

# Tim Lowly

*To Do. To Be.*

Robert T. Wright  
Community Gallery of Art



College of Lake County

## Tim Lowly

To do. To be.

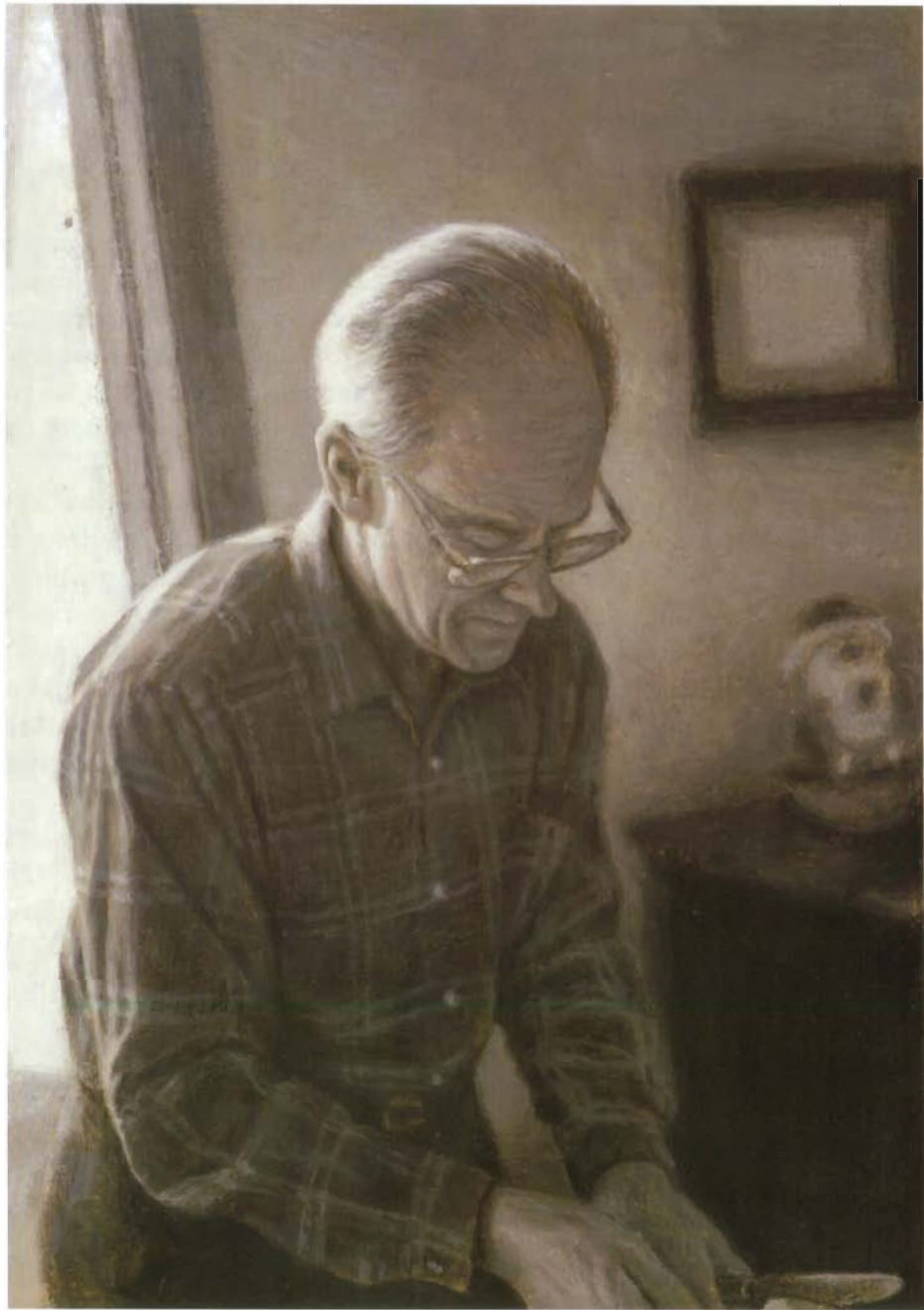
Seemingly contradictory, they are the two most basic components of existence. One implies the inevitable tasks that confront us every day, the other a kind of surrender. Hand in hand, occurring simultaneously or separately, they propel us through the years. We work, cook, talk, read, eat, play, clean, organize. We are.

The relationship between doing and being infuses recent works by Tim Lowly, who has explored themes of spirituality and the mysteries encountered in every life in representational paintings and sculptures. Lowly sees the concepts of doing and being as complementary rather than conflicting, examining both the contrasts and the overlaps between the two.

