

## Laudemus

### The Eight Canonical Hours of the Divine Office & Gretchen Albrecht's Eight Hours

In the great religious traditions, praising God arises from a perception of eternity that infuses every moment. To praise is invariably by chanting – a repeated word or phrase sung communally and slowly; its breath-borne sound induces a meditative state that transcends chronological time and invokes what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*: time as opportunity or encounter.

In the Christian tradition, chant originated in the Psalms: 'O God, at dawn I search for thee'; 'At midnight I rise to praise thee.' In the eighth and ninth centuries, monastic prayer became what we know as Gregorian chant, in which monks or nuns, summoned by a bell, gathered in oratories where their voices unfurled in adoration at specified times of night and day.

The word 'hour' comes from the Greek word *hora*. *Hora* is unconcerned with twenty-four segments, but with time passing – how light appears and recedes; how air and water are cool, warm, tossed or still; how we are born, live and die. The eight hours of the Divine Office whose Latin names – Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline – are still sung in monasteries throughout the world and, with the Mass, are what binds monastic life.

Augustine called the Hours, 'The now that does not pass away.'

Gretchen Albrecht did not grow up within a formal religious tradition. She comes from a close family which celebrated one another – a builder father who taught his children how to use tools and wood; a mother who loved colour, fabric, and food: the children learnt to sew; they had camping holidays with aunts, uncles, and cousins at lakes and beaches. There was always a garden. Hers was a jostle of life in Aotearoa where everyone loved the sun, the sky, the sea, and the hurtle of hills and valleys.

For five decades, her paintings have celebrated living here. In every work, we see her eye and hand responding to landscape and colour as her paint pours, swirls, spatters, floats over canvases, initially rectangular, but becoming, 'my hemispheres', 'my ovals.' Yet within this rich colour-filled activity, there is always a seam of silence and mystery – patches of light and shade draw us to her 'sense of the ineffable.'

Perhaps her first apprehension of the numinous outside her country came in 1979 when she saw Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* in the chapel in Monterchi. 'The blue gowned Madonna pointing to her unbuttoned dress, and pregnant belly...the curved Romanesque architecture intensifying the experience of looking and understanding, and 'presenting' the image: making it visible through the fabric of the architecture. A perfect containment for revelation.'<sup>ii</sup> This is the intersection between divinity and humanity.

Recognition of Mary, both as mother of God, and 'a woman who got pregnant, gave birth, went through states I identify with,'<sup>iii</sup> has resulted during her painting life in two groups of sequential paintings. These consider Mary's responses to becoming the Mother of Jesus: Albrecht's Angelic Colloquy paintings; and later, her suffering: the

pensive sequence, 'Seven Sorrows of Mary,' as foretold by Simeon in the Temple at the presentation of Jesus.

In the 1980s, she visited Cistercian Abbeys in Provence where the beauty and austerity of a life of prayer plaited with work affected her deeply. *Eight Hours* is an antiphonal response to the eight canonical hours of the Divine Office. Albrecht has been painting them since 2018 although they have been gestating for years as fragments of poetry, photographs – of planets, stars, or skies, and lists in sketchbooks. Of her *Eight Hours* she says, 'They celebrate the day, the seasons, the year. The hours of day into night are something that everyone experiences – we all live them. Their religious underpinning provides a perfect way for me to gather in metaphor, and the physical and emotional experience of being a painter *here*.'<sup>iv</sup>

The series is also related to her four *Seasonal*/hemispheres, 1985-6, which express the transience of nature and imply a human counterpart. The sacred scaffold of *Eight Hours*, however, adds another dimension – as if Albrecht's interest in the ineffable has resulted in a more contemplative consideration of being alive. This is reflected too in her use of large undivided hemispheres rather than two quadrants whose bolted edges may imply division, separation, or reconciliation rather than the spreading, unifying possibilities of an unbroken surface.

*Eight Hours* begins and ends with two explorations of darkness: *Vigils (the night watch)*, and *Compline (darkness falls)*. In *Vigils (the night watch)*, dark wings rise in a measured pulse towards and away from the centre of her hemisphere nearly obliterating a velvet night sky. *Vigils* is customarily sung or prayed at 2a.m. in 'the womb of silence'<sup>v</sup> when detail hides and waiting is all; we must trust the dark.

In *Compline (darkness falls)*, darkness drops over a constellated sky, its pink-suffused, blue geometries float over raw canvas. In every painting, Albrecht's geometries are more or less visible depending on its mood, their serenity always anchoring the energetic sweeps of colour above them. 'I kept them here because they are a bit like marking time, like the striking of a chiming clock. In *Compline (darkness falls)*, she says, 'I deliberately left the skirt of the hemisphere exposed.' To me, it's a little line of moonlight.'<sup>vi</sup>

Between these paintings, the hours of the day release. Lauds is sung at dawn to greet the new day. In *Lauds (the coming of the light)*, bright white paint leaps at the retreating dark of the right quadrant – a rosy finger pierces it; beneath, an emerging blue suggests water, immensity, distance.

These works are the portrait of a palette and a celebration of pattern and process – as each day unfolds, so too do we, whether artist, monk, or those who live hidden lives. Daylight is for being and doing, darkness and silence for repose and reflection, and finally, death.

'To consciously mark time gives enormous significance to observing the world. The monks are between two worlds – they observe this world and are within a spiritual one.'<sup>vii</sup> *Eight Hours* flows from and towards darkness, peaking in the intensity of *Sext (noon)* when the sun is at its apex and our eyes burn in its red and gold refulgence.

We can track Albrecht's play with yellow and its variations, starting with its golden emergence in *Prime – the sun has risen*, which transforms into a daffodil-like hue in the Edenic garden of *Terce (the little hour)*, where paint runs 'a bit like water and you have the experience of going outside on a crisp spring morning.' The prayer of *Terce* is a thanks for being alive, so that in every sense yellow is associated with light and sight: what can we see as we live and work?

After *Sext* comes *None* (*shadows begin to lengthen*). The sun is sinking, shadows extend, a purple lustre spreads towards the departing sun. The chant of *None* acknowledges both impermanence: we die, and continuity: each note passes and another follows – ‘the now that does not pass away.’ The sun has almost set in *Vespers* (*the lighting of the lamps*). Both waning sun and lamplight are united in the serene golden bar of the geometry at the base of the painting and the swishing glow above it.

Rilke wrote in his *Book of Hours*, ‘Nothing has been real without my seeing it, all becoming has needed me. My looking ripens things and they come toward me, to meet and be met.’<sup>viii</sup> *Eight Hours* is Gretchen Albrecht’s magnificent response to seeing, meeting, and making.

- Laudemus.

Catharina van Bohemen, 2022

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Introduction: Psalms 63:1, 119:62, English Standard Version, Confessions of Augustine

<http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/web%20publishing/AugustineBookXI.htm> retrieved 28/01/22

i Conversation with GA 1 Dec 2021

ii Letter to CvB 2008

iii Conversation with GA,

iv Conversation with GA, Dec 3 2021

v David Steindl-Rast with Sharon Lebell, *Music of Silence – A Sacred Journey Through the Hours of the Day*, Seastone (2002, published by arrangement with HarperSanFrancisco, a division of HarperCollins publishers) p.20

vi Conversation with GA, Dec 3 2021

vii Conversation with GA,

viii *Rilke’s Book of Hours – Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, Riverhead Books (NewYork: The Berkley Publishing Group,1997) p.47