. Ross. Seemingly, this effectively concluded the BHA’s project to privatize and dispose of Berkeley’s 75 public housing townhouses.

However, the deal to privatize public housing in Berkeley became a lot more complicated as of March 17, 2014, when Preet Bharara, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, filed a civil rights lawsuit in federal court against the Related Companies, Inc., for engaging in a pattern and practice of developing rental apartments that are inaccessible to persons with disabilities in New York City, and elsewhere.

U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara said, “We will not allow developers and architects who deprive people with disabilities of accessible housing to evade the consequences of their failure to comply with clear, long-standing federal civil rights laws. When developers demonstrate an unwillingness to design and construct accessible housing in accordance with federal law, this Office will not hesitate to use its enforcement tools to compel the developers to make both their present and future constructions accessible.

“To ensure that RELATED’s current and future residential housing developments are accessible to people with disabilities and to redress its history of non-compliance with the Fair Housing Act, the United States seeks a court order enjoining RELATED from designing and constructing multi-family housing, such as 15 Hudson Yards, without the accessibility features required by federal law and requiring RELATED to retrofit the inaccessible conditions at all the rental properties it has developed to make them accessible. The United States also seeks damages for persons harmed by RELATED’s unlawful practices, and a civil penalty to vindicate the public interest.”

When developers demonstrate an unwillingness to design and construct accessible housing in accordance with federal law, this Office will not hesitate to use its enforcement tools to compel the developers to make both their present and future constructions accessible.

“The Committee’s Concluding Observations welcomed the positive steps taken by the federal and some state and local authorities to address criminalization as a human rights violation, but noted concern that the practices remain in place. It called on the U.S. government to ‘engage with state and local authorities to: (a) abolish criminalization of homelessness and policies at state and local levels; (b) ensure close cooperation between all relevant stakeholders including social, health, law enforcement and housing professionals at all levels to allow synergetic efforts to find solutions for the homeless in accordance with human rights standards; and (c) offer incentives for decriminalization and safe housing solutions, including by providing continued financial support to local authorities implementing alternatives to criminalization and withdrawing funding for local authorities criminalizing the homeless.’

The February 11, 2014, notice sent to some of Berkeley’s public housing tenants from the BHA tells them that their 75 public housing units have been sold to the new ownership entity, Berkley 75, LP, effective February 14, 2014.

Additionally, the notice tells the tenants that Berkley 75, LP, will be their new landlord, and they no longer have any involvement in their tenancy. These tenants were advised that, beginning on February 14 and continuing through the end of the rehabilitation of their housing units, they can use Section 8 vouchers to move if they decide to do so.

The notice did not list a phone number or address telling tenants how they can contact the new owners of their privatized housing units.

Out-of-state billionaires Jorge M. Perez and Stephen M. Ross of The Related Companies took control of Berkeley’s public housing units on February 14, in a deal that edged out local nonprofit housing developers. Many of Berkeley’s low-income tenants are homeless as a result of the sell-off of Berkeley’s public housing units that originally were supposed to remain as public housing units in perpetuity, when they were built with tax-payer funding.

Former public housing tenant Terry Pete said, “I was pressured out of my public housing around here and now I live in Berkeley’s public housing for much of my life. I was pressured out of my housing and have been homeless now. I had to move in with some of my relatives to avoid living on the streets. I was not given notice of what was going to happen because I don’t have a phone. I was finally able to move into a motel, but I worry about how I’m going to pay the rent there.”

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U.N. Human Rights Committee Calls Criminalization of Homelessness in the U.S. ‘Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading’

A homeless veteran died in jail after being arrested for seeking shelter from sub-freezing temperatures.

by Selam Abera, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty

Geneva, Switzerland — The U.N. Human Rights Committee in Geneva has condemned the criminalization of homelessness in the U.S. as a “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment” that violates international human rights treaty obligations, and called upon the U.S. government to take corrective action.

The Committee’s statement is part of its Concluding Observations, following a two-day review of U.S. government compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a treaty ratified in 1992.

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), which had submitted a report to the Committee as part of the review process, applauded the Committee’s findings.

“Criminally punishing people simply for having no legal place to be is cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment to which homeless people across the country are subjected every day,” said Maria Foscarinis, NLCHP executive director.

The NLCHP regularly issues reports on the criminalization of homelessness and litigation to challenge the practice. “We welcome the Committee’s Concluding Observations and call on our government to take swift action to solve homelessness with homes, not jails and prisons.”

