

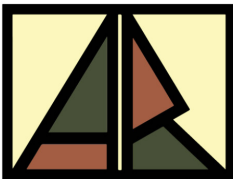
GREGORY PALESTRI

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

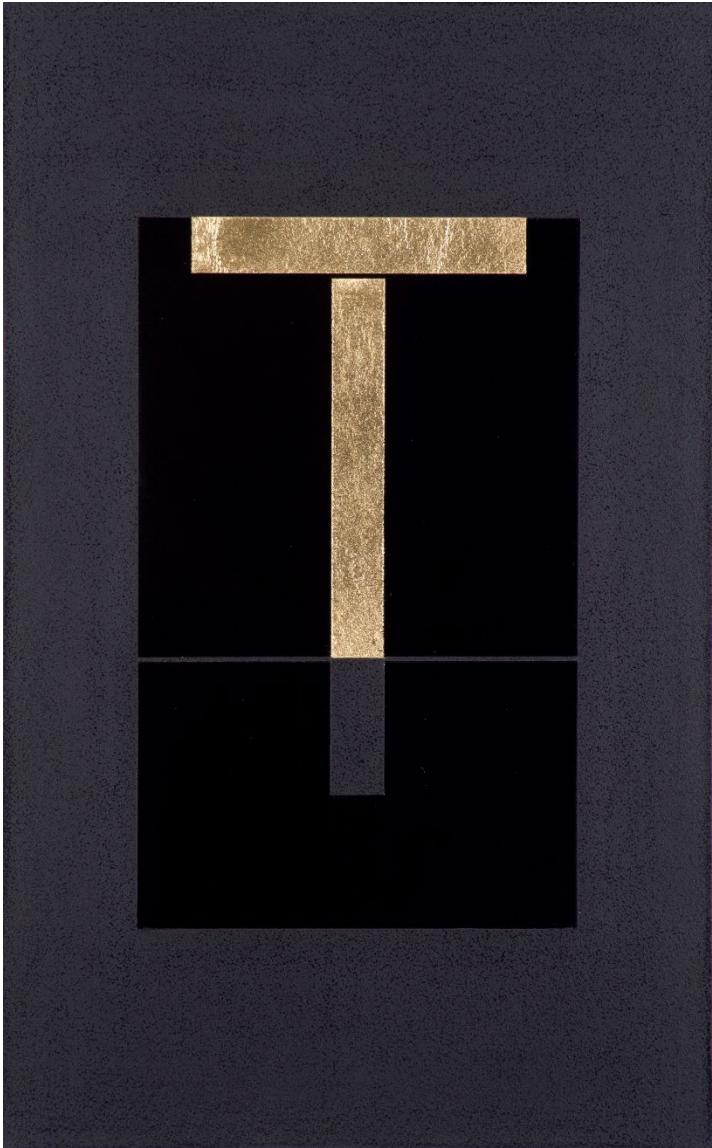
February 17 - April 28, 2021



XI Nailed to the Cross



**ARTREACH GALLERY
& ARTS LIBRARY**



XII Dies on the Cross

STATIONS OF THE CROSS: AN INTERPRETATION

Each life lived is a narrative, spilling forth a story of interaction, marking rhythms of individuality. Reality includes our falls, and one hopes that strength and courage will facilitate some kind of getting up and moving on. We are aware of the light and easy ways of being, ways that often seem to cover the struggles, disappointments, and deaths — our own or others'. But covers do not rule; they serve as creative aspects of our human efforts to counter the falls. The falls eventually return with a force that seems final.

What seems is just that: appearance. There is another force that wants to be known, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says:

Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions. . . .for the god
wants to know himself in you. (1)

Between what is and what seems, between reality and appearance, there is a presence that persists. Look to the death that claims us all, and there we become aware of what Dylan Thomas refers to as “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” (2). The god, the green fuse, life energy, chi, resurrection: These are known in the human heart before, after, and within each fall. They form the will that leads to the end of each effort within each of our narratives.

In a geometric poetry of blacks and gold, Gregory Palestri has created invitations to consider the narrative of Jesus' life as a paradigm for the life of each person who knows the substance of conflict: personal, physical and political. He expands the traditional *Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, or points of engagement, to include two more: *Resurrection* and *Empty*. Resurrection announces the value of what moves in each of the preceding panels; what wants to become known in our personal stories will its way to the last. The gold rays radiate about a black center rectangle, an unknowing darkness. And as we

move on to begin the circle of images again, the same force keeps on being present in the shining gold in each black rectangle.