Much of Lowly's work over the last 17 years refers directly or indirectly to his daughter Temma, who is severely physically and mentally disabled. Temma defies our assumptions about the merits of doing by her very essence, prompting a consideration of an alternative, parallel reality and the ineffable qualities of her inner life. What does she see and feel? What does she know? We are left to wonder and examine our own perceptions.

Indeed, Lowly's art leads us to questions of the utmost importance: How well can we know another person, even someone close to us? How well can we know ourselves? How can we relate to the world of objects and appearances when what is truly important remains invisible and ultimately incomprehensible? Lowly has engaged with questions such as these through art for most of his life, rendering his investigations in profoundly moving and visually compelling terms.

Unlike Lowly's recent exhibitions, which focused on his daughter being cared for by his wife, images of Temma appear in this show only twice. Viewers first encounter a stoneware sculpture depicting Temma lying on the ground, her figure equated in some way with the stillness of earth, the folds of her clothing melting into the support beneath her. Toward the end of the exhibition is a small tempera painting of Temma lying on a quilt, the image deliberately blurred like many of his most recent works.



*Setting the Table*, 1999  
acrylic gesso with pigment on panel  
10" x 7"

On the wall behind these works is Lowly's "to do" list, a poetic mixture of the sublime, the startling and the practical. The list can be read as a balance to the concept of being that is embodied by Temma, as well as Lowly's response to the death of his father in 1999. The list implies the taking of steps and moving on, reflecting the organization of the exhibition as an interior journey marked by life-altering events.

In the rest of the paintings Lowly portrays other members of his immediate family engaged in simple tasks—preparing for a meal, stopping on a gravel road on a summer day—and at rest. He offers quiet scenes stripped of the whirl and bustle of daily routine and imbued with numinous radiance. Most of the paintings and drawings on view are done in subtle color or in black and white, as if searing light had bleached the canvases. The paintings are clearly contemporary but also appear timeless, their subjects inhabiting an otherworldly realm.

As in all of his art, Lowly avoids didacticism and sentimentality and elevates highly personal subject matter to a universal realm. An austere portrait of his mother entitled "Alma" was inspired by her grief over the loss of her husband, but becomes a meditation on humility and simplicity. The subject and the means employed in creating it are perfectly balanced. Its soft, worn texture, the result of Lowly's scraping and sanding of painted paper, leaves the impression of many layers of experience and an acceptance of life's inevitable hardships.

Lowly depicts her in profile against a blank wall that is close to the shade of her gray hair, her only adornment a small barrette. She looks down at something we can't see—a book, maybe, or a patch of sunlight on the floor. As in Lowly's images of Temma, the woman sits just out of our reach. We watch from the other side of the looking glass, witnesses to her silent reverie.

"Setting the Table," a portrait of Lowly's father, is similarly introspective and evocative. We only know the figure's action from the title of the work; Lowly has cropped the image at his hands. He bends toward what we imagine is a table and looks down like the female figure in the previous portrait. Sunshine pours in from a window behind him, illuminating his head, shoulders and back with white light. In this painting Lowly captures the union of doing and being—someone immersed in a mundane task that somehow becomes an amplification of his being.

