Worship Design Studio with Dr. Marcia McFee
Interview with Alexandra Childs, Visual Artist

Alexandra Childs is available for consults and workshops and installations. Contact her at: artsheart@earthlink.net

Marcia McFee (M): Greetings and welcome to the Worship Design Studio. Here at the studio we believe that education and inspiration walk hand in hand. I’m always looking for ritual artists who can help us understand more about creativity, liturgy and theology, as well as suggest some great ideas for us to use in our worship. Alexandra Childs is one of those ritual artists. She is an ordained pastor as well as visual artist and I talked to Alexandra about creativity and artistry, and then we used Advent ideas as an example of looking for ideas that can bring ancient practices new life.

If you are a visual artist on your worship team or simply someone who is interested in how visual images can play an important role in the brainstorming process, you’ll enjoy this conversation.

As we began the interview Alexandra shared with me the love of the spirit of creativity depicted as wisdom in the Scriptures. This was an idea that she used to create her recent service of installation as a traveling minister of the arts.

Alexandra Childs (A): My theory and belief is that wisdom is creativity and that the power of God that moves through us when we’re being inspired is the Holy Spirit and so that is what I built this on; and how to really help people disconnect creativity from art. How do you know that creativity is way beyond art? You don’t have to be an artist to be creative and be passionate and to understand wisdom and write and be inspired by the Holy Spirit, because we are all doing that. And that is informs and inspires every discipline. You’re a mathematician you can be creative, you’re a stock trade you can be creative, you’re someone who cares about and makes your home you can be creative, you know. Everybody – the world stands to benefit from inviting creativity.

M: Let me ask you a question. What, then, is your definition of an artist? It sounds like an artist is using their creativity in very specific ways.

A: I would say an artist is someone who is making something; actually I haven’t extended the definition of art really. I have sort of allowed people, in my mind, to be able to say oh, well, that’s visual art, that’s dance art, that’s music art, because I think there is a power to that purity of that. There is a sense of understanding of oh, yeah, I know what art is and I think that is a very powerful touchstone for all of us.

M: Yeah, because we talk about being ritual artists in the Worship Design Studio and – it’s actually making something. So I think that for people who are on worship teams that may not
have a “traditional arts background” but find themselves dealing with this art form of ritual, they really can claim to be ritual artists as they are making something.

A: Absolutely. You know, it’s that sense of making something from either nothing or making something from disparate pieces that you pull together, that you use the power of creativity to make something new. For me it is sacramental, you know, it’s that transformation, it’s about that combination of bringing in the divine, the heavens, and having it manifest in earth as the embodied world and that’s what I have always been called to, where my earliest memories. I was two; I remember that longing in my solar plexus in my gut to make things, to put things together that made something new.

M: Alexandra also talked with us about the nature of making art and how it’s not always something that’s controllable and that there is an element of surprise in it and that we need to just do it.

A: Part of what I believe the beauty in a lot of art is a human hand and heart working with the uncontrollable material, materials that they don’t always know exactly how they’re going to respond. There’s an element of surprise and an element of chaos in there that is somewhat controlled and it’s exciting.

M: Yeah, it really is.

A: And I think that willingness to ride that wave is part of what art is.

M: And you just jump in and be willing to make something, make mistakes, you know. I’m always remembering this wonderful video and creativity by DeWitt Jones, who is a photographer for National Geographic, and he says that there is something like - the typical National Geographic article will require you to take thousands of photos to get the perfect five. And it just - it keeps reminding me that sometimes when I feel a little bit stuck, I just need to do something. And it’s OK if that’s not going to be the end product but I just need to do something and then that will inspire me to do something else and something else, and then eventually the thing that feels right will come. I think that’s such a great lesson for creativity, is just to start making.

A: Yes, and that’s one of the things that Nancy Chen, one of my mentors who many of your listeners may already know, but certainly the godmother of great huge space, and she says no matter what your medium and especially if you are a liturgical artist working in fabric and sacred space and stuff, that you need to keep drawing, you need to keep doing collage, you need to keep doing your first love of mediums and keep exploring what your hand would do on paper and I love that. That does inform what we’re doing, even if we’re not stuck and trying to get through that block, and it still gets the proverbial thing, the creative juices flowing and it’s like a save.

