Sacred Space: An Examination of Christian Theology within the Current Western Artistic Discourse

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SACRED SPACE:
AN EXAMINATION OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY WITHIN THE CURRENT WESTERN ARTISTIC DISCOURSE

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Religion’s relationship with the American post-modern art world could be classified as a tumultuous one, or as author of *Art and Religion in the 21st Century*, Aaron Rosen, states; “to judge simply by the headlines, it would seem that art and religion are headed for an apocalyptic showdown” (Rosen 9). The post-modern art world still uses Christian iconography but in many cases not for the sake of gospel proclamation and teaching. Because of this, the art world can often be defined by its opposition to Christian theology despite emerging from a religious parentage. Many churches also reject contemporary visual interpretations of biblical truths because of a reluctance to let go of ecclesiastically established symbols and a historical concern with the art world’s shifting morals. The focus of my work is to deconstruct the prejudices held by each group through the dissection and reimagining of past and present ritual objects within different environments. I seek continual re-enchantment and remembrance of the crucifixion and question where contemporary, theological artwork can reside.

By placing my investigations within galleries, I endeavor to reintroduce theological conversations into contemporary artistic discourse. The investigation in and of itself is a form of ritual in which I use constructed and found forms as conduits for spiritual experience. *Sacred Space* hosts a variety of objects that run through cycles of ritual. Some are self-sufficient while others require audience participation. Most of the work, however, is destroyed or altered as its cycle is carried out. The work dissolves, breaks down, topples, or transforms through these processes, and the final results are unknown, even to myself. Do these machines create anything good or worthwhile? Is our adherence to ritual a negative or positive? Does the space that they are in affect the result? Letting the work resolve itself is a complete act of faith that requires me to surrender my hopes, intentions, and preconceived notions of what the piece will look like or
the impact that it will make on the audience. The process acts as a conversation in which individual participation, place, and other forces affect the outcome. The work is never the same in each showing, and new information, new revelations, can be gained with each cycle. I set up the pieces, step away, and allow unseen forces to intervene. An act of faith is occurring within the gallery space.

“When you enter the realm of art, you are, like it or not, entering into the realm of religion” (Rosen 7). When we look at the origins of the art world as it exists today we cannot help but to trace it back to the church. In order to understand my place, and the place of my work within the gallery, I must first examine the historical relationship between the art world and the Christian world. I will examine the use of art within past and present religious structures. It is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the complexity of the art world’s history, but an abridged version that focuses on major events and how they influence my current work.

The emergence of widespread, didactic, biblical artwork began when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman empire by the end of the fourth century. Christian art quickly replaced the Classical, ‘paganistic,’ works of previous generations within Rome. The edifying nature of the work emerged as a way to relay biblical narratives to an illiterate society. However, by merging church and state, religious artwork began to take on another function. Works such as Emperor Justinian and his Attendants emerged to show the connection of the political (secular) and religious world. They also served as a form of propaganda to the masses and displayed the might and religiosity of the emperor (Stokstad 288-291).

Europe was soon taken over by Christian influence, and religious narratives remained strong in the Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, and Renaissance periods despite major stylistic shifts. Grandiose artwork existed mainly in cathedrals and was meant to be used for reflection on
theological ideals. Artists could make their living on commissions from the church, but they were limited in subject matter and style. Guild systems oversaw everything from materials to subject matter, and the individualistic nature of artists today would have been utterly rejected. The control of the guild assured that the church had a universal voice through the commonality of religious symbols. This in turn allowed the church to further its mission of spreading the gospel throughout the world quickly and with little reinterpretation.

Wealthy patrons, like Emperor Justinian, also continued to exert their influence over the construction of religious work by commissioning the artists to include them in biblical narratives. Multiple examples can be found in the works commissioned by the Medici family such as The Procession of the Magi by Benozzo Gonzoli. Located on the first floor of the Medici family chapel, The Procession of the Magi was a colorful, elaborate masterpiece that depicted members of the family traversing Jerusalem to meet the newborn Christ (Fig. 1). It was meant to “portray family pride and family piety in one stroke, combining a secular enjoyment with a genuine religious belief” (Oxley17). Artists also included many of the Medici’s household and political allies to indicate their power and affluence.

