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In a New Millennium, Religion Shows Its Face

SEX and politics, two of three topics once forbidden at polite dinner parties, have been abundant in recent art. So is God the last taboo?

Midcentury artists turned away from religion and toward modernist universalism. They kept beliefs pretty much to themselves, or abstracted them, à la Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Until recently, the art world sanctioned little work with overt religious content unless it possessed a critical, subversive edge. Postmodernists, however, have begun to embrace religion as part of the culture. Now, spurred by the millennium, contemporary art can again be unabashedly faith-based, to borrow political argot.

"Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium," opening today at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn., samples work by 36 living artists from six countries who variously celebrate, wrestle with, deconstruct or critique religion. The exhibition confines itself to the Judeo-Christian tradition partly to rein things in, but also because it has been the dominant influence in Western culture, says Harry Philbrick, the museum's director.

Mr. Philbrick and two artists in the show, Christian Eckart and Osvaldo Romberg, have organized the exhibition.

Mr. Philbrick says the show has flushed out the long-suppressed or concealed religious backgrounds of several participants. "Even though many artists deal openly with issues of race, gender, class and sexuality, repeatedly we heard, 'No one's ever asked me about religion before.'"

Ann Wilson Lloyd's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about artists' residences.

Matthew Ritchie, for example, makes colorful, complex paintings and installations that recall abstract scientific schematics, but imbedded within them are arcane systems based on Judeo-Christian myth, specifically, he notes in an artist's statement, regarding angels and the doctrinal clash between concrete image and abstract word.

"There's a perception in the art world that there's a fundamentalist, right wing, Christian Coalition juggernaut out there," Mr. Philbrick says. "Of course, the world is a lot more complex than that. There are all sorts of levels of thought, belief and faith." Three local churches and one synagogue have agreed to display works from the exhibition. These include fonts cast in the shape of renowned cathedrals by Nicholas Kripal, stained glass by Jo Yarrington, sculpture by Justen Ladda, photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris and painting by Mr. Romberg, one of the curators.

"One of the underlying hypotheses of this show is 'Does contemporary art have something to offer religion, and vice versa?'" says Mr. Eckart, the other curator. "From the first curatorial meeting, we felt the most interesting expression of faith was a test of faith — challenging but not necessarily cynical or pessimistic — from within or without the spiritual or religious practice.

"Most Western-trained artists have been influenced by Western religious art, either directly through imagery or indirectly through ethics. There tends to be an underlying Judeo-Christian ethical and moral imperative somewhere. Even the most progressive projects, like socio-political, didactic work, are about inclusion or democratic ideals and are essentially morality plays."

Mr. Eckart's contribution to the exhibition is an elegant trio of luminous monochrome paintings on shaped aluminum. Their lacquered industrial finish reveals no trace of the artist's hand, which he intends as a postmodern contribution to the spiritually sublime state that, historically, certain artists sought to invoke. In his catalog essay, Mr. Eckart writes that a fundamental aspect of proto-modernity required Renaissance sacred art to shift from "an external, didactic site to an internal and personal one," requiring "committed participation on behalf of the viewer."

Viewers will be able to participate in completing the work of Mr. Romberg. His outdoor installation of stacked fire logs in the museum's sculpture garden comprises overlapping archaeological footprints of a mosque, synagogue, temple and cathedral. When the show ends on May 29, visitors can take the logs to burn, sending the ghosts of these buildings heavenward, where, the artist says, they belong.

Mr. Romberg is Jewish; he was born in Argentina, but has lived and worked in Israel and now in Philadelphia. He sees a growing corps of international artists from all religious backgrounds, who, like him, find the spiritual potential of art supplanting the need for religion. "I believe art can help society become more spiritual," he says. "And artists can be the engineers of emotion."

Of the 36 artists in the exhibition, about half identified their religious background, according to the museum staff. Of those, eight are Catholics, four Jewish, two Baptist, one Mormon and one Quaker, with two generically listing themselves as Christians. The mix suggests that the rich visual tradition of the Catholic

An exhibition with a Judeo-Christian theme fights the art world's perception of a fundamentalist 'juggernaut.'

Church, as well as its vast contributions to Western art history, are particularly lasting legacies for artists reared as Catholics. Influential Catholic doctrines have also supplied grist (or axes) for further grinding.

Petah Coyne's new sculpture for the exhibition is a minimalist wall-like construction investigating idealized femininity. It involves nuns, and Marilyn Monroe and her alter ego, Norma Jean. Ms. Coyne says she is consciously revisiting her Catholic upbringing in recent work.

"The psychology of that past is imperative," Ms. Coyne says. "The nuns always told us they were as pure and whole as the Madonna, the epitome of women, the best of women. But the church's stance on women is so

second class it bothers me terribly. So I put these nuns literally in the wall, their faces hidden, except for glimpses from the back."

She adds: "There were some beautiful things about the church. I try to use those in my work too. It brings up so much material. It's given me my art, or, at least, a lot to work around, but it's not the main thing. Feminism is in all my work, as are other elements. I think this new piece has less to do with faith and more to do with humanity and being female in the world, but because the whole thing is couched for me in religion, I can't separate it."

One question the exhibition raises, according to the curators, is whether non-Catholics have less leftover angst with which to work. Another is whether today's younger artists of all religious backgrounds simply feel freer to broach the subject. The Rev. Ethan Acres, a 30-year-old evangelical street preacher from Las Vegas who is also a trained artist, still practices his gospel-based, born-again faith, professing his sometimes quirky version of things overtly in his work.

Mr. Acres's art, based on normally fire-and-brimstone topics like Armageddon and creationism, is instead good-natured and funny. "Miracle at La Brea," a photographic print, depicts a Tyrannosaurus rex with wings ascending into heaven from out of Los Angeles's famous tar pits. Some fundamentalists might see this more as a sendup than a testament.

"It's the most common misconception people have, but I hope my art presents Christianity in a new and interesting way," he says. "I grew up around hell fire and brimstone" — he began preaching at 9, with his stepfather, in a rural Alabama Baptist church. "But what touched me most was laughter in church. I believe humor is just as powerful an expression of faith as terror or guilt." □

By ANN WILSON LLOYD
