



"THE CROSSES WE BEAR"

**ENVIRONMENTALLY CONCERNED WORKS
BY CAROLYN OBERST, FROM 1990 TO 1994**

ON VIEW: SEPTEMBER 30, 2022 – SPRING, 2023

PRESENTED BY

**The Historic Christ Church Chapel
Christ Episcopal Church
90 Kings Highway
Middletown, New Jersey 07748
www.christchurchmiddletown.org**

Front Cover

"Burning the Tree of Life" – 1992
Oil on Shaped Canvas
93 x 78 inches

Adding my voice against the destruction of the rain forest that helps to sustain all life;
this painting was like a scream.

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Design and edited by Romeo Rafila (www.webdesignro.com).



Artist's Statement

Since I started making art in the late 70's, I had always drawn from my surroundings, my personal life, for subject matter. But in the early 90's, dismayed by the destruction of the planet, that was only just beginning to be universally recognized, I felt the need to make a statement to try to call attention to the issue. I started researching both life forms and ecosystems that were being affected by the warming of the planet and decided to make paintings of some of them.

But how to make these works stand out and get the message across?

While a symbol of Christianity, I felt that separate from the religious association, the cross shape would connote both a sign of pain and suffering as well as a call to action. Making the paintings in the standard rectangular shape would not be the "shout out" I was looking for. The cross indicates that this is not the usual, this is important, and attention should be paid. The title of the series, "The Crosses We Bear", expresses the concept that the burdens of this degradation are universal.

I made this group of paintings and could have made more given the plethora of subjects to choose from, but the reception to the work was cold. People were put off by the cross shape, as they didn't see it could reflect more than Christianity; that it had universal meaning. At the time, only one painting was ever shown. Recently, given the new urgency that people feel for this subject, three more have made it briefly into the public realm, most recently in the summer of 2021 at the Limner gallery in Hudson, NY.

My dream from the start was to show them together as I always felt that an exhibition like that would make the most powerful statement. It seems that the time finally came, and I am thrilled to be able to have these paintings assembled in such a beautiful, spiritually endowed, venue, as The Historic Church of the Christ Episcopal Church in Middletown, NJ.

Carolyn Oberst

2022

“Crucified Tree” – 1990
Oil on Shaped Canvas
90 x 59 inches

The impulse behind this image was a similar plea to Burning the Tree of Life. As deforestation was on the rise in 1990, trees were becoming more and more vulnerable to destruction.

Whether burning them down, or over-cutting, trees were a threatened entity. Relating this destruction to a crucifixion made sense to me, something good being killed off in a slow and painful way.

Gradually, over time, this misuse of a vital resource would take a toll. I could see that the world would pay a price for this transgression.

