

A Mysterious Concentration

The Reverend Paul Plante, of Oquossoc, has two vocations — the priesthood and painting — and he pursues both with a quiet intensity. *By Monica Wood*



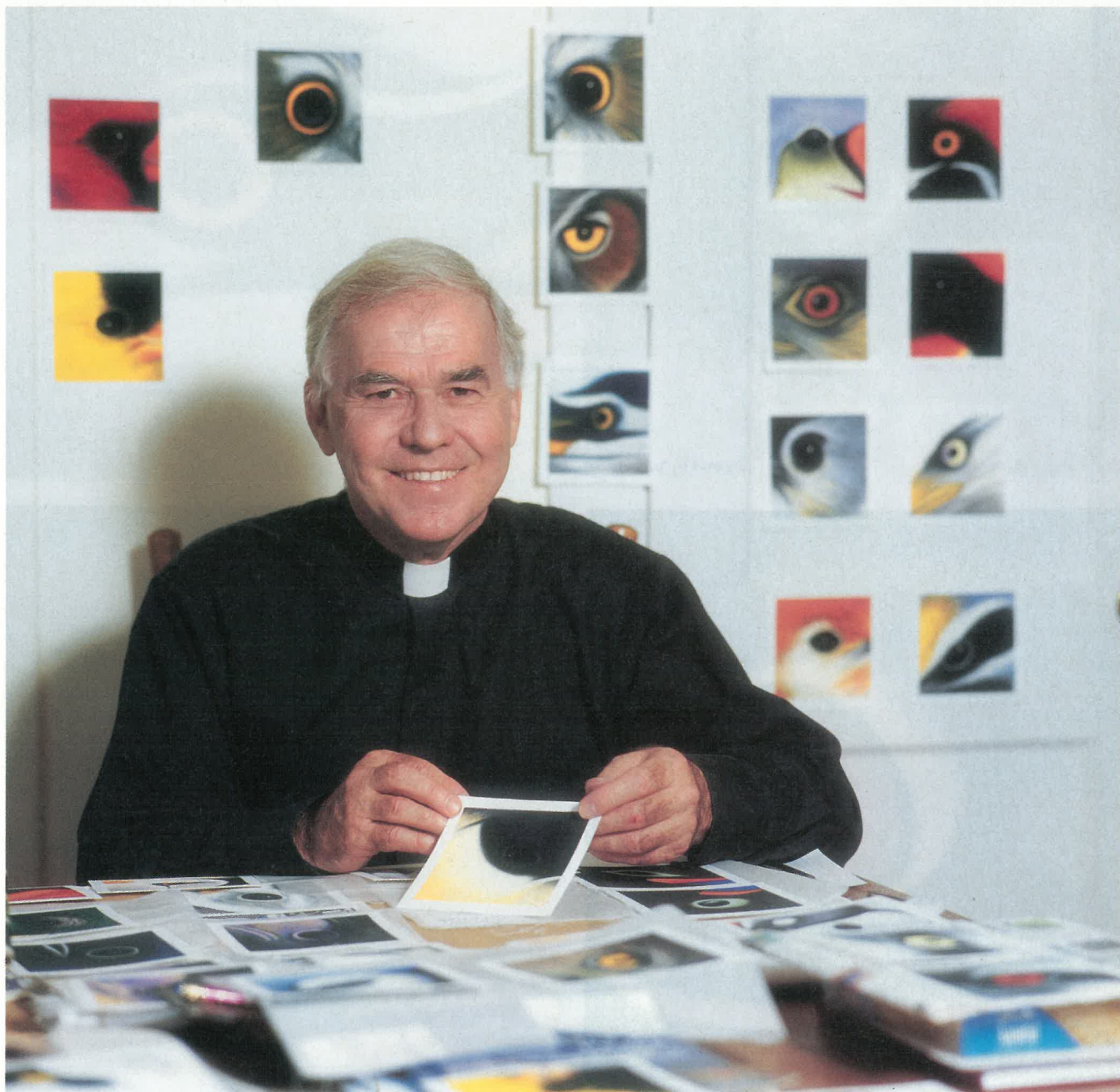
Entering the cozy, two-story rectory adjacent to Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic church in Oquossoc, one is struck first by how fully inhabited it seems. Although the pastor, Father Paul Plante, moved here only a year ago, he has undeniably claimed it as home. Dressed in his blacks and a pair of Birkenstocks, his clerical collar stuck into a breast pocket as if saved for emergency use only, he invites visitors into a tidy kitchen filled with light and paintings. The parlor — burgeoning book-

shelves, plump chairs built for reading — further reflects its occupant's generous vision. And upstairs, a makeshift studio holds hundreds of five-inch-by-five-inch oil pastels of God's smaller creatures.

In the Maine art world — and far beyond — these paintings are known as “bird’s eyes,” and their creator might well be the most frequently exhibited artist in the state. His jewel-like images initially strike most observers as color-drenched abstracts, some nearly impressionistic, some downright geometrical.