Parallels can be made in our current culture to the efforts of the Medicis. My work, Auto Repair Passover, explores the use of religious artwork as symbols of individual, family, or company morality and asks the question, “does this nullify or diminish their value as religious objects” (Fig. 2)? We can define the term “religious object” as a physical object that is meant to inspire worship of a deity (specifically the Christian God for the sake of this essay), reflection on internal vices and virtues, or remembrance of biblical narrative and theology. The term is not limited to individual interaction as we will discuss later when considering the post-modern art movement, but also includes objects interacted with in a communal setting. “Auto Repair
Passover” questions the pairing of didactic biblical paintings with modern day advertisements. The fan on the left depicts a copy of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, while the fan on the right is an advertisement for an auto body shop that reads in large letters, “WE CARE ABOUT YOU!” along with the company’s services. The gap in between the two images questions chronological progression of Christian religious “advertising” to modern advertising and why the two appear within the same context (printed on a paper fan). This piece also considers Andy Warhol’s *The Last Supper*, 1986 and superimposing corporate imagery over religious ones (Fig. 3). Although Warhol invented the proximity in his work, *Auto Repair Passover* examines the proximity that has already been created by the manufacturers of the fans. Not only are they meant to keep one cool, but the fans were also provided at a funeral service and taken from an estate sale where they were arranged around a portrait of the deceased on a piano. The painting depicts Christ's final meal with his disciples before his death, and is used to bring credibility to the message on the back. Like the Medici family’s commission, the audience might be persuaded through the proximity of religious artwork to endow the auto repair company with a level of morality and religiosity that may or may not be present. It is also interesting to note that in both cases money was exchanged in order to bring the patron’s message into a domestic space.

The fans, like many Christian artworks, reside in the realm of kitsch, which is to say art that is sentimental, formulaic, and emotionally manipulative. Kitsch emerged with the American industrial revolution. Artwork, like many other products, now had the opportunity to be mass produced. Clement Greenburg, noted art critic, describes kitsch in this way:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style,
but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time” (Greenburg 10).

Christian art is often classified as kitsch. The deeply sentimental value and appeal to a mass audience fits well within Greenburg’s description. As I traveled across Europe to the Louver, the Vatican, and museums dotted across Madrid and Barcelona to view highly treasured Christian artworks, I began to understand why it was classified as such. Paintings, sculptures, and tapestries were commissioned by churches across Europe to tell the same story with slight variations. Titular stories within the Christian faith (the immaculate conception, the crucifixion, and the apostles’ journeys) were told ad nauseum in multiple styles by hundreds of different hands. It came to a point that I jokingly turned to my husband and said, “if we see one more Madonna and child, I’m leaving!” Thinking about this later, I was confused as to why I felt that way. The stories themselves were not boring, nor were the paintings lacking beauty or mastery, but I began to feel emotionally manipulated. Many of these biblical stories had been beautified to appeal to a wide audience. There were few works that were visually challenging, and they all seemed to rely on a formula robotically followed by the artist. The works relied on a universal sense of beauty and sentimentality and were used as rhetorical devices for memorization. The individual interpretation of the artist was removed in order to serve the needs of the church.