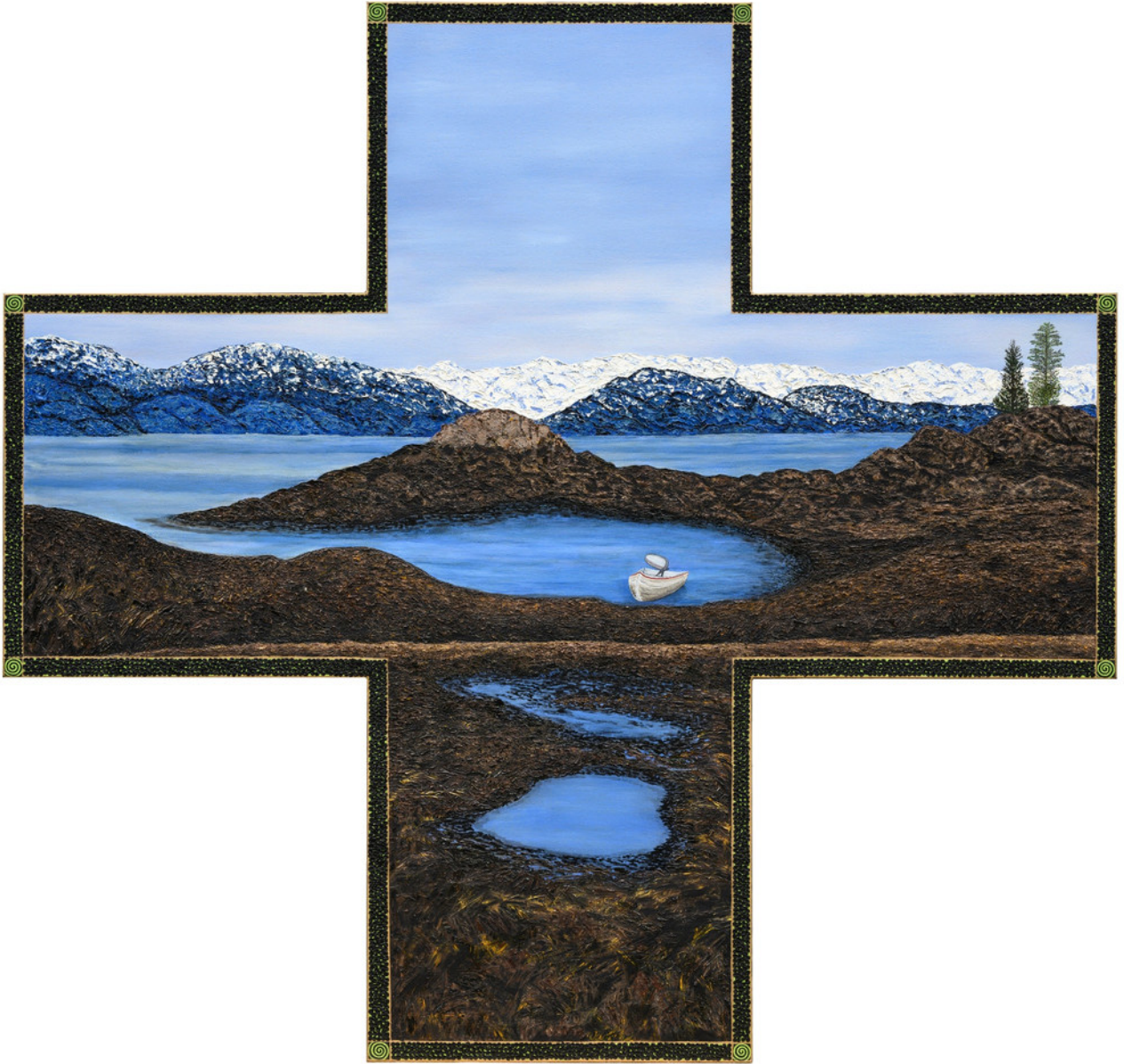


“Oil Spill” – 1992
Oil on Shaped Canvas
80 x 84 inches

The Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred in Prince William Sound, west of Tatitlek, Alaska, on March 24, 1989, and spilled 10.8 million US gallons of crude oil over the next few days. At the time, it was the largest oil spill in US waters. The images of birds covered in tar were terrifying and depressing. The images of this incident led me to make this painting.

The record of that spill has since been superseded by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While well known that our dependence on fossil fuels could lead to many disasters, nothing was ever done to change the equation. Another example of how refusal to protect the planet has dire consequences for all.

Lately, this painting has come to also represent the perma-frost that's disappearing. So, it seems to cover two topics at once.



"Disappearing Frog" – 1993
Oil on Shaped Canvas
22 x 20 inches

My family and I had a summer house in what's referred to as the NE Kingdom of Vermont. It is called that because it is an extremely beautiful, and unspoiled area of the state. A very rural environment. For example, our house was 10 miles from a paved road.

Behind the house we had created a beautiful pond from what had originally been a swamp. Early in the summer, the pond would fill up with tadpoles. Little black creatures that would swim around near the edge, making the water look black. After a while, they would become tiny frogs and start to disappear. Amazing that they all found somewhere to go. It was a very strange phenomenon and was a traditional start to our summer.

As the years went on, there were fewer and fewer tadpoles/frogs. After a while, none. We learned that acid rain was killing off the frog populations, and like the proverbial canaries in a coal mine, were a symbol of the pollution affecting even a pristine area like rural Vermont. The pollution was not being produced in Vermont but was coming from factories in the mid-west.

There are no boundaries, we are all connected.



"Endangered Birds" – 1993
Oil on Shaped Canvas
44 ½ x 32 inches

By this point, I realized that these cross paintings were becoming a series. So, I began researching endangered species, and, of course, birds came up.

I had done a few watercolor and ink drawings of birds as portraits, so birds were on my mind as I researched. Rather than do them as individuals, as I had in the bird portraits, I decided to see if I could create a composition that would include many of the endangered birds, to show how dire the situation was becoming.

I chose among familiar and beloved species, like types of parrots and cockatoos that were in trouble, which I felt would make the statement more shocking, in order to help wake people up to what was being lost.



