

# Making a Mark

## Christine Brooks Cote



THE IDEA FOR THIS ISSUE’S THEME, “Making a Mark,” came from artist and poet [Karla Van Vliet](#), whose words and images have been part of *Still Point Arts Quarterly* for a very long time. About a year ago, Karla sent me some samples from her most recent collection of artwork—explorations of asemic writing. The images pushed all my buttons—in a good

way: strong color, dark palette, abstraction, calligraphic marks, geometric forms, texture, simplicity coupled with intensity. I know I’ve found something wonderful if I can look at it endlessly and have no impulse to name it and no need to use words to talk about it, but only want to experience it and allow it to soak into my pores.

*(In case you’re wondering, I love Agnes*

*Martin and Mark Rothko and even Jackson Pollock . . . all those abstract expressionists who clearly have something to say but either cannot or refuse to come right out and say it. Some things are better experienced than explained.)*

Then came the suggestion that we devote an issue of the *Quarterly* to mark-making. We would include some of Karla’s artwork as well as excerpts from her essay about asemic writing. After some back and forth, we settled on a title—“Making a Mark.” Surely, artists would find many ways to respond to that theme. How would writers interpret it? I had no reason to worry.

LET’S BACK UP JUST A BIT. WHAT IS ASEMIC writing? In an excellent piece entitled “[Asemic Writing and Radical Deconstruction: The Philosophy of Non\(Sens\)](#),” writer and artist Todd Burst draws from poet Michael Jacobson when he says that asemic writing is *wordless writing, visual literature without meaning*. It is a shadow, an impression, and an abstraction of conventional writing. It is “a visual experience that lies beyond meaning. It is writing that expresses itself as such and goes no farther.” Sounds like someone clearly has something to say but can’t come out and say it. Maybe there are no words for it. Maybe the words haven’t yet come to mind. Maybe words are simply insufficient. As an aesthetic object, asemic writing easily and seamlessly becomes artwork.

In the short essay that accompanies her artwork in this issue (pages 46 through 55), Karla describes her connection to asemic writing this way: “At first, I am heady about the subject, how it inhabits an essential space

Check out this great [video](#) featuring asemic writing: “Asemic Writing and Other Pleasures,” by Francesca Biasetton.

of expression, depicting what is not yet fully denotational. But the very thing that draws me to asemic writing is the place it rises from. For me it embraces the mystery between silence—what is yet to be spoken—and the semantics of known language. What is represented are the feelings or ideas that the word, or markings, suggests to the artist and to the viewer.”

MARK MAKING IS CENTRAL TO THE CREATION and even the idea of art. Any time a brush or pencil strikes a surface, a mark is made, perhaps a dot, a line, or a shape. There is, in fact, a group of artists referred to as mark makers, and many of them also fit within the abstract expressionist category: the aforementioned Martin, Rothko, and Pollock, as well as Willem de Kooning (both a painter and sculptor), Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Cy Twombly (who was influenced by the tradition of calligraphy in his art-making), and more. But we should not limit our view of mark makers to any specific group. Think of Vincent van Gogh’s thick dabs of paint put in place with a brush or palette knife. George Seurat, the impressionist whose paintings were done with millions of tiny dots. Going back many hundreds of years, Japanese calligraphers and enso painters were masters of mark-making using a brush and ink.

Indeed, looking back through art history, we see that marks can range from those that are gestural and abstract to those that are figurative and precise. And that tells us that at some level, of course, all art is mark-making. No matter what period we consider, it all starts with someone using some tool to place a dot, line, dab, or shape on a surface. And not just painters—sculptors make marks by pushing or pulling or sanding their medium. Photographers manipulate light and movement to make marks, marks that may be bright or in



shadow, clear or blurry, sharp or grainy. The thrill is to see how artists connect the various marks they make to create the final work of art.

WHERE ELSE CAN WE GO WITH THIS IDEA OF “Making a Mark?” This simple phrase carries multiples meanings. Think of the marks put down by nature—the carving of land done by moving glaciers, valleys created by rushing water, cracks in rocks created by frozen water, rubble created by earthquakes and wind, the swooping lines created by falling stars. Think of the ways people leave their mark—by being kind and generous and loving, or, quite differently, by causing pain and suffering. Think of the ways people are marked—by crimes they commit, by past behaviors they can’t shed, by the color of their skin, the place they’re from, the beliefs they hold dear. The various essays and stories and poems in this issue explore these and more.