NLCHP noted that the Committee’s Observations follows last week’s reports of the death of Jerome Murdough, a homeless veteran, in an overheated prison cell, following his arrest for trespassing after seeking shelter in an enclosed stairwell of a New York City public housing building during a week of sub-freezing temperatures.

“Jerome Murdough never should have been in jail in the first place,” said Eric Tars, Director of Human Rights and Children’s Rights Programs at NLCHP.

“Despite the recession, our country is still the wealthiest country in the world, and we have the resources to ensure that everyone has a safe place to live. Criminalization is a barbaric approach to homelessness that should be rejected.”

“[It] is just a policy that can be without shelter in a country, and then be treated as criminals for being without shelter,” said Sir Nigel Shadbolt, President of the U.N. Human Rights Committee, in his closing statement on the U.S. review.

“The idea of criminalizing people who don’t have shelter is something that I think many of my colleagues might find as difficult as I do to even begin to comprehend.”

The Committee’s Concluding Observations welcomed the positive steps taken by the federal and some state and local authorities to address criminalization as a human rights violation, but noted concern that the practices remain in place.

It called on the U.S. government to “engage with state and local authorities to: (a) abolish criminalization of homelessness and policies at state and local levels; (b) ensure close cooperation between all relevant stakeholders including social, health, law enforcement and housing professionals at all levels to allow synergetic efforts to find solutions for the homeless in accordance with human rights standards; and (c) offer incentives for decriminalization and safe housing solutions, including by providing continued financial support to local authorities implementing alternatives to criminalization and withdrawing funding for local authorities criminalizing the homeless.”
Art by Leon Kennedy

**Visionary Art of Leon Kennedy**

“What I’ve seen him focus on lately is his understanding of ‘Love One Another.’ It’s very important for Leon to show through his art that people need each other.” — Susan Werner

At St. Mary’s, where he is part of a community that appreciates his art. One of his works, “Fellowship With One Another,” is an iconic image of communion with 15 people gathered around a table, sharing a meal together. Kennedy has painted their table fellowship in the form of a circle mandala, a symbol of unity in community.

**THE BEAUTY OF FACES**

Community is a central part of Kennedy’s vision of life, as shown in his painting, “Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.” Kennedy explains that his art stems from his love for humanity, and he especially loves to paint the faces of the people that matter most to him, his close friends and family and neighbors. “I love to see a picture of the beauty of old faces, young faces,” he said. “All colors, everyone has their own beauty. Everyone has character, and everyone goes through something.”

Susan Werner has seen the artist’s growing focus on creating art that expresses love for one another. “Leon’s always been using real life and real people and our connection to one another as his theme,” Werner said. “Originally, some of the images were very focused on that direct connection with God and praising God and worshipping together. What I’ve seen him focus on lately is his understanding of ‘Love One Another.’ So now there’s a lot more images about love and relationships between people. It’s very important for Leon to show through his art that people need each other.”

At first glance, Kennedy’s painting, “Love Thy Neighbor,” is a fairly straightforward portrait of the faces of his friends, his Oakland neighbors, and his community members at St. Mary’s Center. A second look reveals something startling and surreal and even disorienting. In the dreamlike perspective of Kennedy’s painting, the laws of time and space — and even mortality — are suspended, so his real-life neighbors co-exist simultaneously with long-departed elders and historical figures such as Nelson Mandela. The artist’s present-day friends at St. Mary’s Center are magically juxtaposed with Dr. Martin Luther King — who died 46 years ago — and with Kennedy’s own mother, Ella Mae Kennedy — dearly loved but no longer among the living.

**The Art of Resurrection**

It is a stunning effect, the casual, matter-of-fact way in which Kennedy’s living friends are portrayed right next to long-gone elders and assassinated civil rights leaders — and no one seems at all surprised by the miracle of resurrection in their midst. In Leon’s vision, even death does not shatter the bonds of love and community. It’s nothing less than an announcement of the dreamlike perspective of Kennedy’s painting, the laws of time and space — and even mortality — are suspended, so his real-life neighbors co-exist simultaneously with long-departed elders and historical figures such as Nelson Mandela. The artist’s present-day friends at St. Mary’s Center are magically juxtaposed with Dr. Martin Luther King — who died 46 years ago — and with Kennedy’s own mother, Ella Mae Kennedy — dearly loved but no longer among the living.