M: [Alexandra and I talked about what a wonderful privilege it is to be a ritual artist and that is not just a task but it’s also a spiritual journey.]

A: The journey of making something – so let’s say you’re beginning to think about creating for a series, creating a visual palate for a series –

M: Like Advent.
A: Exactly. The very act of just entering and immersing yourself in the theology and the sites and the sounds and the feel and the taste of that season in order to get to, how is it that we will visually create that world in the sanctuary, your journey as an artist in getting there is just as exciting then as the journey other people will take once you have created that visual palate in the sanctuary and they get to experience it for the first time. It’s layers of journeys and I think that’s also what tradition is when it’s done with integrity, is layers of journeys and layers of years of journeys, and layers of generations of journeys.

M: So you take into account those traditional journeys, those journeys that have come before, and that’s part of your palate as you begin to be inspired to your own expression; is that what you’re saying?

A: It is. And there is something tangible that people can sense when there’s a tradition there. They go, oh this was done before, this map has been printed before, this journey has been taken before and I am honoring my ancestors and making my own journey.

M: So let’s use Advent as an example. I’d love to hear you sort of tell us concretely about your own creative process and perhaps how you have dialogued with the traditional Advent kinds of visual things that we are used to, but then put your own vision on that as well. Can you talk us through that a little bit?

A: Well, part of it is the beauty of brainstorming. You know, I do some good work on my own and love having that epiphany, but I also thrive after brainstorming with like-minded people, people who have the same committed vision, the same committed purpose; you know, like let’s create the Advent season for our church and the rituals and the visual arts. I also think it’s really wonderful to engage in that kind of exploration, that brainstorming exploration with people from the musical department, from the worship leading ritual department, the visual arts department, from the dance department, from all together, because that honors your way, Marcia, of having the sensory rich worship really be manifested. It’s not all the visual artists coming together, it’s not –

M: Right. It’s being inspired by each other and literally coming out of the same, what I call anchor image. Something that ties all of our work together.

A: Yes, and that is so, so critical. That’s different tangent. So to answer the question you just asked me is I’m such a child of technology, child of the 60s, too, but child of technology because I really do love going to Google, finding a couple of phrases that I would type into the Google image search area and sometimes there are phrases like something more random, like ‘manifesting the divine’ and sometimes it’s more like Epiphany or Advent or –

M: Or a concrete image even.

A: Exactly. If it’s not a concrete image you come up with some very unexpected things. That’s sort of what I’m angling at here, you’ve got different things that you aren’t expected, phrases that aren’t expected, then all of a sudden you start getting some really interesting images because, you know, we’re all a little bit tired of the Advent- we’re tired of how Advent has gone; well, we’ve done that. It’s not that it was bad at the time it was lovely and inspired but we need something fresh and I think this year and this historical era in particular we need new stories and we need new ways of looking at the old stories. So using the Google brainstorming method.

M: I love doing that. That’s one of my favorite parts of the process as well.
A: I thrive when I can find a new way of combining things, even if it came not from me. That’s part of why the group brainstorming is so exciting, but Google is my brainstorming when I don’t have the group. And Google can direct me in new ways and then all of a sudden my brain fires up and I go oh, what about that and what about that and I put new things together. One of the things that we learned in art school is that the brain is an amazing story telling organ. You can give somebody, anybody, two disparate images, two disparate concepts, and they will put them together without really even knowing they’re doing it and then tell the story of how those two things relate. We just do that.

M: Let’s do a little experiment with that. Let’s say that as a team we’re going to be sort of going down this road for Advent with the theme – and this is one of the images that I have just in the historical seasonal images for the season for Advent – and that is tenuous human circumstances as a seedbed for the Holy. In other words, the part of the story that talks about how the Holy Spirit comes to reside in this young, unmarried, poor girl and so that’s sort of the concrete piece of it, but the whole image of seed bed of the Holy, where is the Holy planted and being grown. So if I came to you as a visionary for this process with that kind of image, where would you go with it next? I mean, what would you do to sort of begin to look for something that would be our visual power but wouldn’t be so didactic – telling everybody exactly what to think?

