

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 2003      VOLUME IX, NUMBER 6

# THE WAY

*of* ST. FRANCIS

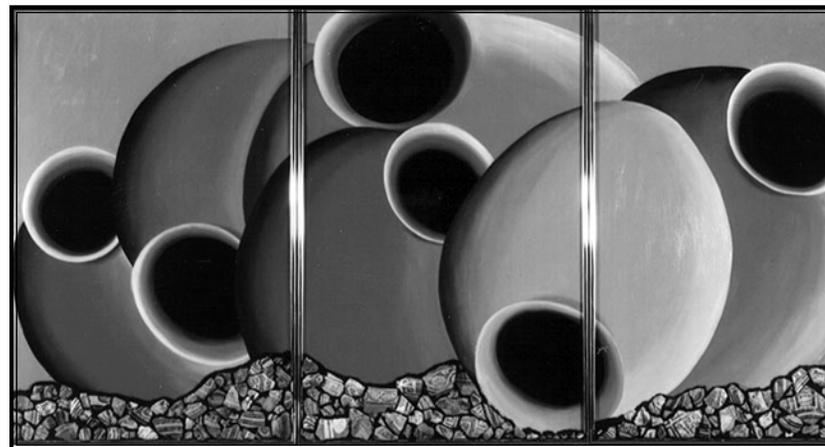


## A Christmas Prayer for Peace

God,  
Mighty One,  
Creator of all that is good,  
You come to us as spirit born anew,  
A child in earthen clothes and heavenly light.  
Swaddling clothes you are wrapped in, for restricting movements.  
You give us true freedom, as arms are opened to embrace all on a cross.  
Light born in darkness, Work spoken in silence, King crowned in poverty,  
Come to us again, once again, as before, as always to a world hungry  
Come, come, come to us, renew the promise of peace that is You.  
Fill our void, heal our scars, calm our fears, enflame our love.  
May the fear of terror, and the terror of war be healed.  
For Peace on Earth is still our most fervent prayer.  
May guns be called to silence, anger stilled,  
All nations surrounded by good will.  
Let the dawn of your birth  
Awaken us to you,  
Jesus,  
Christ,  
Messiah,  
God with us,  
Prince of Peace,  
Wonderful Counselor,  
Root of Jesse, Star of David.

(Father Larry Gosselin, OFM)

## CANA IS FOREVER:



## THE MIRACULOUS VESSELS OF SHEILA LICHACZ

By David Elliott

A. M. + D. G.

*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.*

For the greater glory of God.

She paints letters and a cross on blank canvas, signs that focus her vision on the glory of God.

With every stroke of the brush, Sheila Lichacz is thanking the Most High for her creative gifts, for her family, and for the simple fact that she has this moment to live.

Forty years of brain surgery.

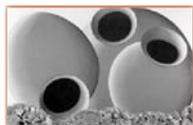
Twenty-three life-threatening tumors removed.

At least five tumors remaining, living in her brain, protected by the vessel of a skull that is now one-third acrylic.

There is still pain. But there is life.

“A. M. + D. G.”

Sheila Lichacz paints and vibrant colors bless the canvas with gratitude and joy.



“My favorite prayer, the one I say every night, is the Peace Prayer, the one inspired by Saint Francis. I sing it constantly. I just feel very close to him.”

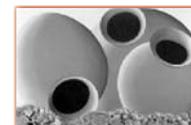
It is June 2003. Sheila and John Lichacz and I are in Washington D.C., talking in the Smithsonian’s Center for Latino Initiatives, where the walls of the Center are alive with Sheila’s paintings and its offices are alive with the quiet enterprise of a staff dedicated to the support and sharing of Latin American culture. This exhibition of Sheila’s art has been extended twice by the Center’s acting Director, Francisco Dallmeier, Ph.D.

Into this purposeful, yet quiet energy, Sheila sings: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...” Her voice is clear and refreshing, washing over us like the waters of the Santa Maria River she swam in as a girl, in the interior of Panama.

What has brought her here? To the Smithsonian Institution? And how did a Panamanian girl from the city of Monagrillo come to be Ambassador-at-large for her native country?

“I believe God is using me to spread the Word. He has given me a

chance to give love. That’s the very best thing any of us can give—our loving and our caring. And we have been given the even greater gift of God. [Sheila looks around the Center, listening intently.] I want to tell you something. We’re not alone here. In this room. Right now. Our saints are here. I feel something very, very strong. And when I feel them, believe me, I feel them. There is no question in my mind.”