A more contemporary example would be the much debated work of Thomas Kinkade. He identified himself as a Christian artist and made work that appeals to a wide audience. He is not seen by many as a valuable contributor to the conversation of Art, but is still successful monetarily. Linda Weintraub's book, In The Making, Creative Options for Contemporary Art,
states that Kinkade’s work “not only satisfies popular tastes and expectations, it employs marketing channels beyond the confines of the art world, occupying popular sites that promote mass produced house wares, collectibles, and books” (Weintraub 19). There aren’t any harmful themes within his work, in fact, his mission is to “provide hope to people in despair, provide a reminder of the beauty of God’s creation despite the darkness surrounding our lives” (Weintraub 20). However, I posit that whenever money is involved, motives need to be interrogated. Kinkade’s paintings are nice to look at, but akin to the paintings I encountered in Europe, there is the presence of mass production. He earned a healthy profit by slapping his paintings on any object imaginable from calendars to blankets, and was not picky about the vessel on which the work was sold, as long as it sold. Hobby Lobby sells his work in their stores in various formats along with other Christian based artworks. As a past employee of the store, I often contemplated the implications of selling religious work. Bless Ball Dissection examines an art object found in Hobby Lobby that has been mass produced and dissects it for theological value (Fig. 4). The work features a white glazed ceramic ball with the word “bless” written across the front. Like Kinkade paintings, the bless ball hints at being a religious object without any direct Christian implications while also making money for the company. Once the bless ball resides in the purchaser’s home (after a donation of $8.99), it informs visitors that the family is ‘blessed’ in some way. The abstract term ‘bless’ does not relate to any specific biblical narrative, nor is it limited to Christian theology. The blessing could potentially come from any source whether it be the Christian God or another deity. We might draw some connections to Christian narrative when we consider that Hobby Lobby is a Christian owned company, but even the company’s description of the object is vague concerning its religious purposes:
Add instant style to your tabletop with Bless Decorative Sphere! Sporting a glossy ceramic finish, this sphere features a smooth surface, a flat bottom, and the word "Bless" written in thin, black letters on one side. Keep your home's decor fresh by adding this piece to a tabletop, decorative bowl, or basket (Hobby Lobby)!

The company instead brags about its ability to “freshen up” your decor and focuses on visual observations concerning its finish, texture, and situational potential. The bless ball lacks specificity. Similar to Kinkade intentionally leaving human figures out of his work, the bless ball invites the purchaser to see themself in the work. I would also posit that this is the reason for the ball’s glossy, reflective surface. It is a mass produced object that could be transferred to any individual. Those who are members of the Christian faith might see this object through a religious lens and make the connection of being blessed by God, but those without such affiliations might relate the statement to any number of contributors such as blessed by luck or blessed by circumstance. The object’s composition is equally vague and offers no apparent symbolic meaning. The bless ball is pleasing in a minimalist sort of way, but offers little else when considered formally. Thus this particular work, and work like it, are tossed in the kitsch category and kept out of the art world discussion.

By placing these works into a gallery, however, I posit that this work was made to fulfill a need that the contemporary gallery space does not. There is a group of people that are not satisfied with the generalized spirituality presented by the artworld, and reject the contemporary art space because they have nothing in common with it. Rosalind Krauss states that “we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence” (Krauss 54). This
phenomenon is strange in itself, for artists are often pegged as being able to capture the unseen in visual form, whether it be emotions, unseen realms, or spiritual experience. However, this stereotype refers to a generalized spirituality, or a spirituality that does not adhere to a specific religion. The galleries that we know today give artists a space unburdened by religious context and display ideas that were not Christian centric. However, to avoid or reject discussing artwork that has specific religious intent is to also reject a part of humanity that fulfills their spiritual needs through religion. The post-modern art space rejected the church because of its strict moral boundaries and created a space for itself outside of its structure. By defining itself as “not the church” and by labeling the artwork within the church as kitsch and irrelevant, the gallery space became exclusive just like they had blamed the church for being.

*I Left This, I Carry This* places a moment of spiritual encounter within the gallery space (Fig. 5). The work is an imprint of my body in clay curled into the fetal position. The pose indicates a state of weakness which has been preserved in layers of epoxy, and is a reminder of a time when I drew near to God in the midst of a crisis. *I Left This, I Carry This* seeks to relay a religious message without drawing into the realm of kitsch. The piece is not consumable in a monetary context, meaning it cannot be purchased, nor is it structured to be capable of being reproduced. The epoxy preserves the gesture, but the more the piece is touched and interacted with, the more it begins to deteriorate. Time has also changed the piece, for the clay that used to be wet and moldable is now dry and rigid. In the same way, time has altered my relationship to the memory. I carry the materials with me, but depending on the stage of life I am in, my perspective of that moment of divine encounter shifts. By placing this encounter in the gallery, I gain a new perspective on it as it is stripped of any obvious religious context. The encounter is a
private one which the audience is unaware of. A passerby might examine the work, dwarfed and vulnerable in the expanse of the white cube, and consider its fragility. They may relate to the feeling of weakness and insignificance, but without context, there are little parallels to Christian themes. It is my intent to exhibit this work within a church and examine how the context influences its message. However, there are hurdles to overcome when trying to place a work void of pre established Christian symbols into the church.

