Guided by the Light

THE WOMAN, SWATHED in a black dress, sits on the floor of a white-tiled institutional kitchen, big pots stacked behind her and beside her. Broken masonry and other rubble ring her. A light from outside the frame spills over the scene.

“Notice where the light falls.”

Donna Spaan is walking a visitor through an exhibition in Calvin College’s Center Art Gallery. She’s stopped in front of a large photograph by Marina Abramovic.

“The light falls on her hands of service and on her face of contemplation,” she says.

Craig Hanson, professor of art history at Calvin, said Spaan “is looking for art that can move people’s thinking away from the urgent and toward the important.”

In the art gallery, she heard symposium participants talking intensely but in a very literal way about the artworks on display.

She thought, “Maybe a way to move people out of that worldview would be an art collection that opens up their imaginations.”

In a sense, it was a quiet, subtle continuation of her Chicago arts seminar in a new place with new participants.

“When Donna first approached me, I talked about how the college’s art collection functions as an educational tool,” said Joel Zwart, former director of the gallery. “We have historical works that students can learn a lot from. But at that point we had very little strong contemporary work. I mentioned that gap to her.”

As she and Zwart began searching the contemporary art markets for pieces to fill that gap and enhance Calvin’s collection, they realized they needed a guiding theme. Spaan chose “Light: God’s Eternal Presence.”

“I’m trying to get viewers to focus not, first of all, on subject matter,” Spaan explained, “but on light. If we can first ask, ‘Where is the light leading me in this work? What is the light trying to do?’ then maybe we can be freed a bit from the strictly fact-based approach to the world that dominates our thinking even in the church.”

When Spaan searches for and considers new work for the collection, she asks herself—as she hopes viewers will—as she hopes viewers will—what the light is trying to do within a particular work and how it speaks to artwork already in the collection.

Zwart said Spaan has collected “weighty works by important contemporary artists” that offer education in a different way of knowing.

“In the deepest sense,” Spaan said, “God defines himself as light—all kinds of light. Ultimately, the light in these artworks leads us to say with the psalmist, ‘In thy light we see light.’”

—Gayle Boss, Calvin College

Note: This article is adapted from the original story of the same title published by Spark (Dec. 2017).