A: So “Seed Bed of the Holy.” Well, I would do what I - I would go to Google, I would combine those words in different ways like seed bed, seed of Holy, or bed of Holy, or Seed of Mary, or Seed of God. So you’ve got lots of different ways that come up to keep that thread and keep that concept and tie it in in different ways, and sometimes great pictures come from when you’re not on the image search. If you’re in Google you can go to the images or you can go to just the general web, which is what it defaults to, and sometimes great images come even from just the web searches, not the image fields. So I would look at, you know you tend to want it to be a winter thing, and seed beds are all year round, so it would be really about breaking up the initial concept.

M: You know that just made me think of – and this is the whole brainstorming process, right – when you said seed beds are all year round, I thought of greenhouses and I thought of a sheltered place for delicate things to be nurtured. And that starts to get into some more different images than simply milk carton with a seed plant in it kind of thing. And it also brought up for me an image of - in the document about the historical seasonal notes there is a wonderful picture of the field, this big open field with these empty chairs sitting all in it and I thought how cool is that, because that evokes this waiting for things to pop up. But, how cool if that images was like furrowed, plowed rows, a field that was just plowed and ready for things to pop up. You know those are some great Advent images and not your typical stars and Advent wreaths and that kind of thing. There’s nothing wrong with that but occasionally – Advent comes around every year and we can bring in some other images that can really help us discover new things theologically about the season.

A: I love that field with chairs sitting in a row in it, or somehow that possibility that an unseated chair presents and knowing that it’s about manifesting it’s human. We can always sit in that chair, and what kind of chair is it? It could be more a throne, it could be a simple old school chair, it could be a desk chair, and what different chairs communicate. And the field definitely is that seed bed. I go to art catalogs, catalogs that are from art exhibits or from a particular artist. I happen to have access to those and some people might not, but libraries would have those, or art museums would have in their gift shops or in their libraries, and there are ways that if you have a particular theme in mind and you are looking for some sort of – you know that brainstorming thread or brainstorming wave, depending on how it comes,
you can look at how other people, like you just said those chairs waiting in the field, how other people have combined things that have nothing to do with what you’re doing but you can look at some of these ways that people have put things together and there are some incredibly creative ways people have expressed things.

M: I want to talk a little bit, Alexandra, about Advent wreaths, because that seems to be the sort of the typical that we go to and actually I think people enjoy that ritual of adding – lighting another candle each time, and it’s just a wonderful – adding something every week during a series is such as great technique. But I’m wondering - have you ever done some atypical things with lighting things or with the wreath idea itself? I wonder if we could brainstorm a little bit about that.

A: You know I am a scale person. Nancy Chinn—one of her main things is how to be successful in a particular space is to honor the scale of that space. And if you’re using the literal wreaths that come in a box that has the little gold candle holders and stuff then probably the scale of that wreath is a little small for having a huge impact on peoples’ hearts. Even if it sits in a space where it still might be a little bit small it tends to feel a little bit packaged. One of my favorite things is actually to go out on an Advent branch-gathering excursion, which is another way to engage with the earth, which is a huge part of the Advent season and the manifesting of the divine on this planet. I mean it was very humble, He came to a house or a manger or an animal stall, so it’s like it’s very much about going out to the earth to the wildness and talking to the elements, talking to the trees and saying, may I borrow some of your branches? – and explaining to the tree. I know that sounds a little bit whacky but it really does align the nature and the natural world to what you’re doing.

M: You know there’s the whole typical image of the sprout from the stump of Jesse to the coming of Christ, and so it has actually Biblical roots as well. Tell us about the branch gathering.

A: In northern California we are very blessed with a lot of redwoods and redwoods are – they often do shed their branches around this time of year, it’s getting a little more blustery and certainly by late November it will be getting blustery so gathering branches, especially that have already fallen – that’s always my favorite – they’re so green but have already fallen, and getting ones that are slightly bigger than you think you’re going to need, that way you can break them down if they are too big, but really dedicating a table in your sanctuary, either off to the side or in the center or actually on the altar, you know, there is one communion during Advent, if you choose to do communion during Advent, and you can actually make room in the midst of the branches for the communion service. And you can have the branches off to either side and have communion in the middle or you could have the branches off in the back and have the line of candles, and also talking about scale, getting larger candles than generally most places – most churches do.

M: You could use pillar candles instead of the tapered candles and they have a much bigger impact.