THE EYES HAVE IT

At first glance, Father Paul Plante's pastels might seem like colorful abstractions, but look closer and you'll see the eyes of these wild creatures staring back at you (clockwise from far left): blue jay, wood duck, Siberian husky, great blue heron, American goldfinch, red-eyed leaf frog, red fox, and snooty Maori wrasse (that's a fish).



AMAZEN

TWICE CALLED
As a priest, the Reverend Paul Plante ministers to a parish in the Rangeley Lakes region. As an acclaimed painter, he has exhibited his unique oil pastels (like the screech owl and snow leopard, at right) at Colby College, the Farnsworth Art Museum, numerous other museums, and art galleries across Maine and beyond.

After a moment's observation, however, the mind registers a recognizable fraction of a bird's face, including, most prominently, the eye. It's like viewing a bird through a lens that magnifies stillness. Stillness that hums with life and color. Stillness that suggests a soul.

Father Plante loves to watch people view, and then recognize, his birds. With gallery owners' cooperation, he keeps his prices low, hoping to encourage budding collectors for whom most original art is unaffordable. He recalls a show in which an entire family came in and bought one

bird each. "You know, I think the three-year-old made the best choice," he confides, smiling. "These are dear experiences." At another show, he sold a piece to a little boy who brought a hard-won five dollars in the hope of securing a painting for his room. "Like the widow in the Gospel," Father Plante observes, "he gave all that he had."

Father Plante knows his Gospel. Now a youthful sixty-two — trim, slight, white-haired — he has spent his entire adult life as a dioc-

san priest. He grew up in Sanford, one of five children of a mill worker and homemaker, where he attended Catholic schools and was “impressed” early on by the Brothers at St. Ignatius, whom he still speaks of with reverence. But his vocation was hardly a foregone conclusion. “People used to ask me, ‘Are you going to be a priest like your uncle? Are you going to be a priest like your cousin?’ But at first I wanted to be a farmer.” For the natural world, too, impressed him. He continually brought things home — injured birds, unfamiliar insects or plants — with the intention of “raising and saving” them. “And it was never ‘just a bird,’” he says. “Never ‘just a bug.’ I had to know specifically.” This close observation, which he mistook for a farmer’s

impulse, laid the groundwork for his future as an artist, just as his Catholic schooling was fueling his affinity for the religious life. Perhaps, inevitably, Father Plante believes that “religion and the creative impulse are closely linked.”

Father Plante responds wholly to his double calling, one informing the other in a graceful pas de deux. In his bedroom studio, one half of the space encloses a simple dresser and mirror and a bed covered with a white chenille spread. The other half serves as an exuberant workspace with recently finished oil pastels filling tabletops and window sills. But the split is not neat: some of the paintings have migrated to the monkish half of the room, and rest-

geographic challenge that requires a lot of road time. But what roads! “I had several deer in the yard this morning,” he says, clearly enchanted by his surroundings. The one drawback is the snow-slick roads in winter (his dotting older sisters worry about his living “in the middle of nowhere”), but with no hospital or nursing-home rounds in the area he believes he’ll eventually find more time to paint than he did during his decade-long tenure in Winslow, a bigger parish with a heavier workload. Though he misses his relatively urban former home, the mountain quiet with its omnipresent birds and animals seems an ideal match for a man with so singular an artistic focus.

Father Plante completes at least one piece a day and aims for three. That’s about a thousand a year, “and some years many more than that.” Stacked along one wall he keeps a simple but astonishing filing system of boxes marked “herons,” “warblers,” “puffins,” and so on, perhaps eighty boxes, each containing dozens of oil pastels that he sends out to galleries as requests come in. “I produce regularly,” he says matter-of-factly. “I work small. And I throw little away.” At present his work hangs in the Firehouse Gallery in Damariscotta, the Bayview in Brunswick, the Caldbeck in Rockland, and the Clark House in Bangor, to name only a few of the many galleries whose owners find the artist’s distinctive images hard to resist. Bird’s eyes have graced the walls of the Colby College Museum, the Farnsworth Art Museum, and the University of Maine Museum of Art as part of the guest collection of Norma B. Marin, widow of painter John Marin. In New York, MixedGreens.com features Father Plante both online and in its Chelsea storefront. The Mississippi Museum of Natural Science has recently shown his work, along with the Mississippi Audubon Society. “I like it when the arts mix in with natural history,” he says. And he loves to encounter his art unexpectedly throughout his many travels — in a Paris apartment, for example, or at an acquaintance’s house in Washington, D.C.

Besides birds, Father Plante’s subjects include tropical fish, apples, plums, *(continued on page 84)*

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ing amid the flock of birds in the studio half lies an abstract of painfully colored slashes called “The Scourging of Christ.”