"Endangered Monarchs" – 1993
Oil + Mixed Media on Shaped Canvas
48 x 42 inches

The news that we were getting about Monarch butterflies around this time, was that due to changing climate, the situations in their usual habitats were changing to their detriment. There were unusual, extreme cold events in Mexico where they go for the winter. Higher heat in the eastern US also meant coming devastation for the monarch populations.

More recently, the widespread decline of monarchs is driven by the massive spraying of herbicides on genetically engineered crops, which has virtually eliminated monarch habitat in cropland that dominates the Midwest landscape. This loss of milkweed has contributed more than anything else to the decline of the monarch population. Drought, illegal logging of fir trees in Mexico's forests also pose a threat.

While a concern in 1993, all of these things have now landed the monarch on the Endangered Species List.



“Endangered Cheetah” – 1993
Oil on Shaped Canvas
29 x 27 inches

By this time, we had been hearing about polar bears, and other large mammals that were becoming threatened, but when I found this image of a cheetah, there was something about its eyes that really touched me. They seemed to be asking for help. Their beautiful coats, their famous strength and speed, made them a compelling animal to champion. But, as with all the others in this series, things have only gotten worse since the early 1990's.

Here's some compelling current info:

Cheetahs face extinction pressure from climate change, hunting by humans, and habitat destruction, which is reducing the size of their populations. Cheetahs' own genes also pose a challenge to their continued survival.

Cheetahs have a low rate of reproductive success, meaning that as a species they are not always able to reproduce. With fewer offspring, the population can neither grow nor adapt to changes in the environment. As the population of wild cheetahs dwindles, only time will tell if they can survive.



“Endangered Western Lilly” – 1994
Oil on Shaped Canvas
30 x 22 inches

I love lilies and was sad when I discover this endangered one.

lilium occidentale is a rare North American species of lily known by the common name **western lily**. It is native to northwestern California and southwestern Oregon. It grows in coastal prairie habitat, swamps and stagnant bogs, bluffs, sandy cliffs, and seaside spruce forests.

This rare wildflower is limited in distribution and directly endangered by many environmental factors. It is a federally listed endangered species and it is also listed as endangered by the states of California and Oregon.

The western lily has experienced significant habitat loss due to bog draining and filling, land conversion for agriculture, urban development, and road construction. Habitat degradation due to fire suppression has adversely affected this species; encroaching shrubs and trees block sunlight and can change hydrology. Soil compaction, plant collecting and flower picking, and grazing can also be harmful to western lilies. When the plant was listed as an endangered species in 1994, there were 2,000 to 3,000 remaining.



“Endangered Puzzle Sunflower” – 1993
Oil on Shaped Canvas
22 x 30 inches

In addition to trees, large animals, birds, and frogs, I wanted to include in this series the kinds of plants that we all take for granted. Things that one would not suspect could be “endangered”. In my research I discovered the Puzzle Sunflower. Tall, but delicate with gorgeous yellow flowers, it reminded me of the more common sunflowers with which we are familiar.

These sunflower plants are found only in West Texas, Utah, and New Mexico in salt marshes. Although the Puzzle Sunflower has narrow habitat requirements, only occurring in highly saline wetlands within deserts, these wetlands are continuously threatened by habitat degradation, groundwater withdrawal, competition from non-native species, grazing, and gas exploration.

The Puzzle Sunflower was added to the Endangered Species Act in 1999.



“Endangered Peter’s Mountain Mallow” – 1993
Oil on Shaped Canvas
15 x 13 inches

On our property in Vermont, mallows grew like weeds. Pretty, common, unstoppable. So, it was interesting to me when I discovered a variety that is considered one of the rarest native plants in the US, is a federally listed endangered species, and is near extinction. There is one small population of this plant located on Peter’s Mountain in western Virginia.

Efforts have been underway for many years to keep these plants alive, and they seem to be successful for a small group of them.







Art in the historic Christ Church Chapel

Christ Church has occupied a prominent position along Kings Highway for nearly 325 years. Even before its official founding in 1702, the site where Christ Church Chapel now stands was used as a community house. The foundation on which the current Chapel was later built dates to the late 1680's, long before English missionaries set foot in the area.

Over the centuries Christ Church has served Middletown in various ways – first and foremost as a house of worship but also, in its first century, as a field hospital during the Revolutionary War and a safe haven for refugees fleeing one army or the other, and even, according to local legend, for pirates who haunted the waters off Sandy Hook! It has been a fixture in the life of Middletown ever since.

