

EXPRESSIONS

Rhythms of the universe

BY JACQUELYN WALSH ('09)

Growing up in Thailand and India, Bethany Tobin ('06) was exposed to an eastern view of Christianity, which sparked a passion that continues to play an important role in her art. Tobin has always aspired to be an artist, and her unique experiences abroad have shaped her inspiration.

Tobin earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in studio art with a concentration in painting and drawing from JMU. This past May, she earned a Master of Theological Studies degree from Duke University where she concentrated on relating Christian practice to art theory. Tobin hopes to “be a part, in some way, of exploring Christian symbols that are Asian.”

When Tobin came to JMU in 2002 she had been focusing on drawing figures. After taking an experimental Honors Program course taught by mathematics professor Dave Pruett, Tobin began to explore ways of expressing the “rhythms of the universe and how everything is interconnected.” She began to create symbols of that interconnectedness by using patterns that were “symmetrical yet intricate and mathematical yet decorative.”

These patterns began to coalesce as mandalas — circle and square patterns — that are used as centering devices in many traditions. What makes them specifically Christian for Tobin is the center of the picture and what prayerfully becomes the center for the viewer who contemplates the mandala. For Tobin, everything in the universe finds its place in the pattern in Christ. The brightly colored decorative patterns show “how the universe is put together in an orderly and beautiful way — unity within multiplicity,” explains Tobin.



Tobin has continued to develop mandalas and is currently focusing on texture and color. Instead of allowing structure to dominate, Tobin tries to create a sense of transparency and a feeling of suspension in patterns and colors whose intensity ebbs and flows.

Tobin says the JMU art department and her professors taught her to take her goals and ambitions seriously. “The art school has a lot of fabulous facilities such as printmaking. I really learned a craft,” she says. Her former printmaking professor, Jack McCaslin,

described Tobin as “easily on par with JMU’s best graduate program students.” Participation in undergraduate student shows and exhibits helped Tobin learn how to present and discuss her work. At JMU, Tobin received the David Diller Senior Art Achievement Award and studied art and religion abroad in Oxford, a move that put her on the path to graduate school.

“Many schools around the country are waking up to the value of the arts, but so often offer no more than lip-service,” says Tobin. “It’s exciting to see JMU’s strong commitment to the arts taking shape in the new performing arts facility. This center will be an asset to not only students, but to the broader community. It will enhance students outside of the arts disciplines because their participation in the arts will also enrich their areas of study.”

After completing Dave Pruett’s honors class at JMU, Tobin found a book of geometric Islamic patterns, which serve as the framework for Islamic art and architecture. Fascinated by these patterns, she incorporated them into her artwork. Her current works, like the one at left titled *Tracey’s Mandala*, include more Buddhist, Thai and Asian influences. Tobin enjoys creating art in the studio space in her new home in Harrisonburg.