Kennedy said, “We all are family. We connect to each other. My work is based on community and family, and I love doing the faces and showing the heart and love. The heart of the community — you call it love. I have God’s love and God’s spirit and passion for people. Each person is an expression of God within. Each one is blessed in different ways.”

**The Blessing of Beauty**

Kennedy’s art has been especially important in giving the blessing of beauty and hope to many of the homeless members of St. Mary’s community who have endured a great deal of personal hardships and suffering while living on the street. Kennedy’s art tells them that they are not alone in their pain and sorrow.

Susan Werner, art facilitator at St. Mary’s Center, has worked with Leon Kennedy for several years, and has seen how his artistry constantly grow and flourish. “Leon is a humble, soft-spoken man who lives passionately and purposefully as an artist,” Werner said. “When he shows his art, he speaks of God’s love for all people and the blessing of fellowship.” Kennedy has indeed found fellowship with his art in welcoming people “who come to St. Mary’s and our connection to one another as his theme,” Werner said. “Originally, some of the images were very focused on that direct connection with God and praising God and worshipping together. What I’ve seen him focus on lately is his understanding of ‘Love One Another.’ So now there’s a lot more images about love and relationships between people. It’s very important for Leon to show through his art that people need each other.”

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Mary’s Center impacted by harsh circumstances,” according to McCarthy. It enables people who have endured the hostility and dangers of the streets to “see the beauty, light and presence of something greater than all of us,” she said.

**Serving One Another**

It is profoundly important for Leon Kennedy that his art serves the community. His greatest mission as an artist is to express the love for one another that is at the very heart of all religion.

“The main idea of my art is concern for people, encouraging someone else,” he said. “I love when someone loves the work, and feels touched. We’re here to serve and love and encourage one another. When I get a vision, I hope it helps someone.”

Living on the streets of Oakland can be difficult and frightening. Many are driven to despair by the constant hardships and cruelty they face. Many feel abandoned by everyone, and give up on the hope of ever again finding love and a better life.

Kennedy sees his art as an attempt to bring love and faith to those who feel broken and lost. He constantly works to create art that may give new hope to those living only a step or two away from despair and poverty.

He has been greatly influenced by his minister, Pastor Kevin Barnes. “I learn so much listening to my pastor,” Kennedy said. “He encourages people to make a difference in other people’s lives. He says to share one’s talents to help someone. He and I would agree we’re here to make the world a better place to live.”

**His Art Is For Everyone**

Leon’s art is meant to encourage homeless people forced to live on the streets. His art is for African Americans who have overcome oppression and poverty, and have found lasting hope in their community’s historic struggle for justice. His art is for everyone.

“My work deals with the endless struggle and the Black man’s fight to be free,” he said. “Today, my work is more spiritual than political. It conveys love and unity. I try to reach the truth and light that is within each of us.”

Leon strongly emphasizes that his vision of community is inclusive. His artwork, “Love Thy Neighbor,” portrays the multiracial diversity of Oakland. His African American family and friends, his white friends and his Chinese neighbor from down the block are all joined together as one on the canvas of Kennedy’s visionary imagination.

“Every day I know what I am going to do,” Kennedy said. “I’m going to inspire somebody. I have a positive attitude. Love is at the center. My ideas come from God. I paint to bring people closer to God and doing his will. All my art is from God. I go within, and the gift comes from God. I am a servant of God and hope to be a blessing for whomever I contact.”

**Finding His Calling**

“As a child I knew that art was my vocation,” Kennedy said. He was born in 1945 in Houston, Texas, and moved to the Bay Area in 1965. “I paint memories of my inner-city life in Houston as a youth and of urban scenes in Oakland where I currently live.”

The budding young artist began by painting huge, mural-sized scenes from his childhood memories of life on the streets in the poor part of Houston. The self-taught artist next began painting scenes he observed around him in Oakland.

His art often reveals his spirituality and his gratitude for his blessings. “My message,” he said, “is the spirit of God and the spirit of the black community.”

“My work is an affirmation of faith, love and charity in my life,” he said. “That is what we need most in our community. Love is most important in life and the message I show is that God is Love.”

In Oakland, the folk artist began painting on cloth, but he soon ran out of canvas, so he started painting on bed sheets and other found materials.