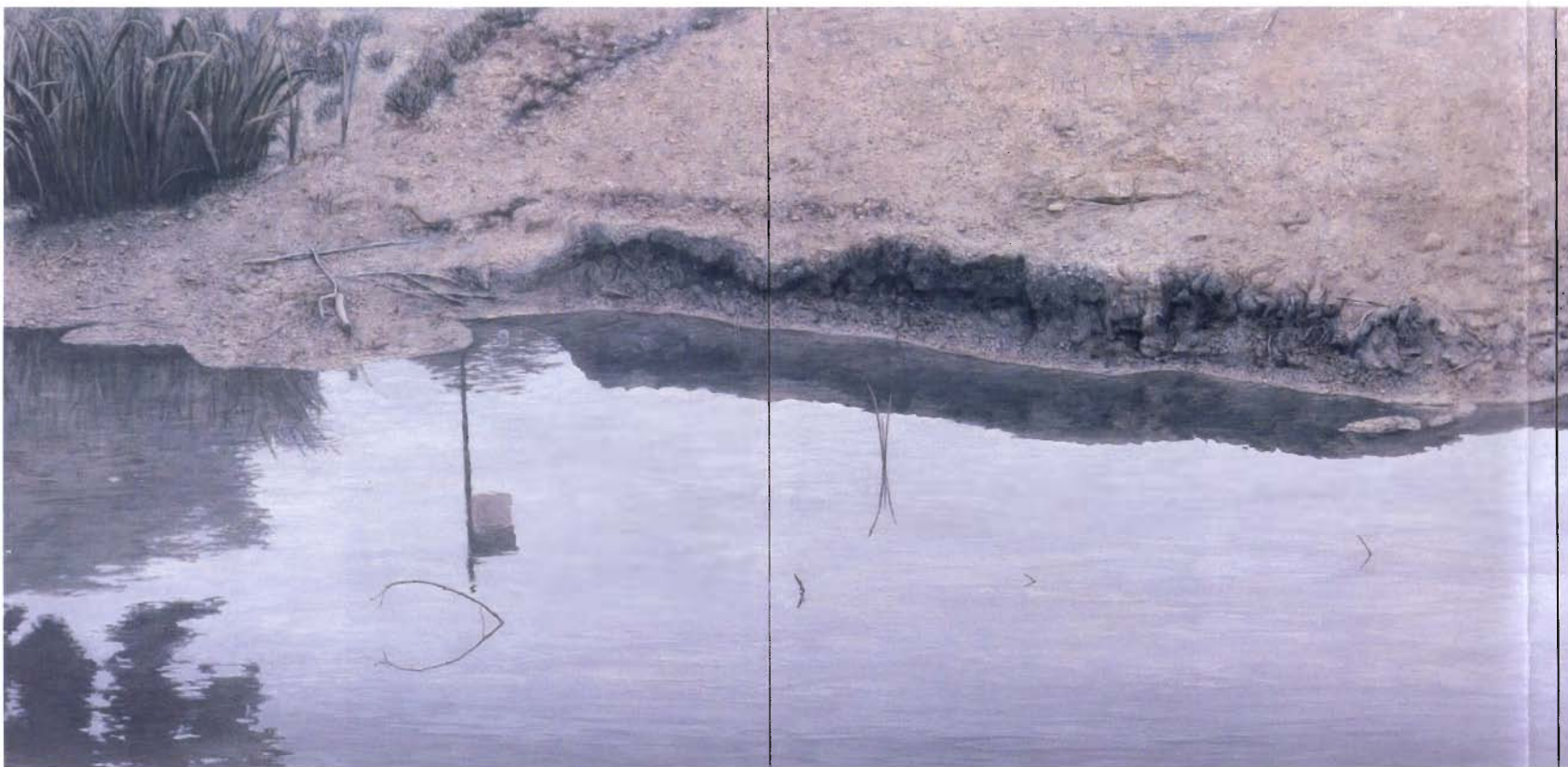


*Light as Air*, 1999  
acrylic gesso with pigment on panel  
66" x 48"