The exhibition of *INTERTWINING Chinese Poets and Poems: Paintings by Zhang Yan Li* (3), concurrently in our main gallery, invites us to consider the world of Classical Chinese poetry. This is aided by a magnificent translator, David Hinton. His recent book *China Root* explores the impact that Taoism had on Buddhism in China and the eventual development of Zen. Hinton's translation of the Classical Chinese poets is influenced by the Taoist "root" which brings a new depth of understanding to the poetry(4). In some kind of cross cultural exploration, we can see how it can illuminate our understanding of our exhibition of *Stations of the Cross*.

Palestri's center black rectangle in Resurrection and his black empty panel transition into a renewed cycle of *Stations of the Cross*; they bring us to a consideration of what Hinton calls the "dark-enigma" or the nameless out of which 10,000 things arise (5). The circle of the Stations is exactly what seeks to express the ongoing nature of narrative as realized in any person's life. In some very significant way it is generative, serving to renew and energize a life in process.

So the Dark and Light, the Black and Gold, continue their mutual engagement. The life of Jesus is one way to state who we are in the world. There are other narratives as well; yet there is some universal reference here. As in art versions — *14 Stations* of Robert Wilson or the *14 Stations* by Barnett Newman or the *16 Stations* by Gregory Palestri — our own versions will take on different color and find different expressions. What is most important is this: as Palestri and the other artists made personal statements, so do we.

— Sheldon Hurst, Curator

SOURCES

1. Rainer Maria Rilke. "As once the winged energy of delight" in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell. NY: Vintage International, 1989, p. 261.
2. Dylan Thomas. *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. NY: New Directions, 2003, p. 90.
3. Sheldon Hurst. *Intertwining*. Portland: ArtReach Gallery, 2020.
4. David Hinton. *China Root*, Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2020.
5. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* in *The Four Chinese Classics*, Trans. David Hinton. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013, Chapter 1.



XIV Laid in the Tomb

SOME QUESTIONS MEANT TO ENCOURAGE ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE ARTIST

ARTIST: Gregory Palestri

CURATOR: Sheldon Hurst

SH Your 16 Stations are set in a very dark gallery space which reminds me of the prehistoric caves in Europe. The cave paintings in Lascaux and Altamira were illuminated by small oil lamps that were found there in subsequent explorations. Their use evoked what we would recognize as a very spiritual experience: flickers of light in a dark space. The gallery evokes a similar feeling.

GP Those cave paintings, the “Sistine Chapels of the Stone Age,” are the earliest examples of the spiritual power of art. With the dim light of the oil lamps, we think they were used by Shamans for initiation rituals of death and rebirth. Down in the dark womb of the earth you are put in the presence of the totem spirits that you rely on for sustenance. Things have not changed all that much in the intervening 30,000 years. We still go to dimly lit churches and chapels to be in the presence of God.

SH Why are the *Stations of the Cross* important for this time?

GP It is an important subject period, regardless of the time frame. For me it was a natural progression from my paintings of the Old Testament Creation story and the New Testament Incarnation to the Roman Catholic tradition of the Stations in order to round out a trilogy of my place in the Judeo-Christian culture system. I’ve been exploring the roots of spirituality for quite some time.

SH There are other significant artists who worked with the subject of *Stations of the Cross*. How do you see your work related to theirs?

GP I have seen the mural of the *14 Stations* in the Matisse Chapel in France. Barnett Newman did an Abstract Expressionist rendition,

and Robert Wilson had an installation at MASS MoCA, but the artist I was most moved by was Mark Rothko. His set of fourteen dark canvases, arranged in a circular space in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas emulate the Christian devotion of the Stations of the Cross. His paintings were designed for contemplation. Simon Schama has described them as “a space that might be where we came from or where we will end up. They’re not meant to keep us out but to embrace us.” Sara Maitland said as much in a *A Book of Silence*. It is extraordinary in the way that Merton’s writings are. She said, “for me. . . they were silence made visible; I was shaken by their power and their fierce dark beauty. . .” I would add to that silence their subtle luminosity. Some of the architecture of Louis Kahn share this spirit of silence and light.

SH Explain how and why you have used the Golden Rectangle.

GP My training in architecture and its history, especially the Greek, Roman, Renaissance and Modern periods (Le Corbusier, et. al.) had steeped me in aesthetic proportion. The Golden Ratio, a proportion found everywhere in nature, has been considered the proportion of harmony since Classical times. Known to the Pythagoreans, certain geometrical shapes, numbers and proportions were considered sacred. Christian artists have related the proportional relationships of the Golden Section to the mystery of God and have been calling it the Divine Proportion since the Renaissance. That said, how could I *not* use the Divine Proportion in my work

SH When I look at your work one of the words that comes to my mind is reduction. How do you see the idea of reduction relating to the subject of the series?

GP In their little book *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk and E. B. White write “a sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the reason that a drawing should have not unnecessary lines, and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell ‘I have taken this to heart.’”

SH There is a sense of the Eastern Orthodox icon in your work.