It seems fitting that he often finds his “canvases” on the street. “My art studio is the street,” Kennedy explained. “I paint on bed sheets that I hang on wooden fences and building walls.”

Today, Kennedy uses a variety of...
Bullying the Down and Out Is a Deeply Rooted Impulse
by Jack Bragen

As a published writer, people might assume that I have an attorney. This is not so. Writing doesn’t pay very much, and because of this, my wife and I need to collect disability insurance and SS. If I could work a nine-to-five job, I would be doing just that. However, I don’t qualify for much, and most of the jobs for which I do qualify are precluded by my lowliness and lack of stamina, caused by several decades of being on heavy medication.

The money provided on SOS doesn’t go as far as it once did. For one thing, my wife and I have had a hundred dollars each for being married. Second, the prices of basic necessities have skyrocketed. Third, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, when in office, cut our SSI benefits. Thus, my wife and I recently decided to seek free food from a church, which is something we used to do but had not needed to do in a while. We were pleasantly surprised. The volunteers giving out food were very kind in attitude and action.

We got two loaves of bread, a bagful of fresh fruits and vegetables, a jar of peanut butter, a box of cereal, a box of dry pasta and canned food. They also gave us a voucher for more food at Safeway. We will be allowed to go back to the church for food every week. When my wife and I drive through downtown Walnut Creek while going to an appointment, we see the meritment of the affluent, who can afford to go out to some very expensive restaurants. Thus, we see both ends of the spectrum. I am more comfortable with those at the bottom, as they are unassuming and not narcissistic.

Poor people seem to understand what it is to suffer. This fact tends to make some one a lot less arrogant. I was once an arrogant person, and reaped misfortune because of this. I have finally learned that people’s good will is a valuable commodity.

People in our society too easily judge and vilify others, and often are cruelly unfair when someone is identified as a target for people’s moral scorn. Everybody joins in and there is a collective throwing of stones which occurs on many levels. How often are people not truly guilty of a crime, when the public has made up its mind that such a person is evil incarnate? The bullying impulse is deeply ingrained, and will reveal itself when people believe it is socially acceptable to hate because others are participating. Yet, this doesn’t make it acceptable to attack and demean our fellow human beings.

When someone is homeless or down and out, they become a target for many people’s abuse, partly because people believe that there will be no retribution or punishment, and perhaps because the individual is often too helpless to fight back. Bullying in society often is directed at people who have suffered misfortune.

Some policemen, who are paid with people’s tax dollars to “protect and serve,” will gang up on a homeless person. I have seen two police officers approaching an apparently homeless and frail-looking man, as they were getting ready to use a pain-infllicting hold on the man.

In what we now consider to be the Dark Ages, people would have flocked to the arena to watch a form of entertainment. There is substance to the biblical passage in which Jesus said that only he who is without sin should cast the first stone. People ought to focus on their own rights and wrongs first, before calling another person immoral.
C
old snap! Jimmy Lee was wrapped tightly in his blankets near Mission Bay Library. Suddenly, strong hands begin shaking him. "You OK?" the voice asks.

Jimmy Lee looks into the face of a big SFPPD cop and gives an angelic smile, then two burly men come to the right of his cruiser, probably to check up on other poor souls freezing their asses off in one of America’s premier tourist meccas.

Jimmy Lee closes his eyes, then coughs and pulls out a lozenge and swallowing.

It’s dawn. His box of blueberry muffins lays in crumbs before him. "Damn, wish Harry hadn’t lost his place." Eight days a month, Jimmy Lee was good to sleep in Harry’s SRO hotel room.

According to the rules of the Tenderloin residential hotel, a resident could have a guest sleep over eight nights a month. Jimmy had kept Harry hanging by cleaning up the enormous clutter in his room, but Harry paid no mind to him, nor the management. Now he had paid the price and had disappeared.

They had met years ago while cooking in a downtown greasy spoon, six months after Jimmy Lee was discharged from the Air Force for a nervous breakdown after serving a year. Authoritarian figures made him unbearably tense and confused.

Over the years of their friendship with Texas-bred Stefa berated him: "You just couldn’t mea-
sure up. You were always a mama’s boy."

Jimmy Lee had wanted to knock his father unconscious and run off to a park and bawl his eyes out. He so much missed his Hong Kong-born, gentle, intelligent dad, who always liked Robert Frost, ever since the sides of his head, saying, "Get hold of yourself, Jimmy Lee!"

