



Called to Creativity, Art, and Work:

An Interview with Makoto Fujimura - Part 1

In *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture*, artist Makoto Fujimura pens a series of essays exploring life, art, and faith. Makoto spoke with us recently in a two part interview about what it means to be an artist and how we can all be creative in our daily work.

How do you see your work as your calling?

I knew that my work as an artist was my calling before I was a Christian. You can't really commoditize art. The pure artists feel called to do what they do despite enormous difficulties such as not being able to market their works or having an audience necessarily at that moment. This made more sense after I became a Christian, and I knew who called me and to what purpose. One of the things that I discuss in the book is how the process of creativity and the journey of faith overlap. In fact, I was part of a study group called the Faith and Work Group at Yale that examined: "Why is it that Sunday faith is not translated into Monday through Saturday?"

What did you learn from that study group?

I wrote an essay in the book titled "Optimum Foraging Theory: Can You Have Your Birds and Eat Them Too?" It was based on the experience of our group touring the Tyson Factory and thinking through what it means to have a calling of some kind but also have a market reality.

As a Christian, how do you deal with the commercialized aspect of the art world?

Recently, I have been writing in *Refractions* and on my blogs about the necessity for the market system in the art world to change into more of a hybrid system. Instead of being based purely on the celebrity-driven, ego-infested market system, it would really take into account one's creativity and the biblical paradigm of [Shalom prosperity](#). That's different from just having market prosperity. God plans for us to be thriving in our creativity. Therefore, there has to be an over-arching system that accounts for that. While there are a few pockets of Shalom prosperity, currently, there is no system like that in place. The church should be one of the first places where that could be possible.

What do you think keeps the church from not being one of those places?

I think it's bought into the commoditized system. It's driven by market desires and consumer mentality. We have big churches, which is not bad in itself, but with mall-like structures and 20th century evangelism, the church kind of turned itself into salesmanship of the gospel—where it can be bought or sold. And the person receiving the gospel is either buying it or not buying it. That's a problem in many ways, as we can imagine.

The ineffectiveness of our not being able to create that hybrid system leads to the gospel being boiled down to some level of commodity. As a church, we need to really reconsider this system by recreating our system and calling for systemic change.

How do you glorify God in your daily work?

I glorify God by fulfilling my calling and being faithful in small things. But it's also about being willing to stand for my faith in certain ways. I do that by being authentic and integrating my faith journey with my art. I work with whoever I work with—whether it be a gallery or the whole system that is driven by a celebrity market system with ideologies that are somewhat opposed to biblical values—but I love the art world instead of disengaging from it.



How do you achieve that balance?

Jeremiah 29 calls us to pray for the prosperity of the city in which God has called us into exile. We are in exile. That's just the reality. But that doesn't mean we can disengage and run away from it. Jeremiah tells us to plant gardens and settle down and get married, which means a long incarnational journey to live and work in the place of exile and to honor God there as Daniel did. We become a better Babylonian than the Babylonians.

What Scripture verses or Bible stories influence your art?

Well, the entire Bible is written by our Creator God for broken creative people of God to create and love. That's how I read the Bible; it's a creative book to be read as our creative journey. So, to me, every single verse in Scripture is filled with creative principles that we can learn from—not for the sake of creativity, but for the sake of sanctification and our journey toward the City of God.

What is the biggest spiritual challenge you face in your work?

I would say it is the market pressure, because I have to survive and feed my family as a full-time artist. So, you toil and labor under the curse. Unfortunately, it's very hard to make what I do sustainable because of market pressure and lack of support from the world and from the church. You have to be entrepreneurial. I'm fortunate that I have that capacity, but a lot of people don't. Oftentimes, that puts them at risk in the world. And yet, God has been kind to me and my family and has sustained us as I fulfill my calling. I consider that a daily miracle.

Speaking of family, how do you juggle your family, your ministry, and your art all at the same time?

I talk about that in the book. It's really an amazing miracle and journey that certainly is a juggling act. I do it because I believe it's important. My journey as an artist and what I create is directly linked to advancement of God's kingdom somehow. If I didn't have a conviction, it would be hard to make it work. But at the same time, there's wisdom there that involves making sure that I have a team around me that protects me from burning out, so my work can be sustainable.

What does your work teach you about your faith in the person of God?