GP My series has a kinship to the icon tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Greek word εἰκόν (icon) means image and it usually denotes religious paintings on wooden panels in Byzantine style, either Greek or Russian. The icon requires a special language removed from natural imitation of life. It is a form of “visual theology” translating the scriptures or traditional stories. That is why it is said that icons are not painted but written, like calligraphy (and why in churches icons are frequently placed on lecterns). The icon gives us information in a symbolic language employing sacred geometry. The ideas of Pythagoras and Plato on forms and numbers were reinterpreted in the Christian tradition where geometric forms and numbers had symbolic meanings: the square represented the earth and man and had 4 as its number (4 Gospels, 4 Evangelists, 4 seasons, 4 directions, etc.). The triangle had the number 3 and represented the Trinity. The circle was one and signified divine unity. But this intelligible symbolism was only the surface of meaning.

The essence of the image is to be a point of contact, a place where we encounter a presence, a numinous light. Egon Sendler, in his book *The Icon: Image of the Invisible* has written: “The icon is a work of art that goes beyond art. Far from being limited to the aesthetic level, the icon’s message is of a theological order. . . In fact the icon is first and foremost, the living proclamation of the value of matter. Being a creation of God, it can bear witness to God. Just by its existence, each icon makes reference to the incarnation. . .” The artist Chuck Close once said that paint was just colored dirt that he pushed around the canvas. Same thing—matter used to incarnate spirit.

SH Your color choice is limited. Tell us about the black and gold.

GP Color also has a symbolic meaning. I tried to incorporate color from the outset. I tried for months with color studies. Some study pieces worked fine as individual pieces but did not incorporate well into the rest of the series. In the end, it was more powerful as a whole without the color and with a nod to Strunk and White. I let it go. That left me with a very pared down visual language — just gold leaf on a black panel with a transparent gloss in some areas. That was reduced just enough for my taste, and with that I began to write a story.

Gold is the pure reflection of light, or brilliance, therefore it is the symbol of the divine light. As Sendler says, “Iconic light has become incarnate grace, materialized, and it must be received as such in contemplation.” The black is something else. Most icons are begun with white gesso on board, then illuminated with color and gold. Mine are on black — and stay black. It must be the iconoclast in me. Of course the black board is my *tabula rasa* or blank tablet on which to write. It is Paul Tillich’s *Ground of All Being*; it is Carl Jung’s *Collective Unconscious*; it is the black monolith in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It does something to us. It is the perfect starting point for our encounter with the divine presence.

SH When dealing with this religious subject, you seem to deny realism. Do you believe the subject demands this?

GP I do not deny realism, I just don’t paint in that style. Ask that of Barnett Newman and you’d probably get a similar non-answer. Part of the reason for choosing to do the *Stations of the Cross* in abstract symbolic language is to try and reach an audience that may be put off, for whatever reason, by traditional Orthodox imagery. The symbols I use are universal, catholic in the small “c” sense, and pre-date Christianity. As I have indicated, the Church co-opted these forms from Plato, et al. and employed them in its own tradition.

One more thought on explaining. . . I have created a language for the Stations of the Cross that does make use of some classical symbols and does have an intelligible meaning to me. But this does not in any way preclude the viewer reading this language and translating it into their own personal story. In the end, I believe this to be a valid approach to contemplating the Way of the Cross.

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ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Gregory Palestri graduated *cum laude* in 1980 from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City where he studied Art and Architecture.

He worked in collaboration with John Hejkuk, Dean of the School of Architecture at Cooper Union on several projects including the Berlin Masque, which was shown at the Whitney Museum in NYC.

He has also worked with Ricardo Scofidio, Liz Diller, Tod Williams and Shigeru Ban on the exhibition Window, Room, Furniture that toured the United States and Japan. He worked with James Steward Polshek and Partners architectural firm in NYC from 1981-1983. He has also been employed by the following architects: David Roth, Jeff Feingold, Reggie Goldberg, and the interior designer Geoffrey Hassman in NYC.

Since then he has been a self-employed architectural designer and visual artist in NYC and Chicago. He currently lives and works in upstate NY with a studio in the Shirt Factory.



XV Resurrection

THE STATIONS: A CHECKLIST

- I. Scourging at the pillar
- II. Taking up the cross
- III. First Fall
- IV. Meets his mother
- V. Simon helps carry the cross
- VI. Veronica's veil
- VII. Second fall
- VIII. Admonishing the women
- IX. Third fall
- X. Stripped of garments
- XI. Nailed to cross
- XII. Dies on cross
- XIII. Taken down from cross
- XIV. Laid in tomb
- XV. Resurrection
- XVI. Blank / Empty

Each panel: acrylic on MDF board, gold leaf and clear polyurethane. 16" x 10" x 1"