Jimmy Lee recalls Stefa telling him that people were meant to sleep indoors and urging him to find a way to get off the street.

He slept on the street—a breeze, since it was often 70 degrees at midnight in Arizona. Unable to find full-time work, he moved on to Phoenix and got a job digging ditches until the super-hot summer peace and quiet. He desperately needs to prove the old man wrong and now the old man’s voice telling him, "You were always a mama’s boy! You guiltless wonder!"

"That damn chink got me," followed by Slim’s cry, "That bastard got me too."

Jimmy Lee remembers Stefa telling him that people were meant to sleep indoors and urging him to find a way to get off the street.
not as homeless,” Flohr said. Expressions Gallery paired up with St. Mary’s and BOSS to identify artists who are homeless and also to find places where they could work and develop their art. St. Mary’s and BOSS worked to encourage homeless artists, and to provide some art supplies and a space to work. “To our amazement, we found 21 artists who are art show,” she said. “I think there are 60 artists in total, but 21 of them were homeless, or are homeless or have been homeless. But they shouldn’t be known as homeless. They should be known as artists because their work is amazing.” Flohr’s work as curator of this exhibit is also amazing, because she is one of the very few art gallery directors who would have ever bothered to talk with or look at the art of homeless people in the first place. She was so concerned about the lack of community support for their artistry that she curated a beautiful exhibit that filled her gallery from floor to ceiling with art on the theme of homelessness. At a time when many business owners in Berkeley are lobbying city officials to build homeless hotels as a place for people from viewers, Flohr has welcomed homeless artists into her gallery, and has provided a sanctuary for homeless artwork.

During our tour of the Homelessness exhibit was at the paintings of Gregory William Rick, a muralist and painter who served in the Army from 2003 to 2007 and was deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Upon his return home, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He tried to get help at the VA, but he went months and months waiting for help and couldn’t hold a job, because he was disturbed. Rick had planned to return to the house where he had grown up to live with his mother, but he found that his mother had died while he was in the Army, and the house was put up for sale because there had been no one to pay the mortgage. As a result of all these setbacks, Rick became homeless. He lost his job, he lost his house, he lost his family, and finally was taught how to read and write in his late thirties. Nobody had ever evaluated his dyslexia during all the years he spent in public school.

As a result of all these setbacks, Rick became homeless. He lost his job, he lost his house, he lost his family, and finally was taught how to read and write in his late thirties. Nobody had ever evaluated his dyslexia during all the years he spent in public school. Now, he’s centered: piercing eyes, black hair halfway down his back, blue felt hat and long lapel on his feet and began painting again. According to Flohr, he said his artwork with the words written on it, kept him focused and helped him feel that there was hope in the world.

Next, we looked at Roosevelt Washington, who grew up in poverty and was raised in Oakland by a single mother with six children. He was allowed to graduate from high school even though he didn’t learn reading, writing or arithmetic. After graduation, he was not able to find a job application, and couldn’t find a job, and then became homeless. Recently, Washington was diagnosed with anxiety, and finally was taught how to read and write in his late thirties. Nobody had ever evaluated his dyslexia during all the years he spent in public school.

“He does amazing work,” said Flohr. “He’s an amazing guy and we’re really happy to have him at the exhibit.”

Next, we viewed a painting of a homeless man quietly enjoying a take-out meal on a park bench is entitled simply, “Homeless Man Eating Out.” His beautifully rendered painting of a homeless man eating out in the open, “He was very emaciated and very thirsty standing on the street corner,” Flohr said. “He was very emaciated and very thirsty — looking. One of the artists came by and gave it to him. You could tell from that how pets are very meaningful to people.”

While discussing another painting of the bond between a homeless man and his dog, Flohr told us of an incident that opened her eyes to the importance of companion animals in the lives of homeless people. “There was this gentleman who was standing on the street corner,” Flohr said. “He was very emaciated and very thirsty-looking. One of the artists came by and she had a bottle of water and she said, ‘Here, it looks like you really need this.’

“The first thing he did was give the water to his dog. She didn’t understand why he would do that since he needed it himself. So she went and got another bottle and gave it to him. You could tell from that how pets are very meaningful to people.”

While it was heartening to hear an art gallery director speak out against economic inequality, her revealing insights into the hopes and hardships faced by homeless people went far deeper than that. In the course of explaining a painting of a homeless man reflected in the windows of the Bank of America, Flohr described the unjust economic gap between the rich and the poor in our country.