The historic Christ Church Chapel is intertwined with the history of our community and as such should be considered a community asset for all to enjoy. In this spirit we at Christ Church are deeply desirous of offering our beautiful spaces (both the historic Chapel and our larger, more modern Church) as destinations for the whole community – for prayer and worship, yes, but also for art and music, intellectual stimulation, and civic gatherings of all types.

Therefore, we are so pleased to host “The Crosses We Bear.” Carolyn Oberst’s cross shaped paintings, inspired by the devastating effects of climate change. These paintings offer a powerful call to all people to accept that human intervention has endangered plant and animal life across the planet and to consider ways to end this environmental crisis. This is a message that fits very neatly into the church’s call for humans to treasure all of creation and to serve as its stewards entrusted with the care and protection of the natural world.

Our goal in hosting this exhibition is twofold. First, to inspire those who attend to take further action to save our planet, hopefully both as individuals committed to fighting climate change and collectively as participants, working for environmentally concerned organizations. And second, we hope that “The Crosses We Bear” will serve as just the first of many events where both the Chapel and the larger Church enrich our community through the celebration of art and music.

The Rev. Michael Way



The site of this building was originally a block house built in 1684. It was used for various things as Middletown at that time was the County Seat. A priest of the church of England, who came to Middletown in 1680, held the first services in his home. That is considered the origin of the parish, but it wasn't officially recorded until 1701. The block house was then used as a church from 1702 to 1744. In 1738, King George II of England granted Christ Church an official charter and the first actual church was built in 1744 on the same spot.

The present building was erected around the old frame in 1836 and is now known as the Historic Christ Church Chapel, of the Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown, NJ, and is an anchor in the Middletown Historic District.

From the Diocese of New Jersey
The Right Reverend William H. Strokes, Bishop of New Jersey

Edgar Degas is reported to have once observed, “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.” Clearly, the collection of Carolyn Oberst’s works, “The Crosses We Bear,” on exhibit at the historic chapel of Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown through December 31, 2022, belie that thought.

In this collection of provocative works, inspired by the crises of violent environmental degradation and life-threatening global warming, Oberst “sees” the crucifying of the planet and the natural world around us and wants those who view her art to see this as well. Through stunning, evocative paintings of endangered nature framed in crosses of different sizes, accompanied by brief narratives of the threat each element of the planet’s life portrayed faces, Oberst challenges viewers to see our suffering planet.

As author and theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson notes “The cross is a mysterious and profound sign that God enters into the darkest trials of human suffering, death, and despair” (Creation and Cross – The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril - Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018, p. 187). For the Christian believer, the cross is also, paradoxically, a symbol of God’s ultimate power to “make all things new.” The brightness and beauty of Oberst’s works invite those who gaze at them to hope and, perhaps, be stirred to action in support of that hope.

Throughout history, religion and the arts have often danced together to provide rich, spiritual, insights for humanity. Carolyn Oberst’s collection “The Crosses We Bear” seems to me to be one more example in this rich history. I am thrilled that the collection is being displayed in what strikes me as a perfect venue – the historic chapel at Christ Episcopal Church, Middletown. The simple beauty of this chapel space provides a profound background for the brilliancy of Oberst’s paintings. There is much in this exhibit that will feed the souls of all who care for this planet we all inhabit, believer and unbeliever alike.

The Right Reverend William H. Strokes, Bishop of New Jersey



Climate Change Activism Through Art!
Carolyn Oberst
"The Crosses We Bear"

The Historic Christ Church Chapel
September 30th - November 16th

The banner features ten crosses arranged in two rows of five. Each cross contains a different nature-themed illustration: butterflies, a blue sky with clouds, a sunset over water, a white flower, a palm tree, a tree, a leopard, a green plant, a cross with flowers, and a colorful bird.







Thank you to Jeff Way, Rev. Michael Way, and Peter Moles for executing a challenging installation which resulted in a beautiful and moving exhibition.



Carolyn Oberst is a visual artist whose colorful work is influenced by the different, yet interconnected worlds around her.



“THE CROSSES WE BEAR”

Paintings by Carolyn Oberst

Theme of Endangered Species and Global Warming.

www.carolynoberst.com
oberst.carolyn@gmail.com
[@oberst.carolyn](https://www.instagram.com/oberst.carolyn)

Presented by

The Rev Michael Way
In the Historic Christ Church Chapel

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90 Kings Highway, Middletown, NJ 07748
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