

# TEXT MESSAGES

BY DONNA CEDAR-SOUTHWORTH



ROBERT CWIOK

“Life is compromise,” states Arlington painter Robert Cwiok. “But there shouldn’t be any compromise in the art.” When he enters his studio at the Columbia Pike Artist Studios, he is in “Rob’s world,” a world in which he is unwilling to compromise. And that’s, of course, the way it should be.

Known for his mixed media collages and paintings, Robert creates work that is vibrant, bold and filled with striking colors. At the same time, though, his images are clearly thoughtful. He especially appreciates when viewers get “beyond the surface” of the work.

“I think that my work has different levels,” he says. “It can be appreciated on the surface, but there’s a lot underneath.” He finds it particularly gratifying when viewers connect with what’s underneath: “That’s what you really want.”

One of Robert’s images, “Book of Song,” tells the story of a man’s journey through “anticipatory grief” at the death of his partner. He began the painting in 1996 and completed it in 1997. Robert says he hadn’t actually gone through the grief yet, but “began dealing with it in a very powerful way” in 1996 when he came up

with the idea for the painting. Eventually, he completed a series of 12 screen prints and collages by the same name.

By the time Robert embarked upon “Book of Song,” he had amassed a sizable collection of quotes from his reading and started

to “pull them together as if it were a collage. The text serves as a scrim on which to hang the collage—that’s what holds it together.”

The quotes dealt with a variety of issues, ranging from formal art concerns to religious implications to poetry. But the real crux of the piece, he says, is philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1947 series of essays, *What is Literature?* “For me,” says Robert, “it was the sense of grief and what do you do with it?” He points to a snippet of text in the painting: “A cry of grief is a sign of the grief that provokes it, but a song of grief is both grief itself and something other than grief.” This “song of grief,” he explains, “is that creative thing that you take

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FACING PAGE: “INHALE/EXHALE TRIUMPH OF GRACE,” ACRYLIC PAINT AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS, 92” X 69”



and you use it to make something else. You take something that's a negative or a tragedy, and you turn it into something positive, and in this way, it is life-affirming." In Robert's case, he started with what he knew best—painting—as a way to make the intangible seem tangible.

Another interesting element of the painting is something Robert calls a book sculpture. "The book is a real conundrum," he says. "It's an object, but it's not an object that's related to what is inside of it... People buy books [according to what's on the] covers, yet the cover has nothing to do with what's inside the book. It's a covering, so it's a very ambiguous thing and I like that. I could manipulate the outside."

A well-read artist, Robert has methodically compiled a compre-



hensive bibliography for his *Book of Song* series. His work combines a brilliant mix of colors with the underpinnings of soul-searching reflection and the universal quest to make sense out of life's chaos.

When his own anticipatory grief turned into reality, Robert produced nothing for about a year. He allowed himself to grieve. But then, he came back. He produced some small paintings along with a large-scale piece called "Heartbeat," which dealt with the misconceptions he faced in the world

around him after losing a partner to AIDS. "Heartbeat" was his way to assert that blood and water are not elements to be feared; they are, in fact, the very essence of life.

In 2002, Robert moved on to his *Inhale/Exhale* series. "I went



through my grief and gained the strength to come back," he says, "and I realized that it was like taking a breath and letting it out. [Loss is] not something that one gets over, but it's something that one moves forward with." Once he began the series, he found himself moving from small-scale works to very large-scale pieces. Robert is especially fond of "Triumph of Grace" from that series because, he says, "It represents for me, personally, something—getting to a different place."

A 2005 work, "Mirror," was inspired by the first scene of Shakespeare's *Pericles Prince of Tyre*, when the protagonist gazes on a skull and accepts his mortality. To create the two superimposed images anchoring the piece, Robert first painted clouds and sky. Then he placed tape vertically over the entire painting, cutting the tape horizontally and removing every other taped square. He then sealed the surface, painted the second sky and removed the square tapes to reveal the underpainting. "You're looking at the underpainting and the overpainting, and the words go on top of that—the words were painted on in such a way that they would come in and out of the painting—not just float on the surface."



IMAGE COURTESY OF LINDA SCHMIDT

Robert received three consecutive art scholarships to the five-year program at the Cleveland Institute of Art where he earned a B.F.A. in painting. He has exhibited both locally and nationally and is the recipient of numerous honors and awards. Employed by the National Gallery of Art for the past 19 years, he supervises the installation of the permanent collection and traveling exhibitions and serves as a courier for traveling shows worldwide.

Are the words important in his paintings? Yes and no. "I see the letters as structural, not just to be read," says Robert. "They're there for a number of reasons. Sometimes I look at the works and the words just disappear. I look at them as one facet of it. It's just another thing to manipulate as material."

For more information about

Robert's work, visit [www.robertcwiok.com](http://www.robertcwiok.com).



FACING PAGE, TOP: "BOOK OF SONG," TRANSFORMED BOOK AND ACRYLIC PAINT ON CANVAS, 70 1/4" x 77"; AND "MIRROR," SCREEN PRINT, COLLAGE AND ACRYLIC PAINT, 81 1/2" x 97"; THIS PAGE, TOP: "HEARTBEAT," ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 55 1/2" x 108 1/2"; AND "INHALE/EXHALE REGRET," SCREEN PRINT, COLLAGE AND ACRYLIC PAINT, 16" x 12"