The church’s hesitancy to include ‘new’ art within their walls post the Protestant Reformation became increasingly justified in the face of America’s progressing secularity. Industrialization and scientific discovery also produced a wave of intellectualist rationalization. According to noted Reformation historian Brad S. Gregory, “intellectualist rationalization through science and scientifically oriented technology” means that “fundamentally no mysterious incalculable powers are present that come into play, but rather that one can—in principle—master all things by calculation. This implies the disenchantment of the world” (Gregory 26). For all intents and purposes, it seemed that people were losing their religion, or, if not, they were keeping it far away from artistic discourse.

A path to reintroducing theological work into the artistic discourse might be found, however, when we consider Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ (Fig. 6). Serrano’s 60”-by-40” photograph displays Christ on the cross under a golden, hazy liquid. At first glance, it is a pleasing enough image. The golden color harkens back the golden halos around Christ’s head found in Renaissance paintings and adds an otherworldly aura. Without knowing the process behind the construction of the photograph, one might lump it in with other Christian kitsch. Knowing that the “otherworldly glow” is created by Serrano’s urine, however, changes how the work is interpreted and experienced. The shock value and experimental medium provided the
work a place within the artistic discourse of the 1980’s, but it was rejected by many believers as being “shocking,” “disgusting,” and “disrespectful to the image of Christ.” In the mind of the church, the inclusion of human bodily fluid across a sacred image made it unsanitary, disgraceful, and unclean. The irony is not lost on Serrano, who was quoted in a Guardian article saying “...for Christ to have been crucified and laid on the cross for three days where he not only bled to death, he shat himself and he peed himself to death. So if Piss Christ upsets you, maybe it's a good thing to think about what happened on the cross”(Holpuch 4).

_Piss Christ_ satisfied the galleries but horrified many in the Christian community. _Piss Christ_ explores the heaviness of the crucifixion, bodily fluid and all, and exposes the consumerist beautification of a horrendous act within the church culture. An argument could be made for the metaphorical beauty of Christ’s sacrifice- salvation for all mankind- but Serrano’s work argues that ignoring the horrors of the cross and the humanity of Christ diminishes in part the gravity of his sacrifice. By reimagining the depiction of the crucifixion, Serrano unearthed a facet of the gospel that some had not really considered before. Because of his reimagining, theological discourse pushed its way into the galley. In addition, Serrano asked Christians to deeply consider their connection to the cross and how they perceived Christ’s sacrifice.

Perhaps artists similar to Serrano are why Christian congregations and leaders are becoming much more conservative concerning the development of art in the church. Like Serrano, even artists with religious motivations are treated with suspicion or rejection by their communions. Jonathan Anderson, author of _Modern Art and the Life of a Culture_, posits that “Christians from across the denominational spectrum tended to see modern art as deeply antagonistic to religious belief, and, as we’ve seen, so too did many historians of modern art” (Anderson 49). The past wounds of works being highly critical of the church or using its
iconography for messages of questionable morality, here we might consider Mideo Cruz’s *Phallus Faced Jesus* or the highly protested works of Leon Ferrari, still cause the church to be skeptical of any work claiming to be religious (Fig. 7). This view puts pressure on artists that genuinely want to exhibit theological work to keep their visual language within what has been pre-established by the church as beautiful, symbolic, or morally correct. In my own experience, work that is not easily understood as religious (didactic art) or isn’t conventionally pretty, or asks hard questions in unconventional ways is politely expelled. I am not implying that so-called pretty artwork does not have value, but I have noticed that work that is harsh, abstract, or mysterious is often feared and spurned by churches. There is a fear that the congregation will not receive the ‘correct’ message when confronted with an ambiguous piece of art, and thus relies on what is safe and appeals to a mass audience. Much like my experience in museums with hundreds of Madonna and Child paintings, the overexposure of work in the same format gets in the way of its potency.

