

An explosion of color and light bursts from the canvas. A modern day icon, it glitters with gold leaf and precious metals surrounding a luminous palette of color. The overall impression is one of energy, positive and glowing. The shapes suggest the elements of the universe, sunbursts, starbursts, moonlight, and, beneath it all, the earth. This is the canvas of Janie Domengeaux-Bayard, a Lafayette artist whose canvasses hang in the office of French President Jacques Chirac and in the office of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco.

Much of Domengeaux-Bayard's work reflects a strong, but lively spirituality engendered by a series of stressful experiences surrounding the death of her sister's husband Tony Moroux in 1992. Previously, she had received training in painting at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and had taught art at local schools. She describes her painting at that time as impressionistic or figural. But in 1992 she experienced a deeply spiritual event. On the Moroux's patio, looking up into the hazy evening clouds, she became aware of a special and potent force at work. Light, shapes and colors formed in the heavens, a sight she still considers something of a miracle. Colors were spinning out of the sun, pouring out. Strange clouds and shapes formed. "The sun, she says "came out like a white host." She first shared her vision with relatives and friends, and then began to paint, attempting to convey what she had seen

The joyful and energetic paintings which emerged are something of a miracle in themselves. "Somebody upstairs," she says "used me to paint" those images. She faced the large blank canvasses, and "I just started. I feel that He did it, He used me." Two years later she donated those first large panel paintings, which she calls "modern-day tapestries" to Lafayette's Fatima Church to "pass it on." (They may be seen today hanging near the altar of that church.) Even now, years later, she does not feel that she is fully responsible for what appears on her canvasses. "It surprises me," she says, "when they come together."

"Sometimes I paint in my sister's attic. There's a lot of room up there to lay out my canvas. I don't know what I really do — I just come in with the paint and start in with the colors. Sometimes I use a brush, a hand, scratch it with the end of a brush — however the spirit moves me."

Before her experience in 1992, she was influenced by primitive, aboriginal, Egyptian, Byzantine, and African art. Those influences are still visible in her paintings today. "I guess I'll just never change," she says. The "Painted Tapestries" combine suggestions of rich Egyptian images of a heavenly afterlife with reminiscences of African mud cloth with its rich earthy tones of brown, ochre, and black, and its bold sense of design. The paintings are, she admits, an attempt to "connect heaven and earth."

Typically, her canvasses are unframed, and smaller works are painted on silk or linen. Most often their edges are frayed, as though from age and use. Sometimes she employs "patches," smaller pieces of cloth with different designs, affixed to the canvas, as though what she has seen is being revised or corrected. Her canvasses seem to represent Memory elaborated upon by time and experience. Not satisfied with merely sharing her vision through flat canvas, she has taken to painting on furniture. (She applies gold leaf to Upholstery.) She has also made forays into sculpture assemblages, and what she calls "drum covers," small round plaques designed to serve as a kind of "porthole" to her vision. Finally there are her "Reveries," paintings of women subjects of many types, united by a dream-like sense of spirituality.

She is often somewhat reticent to talk about the paintings now, preferring to let her work carry whatever message there may be in her experience. "It's just the simplicity of it that I like." Her experience is a "message beyond words."