Then it was heartening to see an artist with a deep sense of sympathy. Instead, she deplored the comments to an artistic appraisal of the painting, with perhaps a vague statement of sympathy. Instead, she deplored the injustice of this situation with real depth and genuine concern. “This is a woman who was homeless for quite awhile, living outside, and finally got a single room occupancy unit,” Flohr said. “She was put in this room and she realized, ‘My God, I can’t stand it. There is nothing in this room that I would choose for myself. I don’t own anything in this room. It’s a tiny little room and I can’t bring any friends into it. The mattress is dirty. And I have to follow all these rules. I have to turn out the lights by 9 o’clock. I have to do this, I have to do that. ‘So basically said, ‘You know, sometimes it’s better to be free and out in the streets than it is to be stuck.’”

This poses a crucial question about whether service providers and government officials should be content with offering homeless people a low-rent room in a shab slum hotel, rather than a real home.

So I asked that very question of Rinna Flohr. “The question is, are we offering people freedom or a cage?”

Flohr answered without hesitation. Pointing to the SRO room depicted in the artwork, she said, “That’s a cage — treating them like animals. I think we need to think about this when we’re offering people spaces. We need to think about what we are offering them. Are we offering them freedom? That’s what people need. They need freedom and protection. We need to rethink the way we offer help.”

The Homelessness exhibit runs until April 18 at Expressions Gallery, 2035 Ashby Avenue, less than a block from Ashby BART station. Expressions Gallery is a community art center that holds classes and events as well as a gallery of fine art — Wednesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Visit their website at www.expressionsgallery.org
Public Housing Sold to Billionaires

A Section 8 housing voucher and moved because the stress was so horrible living at the public housing project once they started to pressure tenants out of their public housing units. The stress caused major health problems for me. Many others were pressured out of their housing also, and someone needs to look into what has happened to us.

It was reported in 2010 that Jorge M. Perez owned 75 percent of The Related Companies, and that billionaire Stephen M. Ross, a 95 percent owner of the Miami Dolphins, owned 25 percent of the development company. The billionaires who targeted Berkeley public housing feel they have political connections to the White House. Jorge M. Perez has been a major political fundraiser for President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and was an advisor to ex-President Bill Clinton during his term in office.

Perez and Ross also have been involved in a major project to privatize many of Oakland’s public housing units in partnership with the Oakland Housing Authority (OHA), East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC), a local nonprofit housing developer. As a direct result of the partnership, several years ago the Oakland Coliseum Gardens public housing complex as the “notorious” 1964 OHA public housing development, when describing how nice the newer Lion Creek Crossings private-rental housing project is.

However, the website fails to mention that a 15-year-old girl was shot and killed in late December of 2012 at Lion Creek Crossings, along with a 14-year-old boy who was also shot during that same incident, and that 15-year-old Haradi Askari was gunned down at the same housing complex on July 10, 2012.

Elsie Smith said, “I was a public housing tenant for 14 years and moved out of the public housing complex. They had sold blood and we did not get paid for it. When I showed them, we were kicked out of our home. Because of that, my life is ruined. But we have not been told the reason for our eviction.”

Along the way we picked up cans sold blood and we could not sit for days. By night we saw fire in the gas by day sight of cities guided us. In the street people stopped and tears in their eyes pressing change in our hands

I am horrified by what is going on and do not know what we can do about it. It is inhuman and it is a bad situation for me in Berkeley. It is an inhuman situation for low-income families in Berkeley who face displacement because their public housing units have been sold.

According to released documents, rents have been collected from Berkeley’s former public housing tenants with an approximate rate per bedroom to Berkeley 75 LP, the new ownership entity. On February 20, the BHA delivered the first list of potential renters to Berkeley 75, LP, for the newly privatized, federally subsidized project-based units. Berkeley 75, LP is currently screening the first group of applicants for suitability as tenants at the to-be-rehabilitated 75 units. The potential tenants face a stiff double examination before being allowed entry into the former public housing units as new tenants, and have to be cleared by both Related and the BHA.

Once the privatized units are rehabilitated and inspected, and the new tenants are chosen with new contracts signed, the public housing units will start earning $373 per month per unit in administration fees from the privatized public housing units sold to the out-of-state billionaires.