To combat the redundancy of the Renaissance format, my work *Fountain* reinvents the visual interpretation of the crucifixion and communion altars (Fig. 8). Grape juice pours from a naked clay vessel and cycles back through the medicinal tube shoved in its side. It is gruesome and machine-like, but the contrast of the gently trickling water and lush swashes of fabric soften its appearance. Latex is painted on the interior of a tent made of blackout curtains that gives the viewer the feeling of entering into a bodily cavity. My intent was to portray the grimness of the crucifixion while also providing elements that provoke meditation. The viewer is encompassed by the work when entering into the fountain’s dwelling place, but no attempt is made to hide or disguise the industrial, pedestrian materials that form the tent’s structure. The smell of the grape juice is one that I am very familiar with as a nondenominational Christian. Instead of wine, grape
juice was served for communion in a small, plastic cup that had a wafer attached to the lid in a sheath of cellophane (Fig 9). The contrast between the factory made cups and bodily process of consumption of the juice and wafer (especially when aligned with the theological implications of Christ’s blood and body being consumed), interests me as a point of connection between religious and contemporary spaces. The creation of this cup emerged for the sake of convenience and to attend to the needs of churches with large congregations. In a similar way, the construction of the tent surrounding the work was made with readily available materials to suit the gallery it resides in. This piece reflects on the streamlining of communion, an act which was meant to be an intimate process of remembrance amongst a group of believers, and examines if these assembly line made portions have any influence on the participant’s interaction with the ritual. Viewers have a variety of options when confronting this piece. They may take one of the prepackaged communion cups, drink directly from the source of the fountain, or merely examine the ritual without participating.

I postulate that limiting the ways God and the bible are allowed to be visually depicted is dangerous. By containing the gospel to Renaissance beauty standards or vague paper weights we strip it of its mystery and assume that Europe’s visual language is absolute truth. It is here that we are no longer enchanted by the power of the gospel. We ignore works like Serrano’s *Piss Christ* or Chris Ofili’s painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Fig. 10), that see the gospel from the perspective of a non-European, and cease to challenge ourselves. We may easily pass by the life’s work of many artists within the Renaissance because it has become familiar and therefore stagnant. We must strive to re-enchant ourselves, and the world, with the gospel. The good news of Christ crucified should not change, but in order to deepen our understanding we must continually question, challenge, and revel in the mystery of the gospel.
Works Cited


“Bless Decorative Sphere: Hobby Lobby: 1958800.” *Hobby Lobby*,


Fig. 1. Gozzoli, Benozzo di Lese di Sandro. *The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem*. c.1459, from the east wall of the Chapel of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence. Benozzo di Lese di Sandro, © Bridgeman Images.
Fig. 2. Davis, Rachel. *Auto Repair Passover*. 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig. 4. Davis, Rachel. *Bless Ball Dissection*. 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig. 5. Davis, Rachel. *I Left This, I Carry This*. 2022. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig. 7. Cruz, Mideo. Phallus Faced Jesus. "Poleteismo" Installation. 2011, Huff Post. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/artist-mideo-cruz-put-a-p_n_918499
Fig. 8. Davis, Rachel. *Fountain*. 2021. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig. 8. Detail.
The Fellowship Cup requires no special preparation or refrigeration. It is also designed to fit in standard Communion trays. Using the cup is as easy as . . .

1. Designed to fit perfectly in communion trays
2. Peel back air-tight seal to eat the unleavened wafer
3. Peel back the second seal to drink the juice

Fig. 9. B&H Publishing. Communion Fellowship Cup Wafer and Juice Set. The KJV Store. https://www.thekjvstore.com/communion-fellowship-cup-wafer-juice-sets-500-count/