I learn a lot from the process of painting—even the frustration of the business side of things or my own failings in what I desire to accomplish. I hope they are teachable moments for me. Creating art is essentially a discipline in which one learns to deal with these frustrations. They are birth pangs that are constantly there in front of me as I work. And, I struggle through that. It's hard work. But in the end, it is utterly rewarding and reveals very much the process that Paul talks about in Romans 8 where the whole creation is waiting for sons of God to be revealed. This whole birthing process, as it were, is repeated in smaller ways on the surface with my paintings. Even as I write, I experience that. Everyone in a creative field experiences that.

What led you to create the International Arts Movement?

I was living in exile and living in the gap and knowing that there's very little support to fulfill my calling as an artist, not in this market system. I was trying to make art sustainable. So, whether you're a Christian or non-Christian, there's some support. That's why International Arts Movement (IAM) is not a Christian ministry, but it is an arts organization—nonprofit arts organization run by Christians. We see art as a primary place to wrestle with deeper issues of art and faith and humanity.

How does IAM influence the New York City art world?



First of all, we're a very small organization. So, we can only be a catalytic organization. We partner with other organizations as well as work with churches and sometimes non-Christian organizations, because we believe that this calling to rehumanize is very much needed from all spheres. I believe creating the “world that ought to be” is a necessary calling for every human being. It's part of my “shalom” calling as well. God has instituted this calling for me, my family, and IAM to work toward peace and prosperity of the city.

We don't create a nice, comfortable place for ourselves. That's because we feel that struggling through the public sphere and all the pluralistic context that we have to deal with is good for us. Thus, we learn to speak in a language that is not tilted and biased and built on fear of what the other side is doing, but we learn to mediate in our culture on what is true and essential about humanity.

How do you facilitate this dialogue with IAM?

We have public dialogs in all sorts of spheres in the arts and business. In the future, we're even going to involve scientists as well, because the issue of rehumanization affects everyone. Here at IAM, we have a vantage point of doing that through the arts. While that's our central point, our conferences, our lectures, and now the Internet are wide open. Anybody can sign up to be a member for free on our [site](#) and join in. It's really a wonderful adventure to have a movement to be a resource to people in their creative journeys.

Artists Are Catalysts:

Interview with Makoto Fujimura - Part 2

How did your art become a ministry after 9/11?

It was not intentional. I was merely trying to address the concerns of everything around me. A temporary gallery was started—International Arts Movement (IAM)—that was an effort to create an oasis of collaboration in the downtown community. It started simply by conversing with those who were there at the time, many of whom were artists. Because we are artists, part of what we wanted to do was wrestle together. Their art was affected by 9/11, and mine as well. And, it was important to journey together for the time being. It turned into a series of exhibits and performances and small conversations there. It was temporary, but, afterwards, it left a legacy in how these artists began to work with change and how they are influenced by that time.

I wasn't necessarily doing this as a “ministry.” But we did minister to people. Every person struggling through those tough days recognized that something important was going on. This event had awakened in us something that art wasn't able to address at the time.

What would you say to people who feel they don't have the artistic talent that you were given, but yet they still have this need to create?

All of us are created to be creative in some way. We may not call ourselves artists or we may not be a professional artist; but creativity is an essence of being human. When you think about it, things that last in our memories are times when we were part of creating something. And, whether it be procreating, in terms of our families, or generating a business or creating an opportunity of mercy, or creating opportunities for people to hear the gospel—all of these are creative acts. And God calls us to that.



That is especially true of nonbelievers, because Christians know by common grace that God poured his gifts into all of the earth. There's a difference between common grace and special grace of salvation knowledge; but common grace is just given generally to all of nature and all of humanity. So, there's an overriding principle of generative creativity that we all long to be part of.

I think artists are catalysts. If you look at a Van Gogh painting, you see a vision that is sharp and refined and out-of-this-world, in a sense. You'll never see a cypress tree or a starry sky in the same way again. So, it's that kind of vision sharing. It's a gift that's being shared with all of humanity. And you can use that as a catalyst to be creative yourself.

What do you say to artists who feel that the church doesn't value their contributions to what they can bring to the body of Christ?

That's reality. But the question is, do they want to be part of the solution, or do they want to be part of the problem? Many times, artists are really unable to rise above the problem; and they become part of the problem. That's one of the things that International Arts Movement is trying to address. Artists can be the most generous, life-giving group of people because we're asked to be resourceful all the time. We've been trained to deal with having nothing and creating out of nothing—not quite as excellently as God did by far.

We can really provide the world with a sense of purpose and significance, and we can create hope even in desperate situations. Artists have this instinctive capacity to run right into the storm, rather than run away from the storm. I always say that you can choose to be part of the storm, or you can move into the eye of the storm. That is the greatest place to create from and has the most energy, as it were in [Jeremiah 23:19](#). And so, there are all these opportunities, I think, that artists can miss if they don't see the whole picture. I encourage them to be part of the solution.