Jorge M. Perez, who is known as the “Condo King” of Miami, Florida, because he has developed and owns so many condominiums, is not the only Related company associated with privatizing Berkeley’s 75 public housing units.

Budget cuts to HUD’s federal housing assistance have forced rents up to $373 per month for new tenants moving into privatized former public housing units in Berkeley.

Public records reveal that the out-of-state billionaires got a sweet deal in their efforts to grab billions of dollars in public housing units from the poor. It cost The Related Company around $35 million to buy Berkeley’s 75 public housing units, at a rate that works out to $253,000 per square foot, even though the median price of housing in Berkeley is currently going for about $454 per square foot.

Public records also reveal that the City of Berkeley loaned the Related Companies of California $400,000 in pre-development costs and some of the work associated with the disposition and rehabilitation of the BHA housing units. However, the $400,000 loan was converted to a grant that left public taxpayers holding the bag.

On March 13, BHA Commissioners also voted to pay $253,000 in consultant fees to EJP/Praxis consultants, even though the deal is done and the public housing units have already been sold. Also, it appears that during the past three years, the BHA paid EJP/Praxis consultants as much as $98,711 for their assistance in privatizing and selling Berkeley’s

Lyond Carlsen may be reached at ten- atron@ymail.com
Viscous Visionary Art of Leon Kennedy

from page 7

materials for a canvas: bed sheets he has found on the streets, pieces of cloth, canvas, wooden boards, even tables and chairs. Many of the materials he works with come from the East Bay Depot for Creative Reuse in Oakland. He creates his artworks with markers, paints, crayons, beads, glitter, cotton, yarn and rope. At times, Kennedy’s use of recycled materials and found objects from the streets seems deeply symbolic.

In describing his painting, “Fellowship and One Another,” Carol Johnson and Catherine Fisher of St. Mary’s Center with Creative Reuse in Oakland, said. “The artist created this compelling image to illustrate his belief: ‘When we gather in God’s name, God is present. In everything, give thanks from our heart.’”

While looking at this work, Kennedy said, “This art is my calling. It is my life. God gave me this gift to make spiritual art and this love of drawing people.”

God Don’t Move My Mountain

A familiar spiritual sings: “Lord don’t move my mountain, but give me the strength to climb.”

This visionary painting is one of Leon Kennedy’s most beautiful works of art. “The vision of this image of two men facing one another, in prayer, hands connected, just came to me,” Kennedy said. “After I painted this, I heard a woman at my church sing the old spiritual song, ‘God Don’t Move My Mountain.’ This song is testimony to my own life, it feeds my spirit. I knew ‘God Don’t Move My Mountain’ was the meaning of these men robed in orange and yellow and people standing in praise and prayer. All the people are giving God the glory.”

The eye between the two men symbolizes God watching over our life, always present, Kennedy explained. “In my own life, I know struggle, and I know strength through God,” he said. “The mountain is life, and I climb in prayer, any time and anywhere. I pray through good times and trials and tribulations. When I feel low, I think about how good God is, and I feel love and thank him.”

Rather than asking that life’s trials and hardships be removed, Leon’s painting conveys the artist’s belief that our destiny, our life, and all our possibilities are in God’s hands.

TRUST GOD

Kennedy created the painting, “Trust God,” as an illustration of a scriptural passage that is very important in his life: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart.”

God: a calling from the heart

“Each person is born with a gift from God: a calling from the heart, a Shining Star. In God’s eyes, everybody is somebody: ‘Who are you? Who are we? What are we doing here?”

While looking at this work, Kennedy said, “This art is my calling. It is my life. God gave me this gift to make spiritual art and this love of drawing people.”

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“Each person is born with a gift from God: a calling from the heart, a Shining Star. In God’s eyes, everybody is somebody: ‘Who are you? Who are we? What are we doing here?”

While looking at this work, Kennedy said, “This art is my calling. It is my life. God gave me this gift to make spiritual art and this love of drawing people.”

“Lord don’t move my mountain, but give me the strength to climb.”

The eye between the two men symbolizes God watching over our life, always present, Kennedy explained. “In my own life, I know struggle, and I know strength through God,” he said. “The mountain is life, and I climb in prayer, any time and anywhere. I pray through good times and trials and tribulations. When I feel low, I think about how good God is, and I feel love and thank him.”

Rather than asking that life’s trials and hardships be removed, Leon’s painting conveys the artist’s belief that our destiny, our life, and all our possibilities are in God’s hands.

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