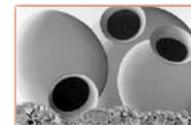


But there are questions in my mind. And in the mind of my wife, Lisa, who has joined our conversation.

Do we *actually believe* in miracles, in healings, sightings, inexplicable events? Do we even care about them? What difference do they make in our daily struggles? And most basically, what is a miracle?

Sheila smiles, radiant and overflowing with an (almost tropical) abundance of life. Her eyes are warm and filled with what Saint Francis calls, “certain hope.” She speaks, not boasting or promoting herself in any way, but softly and strongly:

“What is a miracle, David? *Soy un milagro.* (I am a miracle.)”



**T**he Roman Catholic Church may well affirm Sheila’s self-assessment. Sheila Lichacz’ remarkable neurological journey is one of four miracles being prepared by the Cause for the Canonization of Blessed Junípero Serra. [Due to the active status of the Cause, which is being prepared by the Province of St. Barbara under the direction of Franciscan Father John Vaughn and the supervision of Brother Timothy Arthur, we have necessarily refrained from including physicians’ supporting statements in this article—Ed.]

Not only has Sheila survived, against all odds, her many brain surgeries, she has suffered no diminishment of mental or physical capabilities. Despite daunting predictions and warnings from her physicians, she has never required rehabilitation after her operations. Prominent medical experts have no scientific explanation for Sheila's unique case history.

Sheila, however, has an explanation and she knows that she is called to share this knowledge with others, no matter what the personal price: "Blessed Junipero Serra has kept me alive. He has always responded to my prayers. But at first, I didn't know him from Adam!

"The day I met Junipero Serra, John and I had traveled to San Juan Capistrano, in California, for yet another brain surgery. I had been in a lot of pain and

the tumors had grown. The surgery was absolutely necessary.

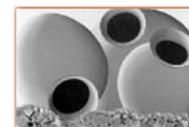
"Before my appointment, I went for a brief visit with a friend to the Basilica of San Juan Capistrano. As I was walking, I saw a statue of a Franciscan friar, Junipero Serra. I felt drawn to him—and I never ignore these feelings—so I put my head on his feet and prayed to him.



"When I'd finished praying, I stood up and started walking toward the car. Only I couldn't feel the ground—it was exactly as if I was floating! That feeling stayed with me a long time.

"Well, at the end of my pre-surgery appointment, the neurosurgeon looked at me in amazement—you could see the emotion in his eyes—and he said there was no longer any need to operate.

"So since that first meeting, Blessed Junipero Serra and I have become dear companions. I pray to him at least twice a day."



In Panama, prayers of thanks have been raised to Sheila for the work that she and John are doing. Through Sheila's paintings and the couple's tireless advocacy, the beach and shorelines where she collected shells, stones, and Pre-Columbian potshards as a girl are being preserved.

The largest site from which the shards originated is now cited by archaeologists as evidence of the earliest ceramic culture in North and Central America, and perhaps South America, as well. Of course, when she was gathering these treasures, she had no idea of their eventual significance to her art and to historians.

On 14 October 2002, Sheila and John were present at the dedication of the Cerro de la Virgen (Virgin's Mountain), within Panama's National Park Volcan Barú. With their assistance, a statue of the Blessed Virgin and a grotto were installed on the top of the mountain, 8,000 feet above sea level.

A meditation garden, harmonious with the rich natural environment of the Cerro, will be planted, and non-intrusive access provided for pilgrims and tourists. It is the Lichacz's hope that these installations will contribute to the protection and preservation of the region's unique natural beauty.

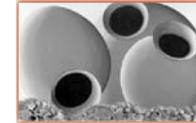


Great natural beauty describes Sheila's artwork as well. It appears unforced, inevitable, part of our shared and personal soulscape. People stop and often exclaim—at a gallery or in the middle of errands while passing through a Franciscan office—as if the painting itself commanded their spontaneous praise.

Aside from admiration of the colors and the unexpected juxtapositions of actual shell, shard, or stone with Sheila's flawless brushstrokes, I most often hear expressions of gratitude: "I feel so peaceful looking at this." "It makes me want to enter the painting, to go right into the heart of that jar."

Or into one's own heart. Sheila's repeated depiction of clay vessels is no accident. She is aware of the many biblical references to clay vessels, from the creation of man and woman to Jesus' first miracle at Cana; and of course, clay vessels have helped us to carry the essential water of ordinary life through thousands of years. Symbol and artifact meet on canvas, creating images that bond millennia. Without words, we sense that Sheila's art affirms our age-old journey into God.