A: People want to be able to feel the ritual that you’re doing. And when we have the elements of that ritual being small and sort of a little bit hard to see, you know church lighting is often a little bit dimmer or darker, a little more mysterious, which means people can’t see quite as well as they do out in the world, so increasing the scale and lining them up in a way that you know they’re in a line, I love the circle, I think the circle is very powerful, but it means that people from a certain angle of the church can’t see all the candles.
M: Or you could actually use levels to have the ones towards the back higher so you get the circle feel but also you get some levels.

A: Which is also what happens, the levels naturally express themselves over the weeks because you burn - by the time the third week comes you’re burning all three of them and you’ve burned the first one three times and they create their own sense of levels but that would be accentuated by having I think every church could do well by investing in some really good acrylic risers rather than always depending on old Pilgrim hymnals to raise things up. And I mean old hymnals are great to use as risers and get various heights on an altar that you’re draping or putting boughs on, but some good acrylic risers are really awesome.

M: Then you don’t always have to cover them. I mean there may be some circumstances where you can just use them as-is.

A: And if they’re nice and clean there’s nothing more exciting than – you know, exploring something. You know I floated a Moroccan lantern this last Sunday and it was just sort of hovering there on this – in this sort of juxtaposition between a clean new plastic thing and an old, sort of patina Moroccan African lantern and it was –

M: You know, speaking of lanterns, one of my favorite Advent “wreaths” that I did one time was hanging a huge – not huge but I guess it was probably at least three feet in diameter, big wreath, hanging it from the ceiling and then having four hooks on it and then hanging lanterns from the hooks rather than – so the light was hanging in lanterns from the ceiling from this wreath – you know from the ceiling, I don’t know if that makes sense. But, it was really –

A: Yes, pulley systems would be very helpful in that.

M: That’s right. And we have a whole podcast with you about the pulley system so I just want to remind everybody that that is also on the website.

A: And also, you know, hanging it one thing, but also having it around the edges of room so that each week is one station and it is more of a pilgrimage from corner to corner. I really love the idea of incorporating the whole sanctuary in worship. If you have a balcony use the workup for somebody – a soloist singing or if you have – people don’t mind having a voice come from behind them once in a while.

M: How cool would it be to have a singer up in the balcony with a lantern on the first Sunday in Advent singing something even like from Godspell – you know, Preserving the –, and then maybe the second Sunday is a duet with two singers with two lanterns, etc., etc. That could be really fun to put together as well.

A: That would be gorgeous. In fact, we did do something like that at Advent and each progressive week not only was there an additional voice but the voice got older and older. It started with a child’s voice in the first week and then it was a child and a youth, then a child and a youth and an adult, and then it was a child and a youth and an elder and that was just spectacular. It was from the balcony. Part of the people knew who they were so didn’t have to see that they were older but their voices also convey that they are. Yeah, taking the wreath off the chancel and putting it either on an actual table or putting it around the sanctuary or putting it up in the air or – but having real branches I think is a really beautiful piece to incorporate at any place, and redwood branches tend to – you know, the greener the branch the less you have to worry about the flame and burning.
M: What other textures and fabrics – when you think of Advent – are there particular colors and textures and feels that sometimes you go for. I mean, of course it’s going to be based on your theme but just in terms of Advent and Christmas itself what do you -?

A: I love the juxtaposition between the humble burlap and the royal satins. You know, satin is such a gorgeous light conveyer and it drapes so beautifully, and then there is the humble burlap that we base so much that texture and how it deals with the light, and you can just feel it on your skin whenever you feel burlap, it communicates very quickly, and again the juxtaposition between two disparate elements I think is very powerful and that juxtaposition right there speaks of Jesus and speaks of the coming of Jesus and it is really a humble beginning - a royal being in a humble beginning and you know something to do with animals and stables and stacks of grain and stuff like that, I think are so beautiful. And the purple and the blue just feel very royal but you know there is also the green of the branches and there is something about the evergreen that can be very powerful and really enhanced by some green satin underneath it or something like that.

M: Wonderful. Alexandra, thank you so much for your wisdom and everybody in the studio, Alexandra is a regular contributor to the Worship Design Studio and I’m so excited that she will continue to grace us with her wisdom in different ways as we go along through the year and through the years. So, thanks a lot, Alexandra.

A: A blessed Advent and a beautiful Epiphany.