Though diocesan priests do not take the vow of poverty, they live simply; Father Plante betrays not a single trapping of artistic success. In lieu of an easel, he paints on a king-sized clipboard attached to a spindly tripod pulled next to a window. Lately he’s been painting owls, and to the unprepared observer the feeling of being watched by dozens of intensely rendered eyes can be thrilling, potent — and a tad amusing. Beneath the serious beauty of Father Plante’s images lurks a sense of whimsy, suggesting an artist in no danger of losing his sense of proportion. “I’m not one of those four o’clock in the morning birders,” he admits when asked about field observations. “I’ve gone out with real birders, and oh, I’ve regretted it at times. I like my comforts. Call me a ‘gentleman birder.’”

Gentleman birder and ferocious worker, that is. Father Plante’s assignment in Oquossoc also includes St. Luke’s in Rangeley, St. John’s in Stratton, and Bell Chapel at Sugarloaf, a

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Mysterious Concentration

(Continued from page 57)

insects, frogs, salamanders, and even a few mammals, all of them translated through the same tightly focused, magnified lens. Curiously, when Father Plante first began painting birds, they lacked eyes. "They were abstract," he says, "just paintings of the colors I saw in birds." Then his vision began to evolve. "The eyes started small," he explains. "Little beady eyes, the way birds' eyes actually are, and eventually the eyes got bigger." When asked why he chose so small a format, he pauses. His dark eyebrows knit. "It's hard to say how these things happen. I experimented with different sizes, and these five-by-five images just felt right."

Once he began working this way, he noticed how naturally people responded to small images — including people with firm opinions about how small images should be shown. A man at one gallery opening recoiled when he found multiple birds' eyes matted into a single frame.

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"He told me, 'You should never frame your work in multiples! Never!' It was quite a thing." Father Plante quickly adds that he deliberates long and hard over which images — even seemingly identical ones — belong together as a single piece. But he remains philosophical about varying tastes, believing that a single image does one thing for a viewer, that multiple images do something else, and that it's none of his business how people handle his work once they buy it. "That's beyond my control," he says, sounding like a parish priest familiar with the contradictions of human nature. "In fact, I don't want the control." He recalls a couple from Boston who found his birds in the Nielsen Gallery on Newberry Street, bought thirty of them unframed, then hung them together — in



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thirty separate frames. All these permutations, and people's fealty to them, seems to please him.

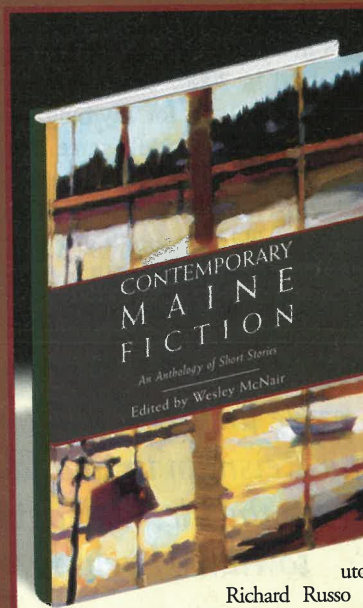
Although Father Plante has painted and shown work since his seminary days in Quebec ("We had in-house shows"), it wasn't until the mid-nineties that he decided to "get more professional." With the support of the Chancery, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with honors, at the Portland School of Art (now the Maine College of Art). "I was the oldest student," he says. "There were six or seven of us 'non-trationals,' and we formed our own little community." Along with painting and drawing, he experimented in sculpture, silversmithing, and stained glass. (One of his glass pieces, a blue flower set into a geometrical design, currently glows in his stairway window.) "I was probably the teacher's pet," he says, smiling, "because I was so interested in all of it, including the history." His student work went directly from the "Senior Show" to the Hitchcock Gallery in Portland, then to the Mast Cove Galleries in Kennebunkport, and his instantly recognizable oil pastels have appeared in exhibits in and out of Maine ever since.

In his studio, reflecting on the owl eyes staring up from a table, Father Plante speaks movingly of the "mysterious concentration" that forms the act of painting, which is not unlike the act of prayer. "Strange connections or intuitions come to the mind," he says quietly. "I'll often stop and take a note, because these things often disappear, like a dream."

Down the hall, near a big, bold painting of a fellow Maine artist, Father Plante has hung a smallish, modestly framed work that simmers with potential. Like the bird's eyes, the painting appears abstract at first: a bright succession of white, red, and pink slashes against a gloomy background. Soon, though, the slashes resolve into figures, and the figures make the viewer smile. "That's my first painting," Father Plante offers, a little shyly. "It's called 'Altar Boy Convention on a Rainy Day.' I was eighteen." The medium? Oil on Formica fished out of the Sanford dump by the artist's father. And painted by a passionate young man with two callings. □

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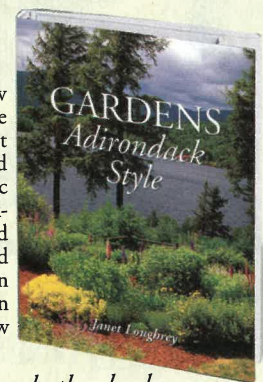
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