She also invites us into pure black. The dark mouths of Sheila's vessels are an extraordinary, never-ending portal, infinitely welcoming and profoundly mysterious. Sheila had been taught once to "never paint with pure black—it just isn't done." But the purity of black that opens before our eyes is a color of faith: we are looking directly into the unknowable depths of our source and our longing.



These words are not the excesses of an overwrought enthusiast. Sheila's work is part of the permanent Contemporary Religious Art collection at the Vatican. Her triptych, "Cana Is Forever," hangs for the world's pilgrims on the wall of the Holy Shrine of the First Miracle at Cana in Galilee, Israel. By two different Presidents of the Republic, she has been named Ambassador-at-large for Panama. Sheila was commissioned to create the Republic's official gift to Pope John Paul II, who subsequently granted her a special audience at the Vatican. Her paintings and sculptures have been exhibited at, and obtained by, leading art museums and university galleries throughout the United States, Latin America, and the Holy Land. These admirers usually know nothing of Sheila's medical history: it is her art that inspires casual passerby and professional curator alike.

There is something Franciscan in this combination of immediate heartfelt appeal and sophisticated discernment. Not surprisingly, Sheila's "other favorite saint" is Francis, that troubadour of the Lord who won the love of leper and pope alike.

"I was in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem, on the Thirteenth of September, 1993—the day I was to leave Jerusalem for surgery in San Diego. It had been very crowded in the Church and I wanted some more prayerful time there, so I asked John if we could go back. When we got there, it was empty! That *never* happens—it's usually full of visitors from around the world. So John and I, my daughter, and her boyfriend were together in the tomb, alone.

“All at once, a beautiful man appeared, a Franciscan friar. He approached us and said, ‘You do not have to go. You can stay as long as you want.’ He had the most beautiful face!

“This friar was carrying three candles, although there were four of us. He gave one of the candles to John and me, because we are one in marriage, and one each to my daughter and to her boyfriend. Then he started walking backwards away from us, and said again, ‘You can stay as long as you want.’ And he disappeared.

“It was time to catch the plane for my surgery, but I placed my head on the tomb and said, ‘Jesus Christ, *please*, get rid of these tumors.’

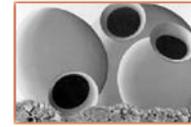
“We left the hotel and the Holy Land, and came to San Diego, where the President of the Neurosurgeons of America, a brilliant doctor, declined to operate because the tumors hadn’t grown!

“Later, when we told this story to one of the priests who had worked a long time at the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, he asked us to describe the friar who had appeared to us. We did, and he said that no one who looked like that had been working there. He asked John if he had noticed the presence of the stigmata, but John, like the rest of us, hadn’t been able to look away from the friar’s eyes.

“He also told us that no Franciscan would have been present in the tomb because at that time of the day it was under the control of the Greek Orthodox Church. [Supervision of various sites in the Holy Land is shared by different religious communities and the boundaries are vigorously maintained—Ed.]

“Imagine my shock when, years later, I saw the friar’s face again, but this time on a piece of marble that was given to me to work with, a piece with a perfect Tau cross in one corner. I showed the marble to several friars at the Custody of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, and they all said, without hesitation, ‘That’s Saint Francis!’

“Well, maybe this is why I’ve become so brave! Now when someone tells me that a certain door is closed to me, I’ll just sit still and think about a way to open it. And, most of the time, it opens!”



Sheila Lichacz’ life has been, and continues to be, blessed by truly miraculous events, not the least of which is her ability to recognize them as such. The other morning, I asked some friar friends what they had been taught in their formation classes about miracles. In the course of our conversation, it quickly became clear that the topic had never been raised. Perhaps it should be; perhaps it doesn’t need to be. My time with Sheila Lichacz and her painted invitations into God has taught me better than any book or lecture that we are the living brushstrokes of our loving Creator.

*Somos milagros. We are miracles.*



Sheila and John Lichacz currently live in Miami, Florida. Sheila continues to create new works of art and her audience continues to grow. Selections from Sheila’s work can be viewed at her website: [www.sheila-lichacz.com](http://www.sheila-lichacz.com). She can be contacted by email at: [slichacz@sheila-lichacz.com](mailto:slichacz@sheila-lichacz.com). (A good starting place for websites related to Blessed Junípero Serra can be found at [www.ca-missions.org](http://www.ca-missions.org).)