What about those who don't work as an artist? How can they view their work as a creative ministry?

Whatever your medium of adventures may be, you can certainly learn from the artists. You know, I speak to people all the time who say, “Well, I'm not an artist; I don't understand art at all.” I ask them, “What do you do on Sunday afternoon?” And they say, “Oh, we take a walk in the park, or we see a movie or go to a concert.” And, I say, “Well, so, you appreciate art in that way, or you cook something together or you have a family barbeque.” That's part of our creativity working through us.

What artists do is accentuate those experiences to give us a full reality that most of us are not aware of. They open up this vista of experience. By wrestling through these things and having a Christ-centered attitude toward things, we don't have to fear culture. We can live in it and critique it, because all culture is twisted. There are idols everywhere. Originally, idols were good things turned into idols. Our purpose as Christians is to turn them back into a source of goodness, beauty, and truth. That takes discipline and some knowledge. You can learn from artists how to hear music and how to look at the world in a way that opens up this whole new area of experience.

Why do you say prayer is the highest art form?

Prayer is agreeing with God and saying that there is a “world that ought to be” that God is really preparing. That takes imagination and a great deal of poetry and color and aroma of Christ. Those are all things that the arts can help us with.

What relationship do you see between imagination and curiosity and the fruits of the Spirit?



Oh, good question. The gift of the Spirit is articulated as a fruit, and fruit is love. That's the primary quality. Joy, peace, patience, kindness—all these things flow out of love. Then, love is defined by Christ in the sacrificial love. That is a gift that is given out into the world.

In that sense, there's an overlap between artistic practice and gift practice. It all should flow out of love. The problem is that we've twisted creativity into just a transgression. The post-modern critique is, basically, this ironic stance toward life itself. You have to be shocking and transgress. But, we forgot to transgress in love.

There's a lot of what art can do that has been stymied or truncated. Our ideologies have segmented things so that art has become separate from faith, business, and sciences. While those categorizations are helpful, we have to understand that, as it says in Colossians, love holds all things together. Christ is the One, the Creator who is holding everything together. Therefore, art needs to be integrated into some holistic synthesis.

Some people say they've been accused of being too curious and questioning too much. How do you respond to that?

I say it's great to be curious. I don't see a problem with that at all. In fact, I think children are naturally creative and curious. And then, I think about our education system. By the time you are in third grade, you are told not to ask questions or be creative. I find that tragic, because there's a part of us that is always yearning to be curious, to be a child again. And, art can release that part of us; and, in some ways, that may be why it's so uncomfortable.

Conventionalities and functions of society are often challenged by the curious. I think what Jesus meant by “let these children come to me” is that the qualities of a child—the innocence, curiosity, the exploration—is exactly what we need as Christians. We need those qualities in order to expand the Kingdom.

How then do you see art as evangelism?

There are many attempts to use the arts as a tool for evangelism. I understand the need to do that; but, again, it's going back to commoditizing things. When we are so consumer-driven, we want to put price tags on everything; and we want to add value to art, as if that was necessary. We say if it's useful for evangelism, then it has value.

And, there are two problems with that. One, it makes art so much less than what it can be potentially. But also, you're communicating to the world that the gospel is not art. The gospel is this information that needs to be used by something to carry it. Only, that's not the gospel at all. The gospel is life.

The gospel is about the Creator God, who is an artist, who is trying to communicate. And his art is the church. We are the artwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works. If we don't realize that fully, then the gospel itself is truncated; and art itself suffers.

Finally, who are your spiritual influences?

I became a Christian reading William Blake. He was an 18th century Romantic poet. So, this man struggled in his faith journey all through his life but came back to orthodox Christianity at the end. He is definitely an influence. Definitely, artists like El Greco and art in general have pushed me to ask deeper questions about the reality of the world and my soul.

Then, there are the missionaries that I met in Japan who clearly communicated the gospel to me—even though I didn't understand or I disagreed with them. But, they did—so in love, in prayer. And



my wife, who suffered along with me and who basically led me to that community and led me to Christ—all these are wonderful influences.

In New York City, I've been enormously affected by Dr. Tim Keller's preaching and teaching. I was involved with him from very early on in the Redeemer movement. He really opened my eyes to see that the city is not a tool to be used for mining success; but it is a conglomeration of people who need to be loved. And loving the city, rather than being against it or being of it, is what I'm still learning to do.