

theo 650: art as theological practice

Spring 2023:
February 16-17
March 15-16,
April 12-13

Fridays - 1pm-9pm
Saturdays – 9am-3pm
(both days include time for meals and breaks)

Instructor: Dr. Brian Bantum

e-mail: brian.bantum@garrett.edu
Office Hours: by appointment

“Art as Theological Practice” is a course where theology is understood as a practice of creation and asking questions while reading and walking with artists as our guides.

This class is open all students (the curious to the practiced) who want to explore how artistic practice can inform your life and ministry. No prior knowledge or experience required.

What is this class?

We experience God in our bodies. When I say, “I met God today,” I might mean that I dropped my wallet and a stranger returned it to me, the two crisp 20’s still there. I don’t know how I was going to eat this week without them.

Or maybe I was walking a quiet trail with birch trees turning yellow on either side. And in the silence, I could not beat down the sadness anymore, so I walked and cried as the leaves crunched beneath my feet until the light slid from yellow to orange and I had no more tears, but the sadness felt a bit looser.

And sometimes I don’t know what I mean by ‘God’ or ‘hope’ or any host of ideas or words we use to make sense of our world. But we throw some flour in a bowl with water and baking soda and mix and knead and divide and rest and knead again. And in that act of making, we begin come to understand the question we had been asking.

We take a flurry of photographs, but this one image catches the light and in it we see something truer than the others, truer than what we saw with our own eyes.

Sometimes I don’t know what I feel or think until I sit down and just begin to scribble words. The words become sentences, then string into thoughts and when I am done, I’ve discovered what I had been thinking about, feeling. We could even call them groans of the spirit, or even prayer

Art as a theological practice is an exercise in reflecting on God and our life in this world. The class will include discussions of literary devices and techniques, readings and conversation on poetry, short stories, creative essay, as well as opportunities to write and workshop your own emerging work.

This course is open to everyone who wants to grow in their understanding of how the arts and artistic practice can deepen our understanding of ourselves, our world and God, as well

as expand how we communicate these ideas to our community. In this class art is not about being a “good” writer or painter or photographer, etc. Here we want to learn from artists how artistic practice helps all of us to become more observant of our world, nuanced in how we express who we are and what we are called to, and more invitational by abiding in the artistic sensibility to sit in the complexities of our world.

In this year’s iteration of the course, we will focus primarily on written work (poetry, short stories, creative essay, lyrics) but I am open to students who come with different art backgrounds who would like to incorporate those into the work and practice of the sessions.

What I hope you will take with you when the class is done

- You will want to read poems or novels or look at paintings or make paintings or write poems or write stories
- That when you read poems or novels or look at images you might begin to see some of the craft or the structure or the techniques the creator used
- That when you go to write a sermon or a letter to your governing board or a birthday card or a poem or a story you might be able to draw upon an array of tools (metaphor, fragments, perspective, collage, etc.) to express and draw your reader into whatever you hope they will see.
- Become acquainted with artists as theologians and intellectuals that help us to see the world in a new way.
- That when you consider your language about God and God’s world you can begin to see theology in new places and express your theology in new ways.

What will we read?

We will read a wide variety of poems, essays, and other artwork throughout the semester. All readings will be available online. One text that you will need to purchase is Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life* which will serve as an overall guide during our time together.

· Annie Dillard. *The Writing Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989. [isbn: 978-0060919887, \$13.49, Amazon.com]

*Remaining readings will be provided as pdfs on Moodle.

What is the structure of the class?

Classes will meet as weekend intensives (Fri-Sat) with opportunities to read selected works, and write, and workshop original work. The weekend intensive will meet three times in a semester with all written work being completed within the weekend. Students should be able to commit the entirety of the meeting hours to reading, writing and discussion.

In the weeks between meetings you be asked to read several short pieces of poetry, short story, or look at visual art and keep a short journal. You won't need to turn in the journal, but you will be asked to self-report how much you complete prior to each in person meeting. *In asking you to keep a journal I am hoping to help you return to poems and creative work as an ongoing practice, a practice that will also help you come into each weekend intensive a bit more attentive to the artistic sensibilities you will be asked to inhabit during our time.

What will we do?

During each session you will have time to read individually and corporately, as well as write and revise your work. Assignments will vary from session to session, but each session will have a final piece (or pieces) to be submitted by the end of the day on Sunday of the weekend intensive.

**doctoral students will also offer a longer reflection engaging critical questions of method, approach and how the readings of the week contribute to their theological work.*

***A complete schedule of readings and exercises will be available by the end of January 2024**