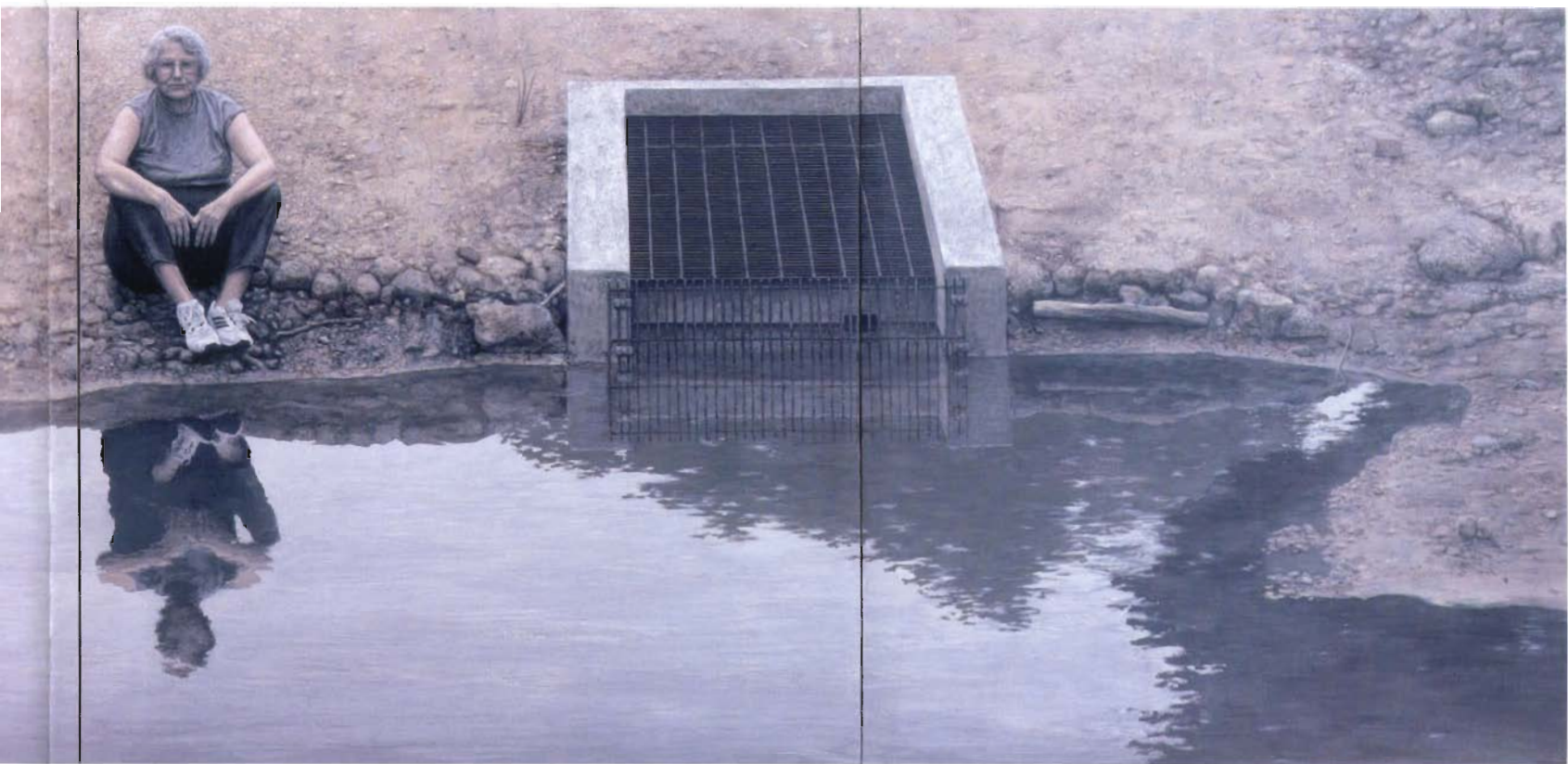
Lowly often bases his paintings on photographs not only because it suits his aesthetic purposes but also because of photography's ability to convey a sense of memory and nostalgia. This quality is most apparent in the remarkable "Light as Air," which Lowly painted from a photograph taken 20 years ago. At the time he was visiting his parents in South Korea where they were working as medical missionaries and where he had spent most of his childhood.

The image is blurred and out of focus just like the original photo, which Lowly snapped by mistake while on a hike with his parents. We see his mother climbing up a steep outcropping of rock and his father standing at the top, his figure appearing to dissolve in bright light. The painting is full of rhythmic, abstracted patterns found in the stones, as well as the trees, which impose a lattice over much of the pale band of sky. The extreme vertical perspective is dizzying and the figures are small in relation to the impenetrable wall of rock, which fills up most of the canvas. One feels the physical separation between the seer and those seen and wants to call to the pair, "Don't go! Come back!"

In contrast to the verticality of "Light as Air" is the monumental, horizontal painting "Woman by Water," which also portrays the human figure located in an outdoor environment. An older woman, again Lowly's mother, sits on the bank of some dusty, barren waterway, an unlikely, unromantic setting. Hers is the only gaze in the exhibition that meets ours but we are unable to read her expression across the stretch of stagnant water because she is slightly out of focus. What is striking is her stillness and that of the water, which offers up her reflection. She sits by the water, she rests. She is.



*Woman by Water, 1999*  
acrylic gesso with pigment on panel  
4 x 16 feet





Such stillness pervades the exhibition's series of four subsequent paintings, which are more intimate in scale and meant to be seen as two discrete pairs. One pair continues his depictions of his parents, seen here separately. His father lies in a hospital bed surrounded by darkness but illuminated by an overhead light. His mother stands amid a small clearing on a mountainside. She is dwarfed by the white sky and the mountain's swell and the trees, a tiny being seen within nature's immensity.

The aloneness of the two figures, each confronting different unknown voids, suggests the depiction of the individual in the early 19th century Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Like Friedrich, Lowly seeks to convert the material world into the realm of the spirit.

That influence continues in the paintings "Wiper" and the slightly larger "Rainbow," small canvases with big emotional and visual impact. Like Friedrich's 1810 masterpiece "Monk by the Sea," the two are filled with a moody, overcast sky that radiates in places. In "Rainbow" thin stretches of earth and trees in silhouette meet this grand sky, which is traversed by an almost colorless rainbow that implies hope. Unlike Friedrich's work, the scene is devoid of people, increasing the scene's awe and immediacy.

"Wiper" strengthens the exhibition's theme of a journey. It locates the viewer inside a car driving down a narrow rural highway toward a horizon that glows beneath dark clouds. The arc made by a windshield wiper crosses part of the landscape and echoes the shape of a rainbow. The arc makes us aware we are viewing the scene through glass and suggests that the painting is a meditation on the act of seeing.