FOR EXAMPLE, IN THIS ISSUE, DR. THOMAS Davison writes about his experiences teaching prisoners, people who are forever marked—by a crime they committed, yes, but many were marked long before their crime-committing days by poverty, abuse, or drugs.

**I snatched up the piece of broken yellow chalk and wrote my name in big bold yellow letters. I spun around to face my class and strolled across a white line painted on the scarred wooden floor with the words NO INMATES ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT!**

People carry with them marks that result from pain—emotional pain caused by abuse or neglect or trauma; physical pain caused by violence or

disease or accident. No one can escape it. Prakash Kumar Mahato covers this in his poem “The Pain.”

Every pain has left a mark  
Though not all externally visible  
But when a tough time comes  
My pain whispers to me  
We are meeting again  
And I endure it with affection  
For all it has done for me  
It has made my fragile body strong  
My bones, harder  
My intentions, firm  
And my beliefs, unshakable

Roudri Bandyopadhyay, in “Forbidden Blood,” writes about the marks placed upon women by societies that for thousands of years have not allowed them the same opportunities as men;

these marks made real by the actual staining of menstruation.

“My dear, women aren’t allowed to enter the temple during this time. It’s impure. You are impure during this time. You will pollute the goddess.” I stare at her in disbelief. I am impure? But I just showered and put on fresh new clothes. I am impure because something is happening to my body that I didn’t even ask for?

Dave Gregory writes about being mesmerized by face painting as an art form and learning that “Anyone can find beauty, but the real joy, the richest reward, lies in its creation, in crafting a universe from whatever materials are in reach.”





The second artist wore beige canvas cargo pants, sandals, and an oversized white T-shirt. Like a butcher’s apron, it grew more colorful as his work progressed. He painted galaxies, masterworks of light and infinity. Natural contours of chins, brows, and cheek bones gave depth to planetary surfaces; freckles were repainted as starscapes; tiny spacecraft perched on noses, surveying the heavens beyond, full of asteroids, meteors, black holes, quasars, red giants, and white dwarfs.

Paula Penna sits down to draw with her daughter and learns that making marks on paper can teach us about marks on our lives.

**My daughter was off and running already on her own picture, head down close to**

the page, black marker in her right hand, an earnest look on her face. She had no fear. Me? I was breaking a sweat. For what felt like years, I could not dare to put my pen to paper. My daughter looked over at me and whispered, “Mommy, aren’t you going to draw a dragon with me? This is so much fun!”

Then there are marks left by time—physical and emotional. Mary Lane Potter, in her piece “Runes,” treasures the scratches and scuffs on an old wooden table.

**I study them, the impressions left by time, and sometimes I caress them. The ones whose origins I can trace—ashen water rings, a ghostly circle where a too-hot soup bowl rested, dull patches where the oil finish has worn away, a Macanudo cigarillo**

**burn, traces of permanent marker from my son’s protest posters, a blackened four-inch scrape dug by my daughter’s runaway Exacto blade, . . .**

Gregory Stephens brings up the complicated topic of being marked by our culture and upbringing . . . and what we go through to accept it or reject it.

**When I ask myself the metaphysical question, “What are you doing here?” my thinking is shaped by that scriptural tradition in which my parents raised**

**me. It has marked me in profound ways that I no longer try to escape.**

Then there are kind and generous people who leave their mark wherever they go. Bethany Bruno tells us about her unforgettable Uncle Bob, and similarly, Joe Kowalski tells us about Daria Washington.

**THIS IS ONLY PART OF THE STORY. THERE ARE countless ways to think about mark-making. As always, I hope you enjoy reading and browsing through this issue. May you find something that inspires you, energizes you, or amazes you. Then, go out and make your own mark.** ❖



CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts Publishing in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. As an editor, writer, photographer, one-time data analyst and higher education administrator, and a full-time observer of daily life, Christine draws from a diverse background and a wide range of experiences to curate the work of artists and writers that comes to her from creative people all over the world. Christine edits and publishes the quarterly art and literary journal *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and designs and produces books of poetry and prose that cover topics from nature and spirituality to music and memoir. Born in Milwaukee and raised in southern California, she has called Maine—a Mecca for nature lovers and artists—her home for the last twenty-five years. Visit [shantiarts.com](http://shantiarts.com) and [christinecotephoto.com](http://christinecotephoto.com) for more news and information.