*Dad/bed*, 2001  
acrylic on panel  
9" x 12.5"



Untitled (wiper), 2001  
acrylic on panel  
8" x 10"



*Mom/mountain*, 2001  
acrylic on panel  
9" x 11'

Intimations on the act of seeing appear again in "Turnaround," the final painting. The work refers to the last of Lowly's "to do" items: Trouble the water. Again a woman sits by water, but in this work it is the artist's wife and she bends over a puddle. She is depicted on a tree-bordered gravel road that is often used as a turnaround for tourists when they realize they have driven past their destination.

Both the title and the image suggest some kind of transformation or reconsideration, through looking. The woman throws a pebble into the puddle and watches as concentric rings alter her reflection, a circular shape that is echoed in the sweep of gravel behind her. It is a small gesture but one that has physical and spiritual resonance. Water has the power to summon the depth of the unconscious even in the form of a puddle.

Throughout the exhibition Lowly provides glimpses into a recognizable world intensified by an awareness of the divinity inherent in all things. It is a view marked by a preternatural calm and evenness of time, ruled by internal reality rather than external demands. His commitment to this vision compels us to stop and meditate on the mystery contained in belief and action.

Lisa Stein, a freelance writer based in Evanston, writes regularly about visual art for the *Chicago Tribune* and other publications.



*Turnaround*, 2002  
acrylic on panel  
48" x 70"

## TIM LOWLY

Tim Grubbs Lowly was born in Henderson, North Carolina in 1958. The son of medical missionaries, he spent most of his youth in South Korea. He attended Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan where he received a BFA degree in 1981. Since 1994, Lowly has been affiliated with North Park University in Chicago as gallery director, instructor, and artist-in-residence.

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 *Shift, gescheidle*, Chicago, IL  
*Trouble the Water*, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA
- 2001 *not long for this place*, Elgin Community College, Elgin, IL
- 1999 Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL  
Lyons Wier Gallery, Chicago, IL  
Snite Art Museum, Notre Dame University, South Bend, IN
- 1998 Wood Street Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1997 Art Space Seoul, Seoul, South Korea

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2002 *Drawings VI*, Koplin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*The Perception of Appearance: A Decade of Contemporary American Figure Drawing*, Frye Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 2001 *National Drawing Invitational*, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AK
- 2000 *Chicago: Self-Portraits 2000*, Printworks Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1998 *Annual Exhibition*, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY

### SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- The Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AK  
The Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA  
The McDonald's Corporate Collection, Oak Brook, IL  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
The Rockford Art Museum, Rockford, IL  
The Wustum Museum of Art, Racine, WI



Tim Lowly and his daughter Temma

## SELECTED GRANTS

- 1995 Illinois Arts Council, Fellowship in Visual Art  
1987 Michigan Council for the Arts, Individual Artist Grant

## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- Fred Camper, The Reader (Chicago), 11/22/02, 01/14/00, & 08/14/97  
Alan Artner, The Chicago Tribune, 11/22/02, 12/13/99, 05/27/99, 08/14/97, & 10/06/89  
Josef Woodard, Santa Barbara News-Press, 09/12/02  
John Brunetti, New Art Examiner, Jul/Aug 1998  
Soo-Jin Park, exhibition catalogue, Art Space Seoul, Seoul, South Korea, May 1997

## Checklist

- TDL 1* (Stoneware), 1997, ceramic, 12" x 54" x 14",  
*Turnaround*, 2002, acrylic on panel, 48" x 70",  
*Dad / bed*, 2001, acrylic on panel, 9" x 12.5"  
*Mom / mountain*, 2001, acrylic on panel, 9" x 11"  
*Woman by Water*, 1999, acrylic gesso with pigment on panel, 4 x 16 feet  
*Untitled (rainbow)*, 2001, acrylic on panel, 14" x 21"  
*Untitled (wiper)*, 2001, acrylic on panel, 8" x 10"  
*Setting the Table*, 1999, acrylic gesso with pigment on panel, 10" x 7"  
*Light as Air*, 1999, acrylic gesso with pigment on panel, 66" x 48"  
*Alma*, 2000, mixed media on paper, 24" x 29"  
*Untitled (quilt)*, 1999, tempera on ceramic

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## To Do. To Be.

February 28- April 4, 2003

Gallery hours:

Mon-Thur 8:00 am-9:00 pm

Fri-Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm

Sun 1:00-5:00 pm

Spring Break Hours:

March 31 – April 4, 8:00 am-4:30 pm

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<http://yyz.clc.cc.il.us/artgallery/>

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