

"THE STATE OF SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART"

October 7, 2006 - January 6, 2007 at The Judson Gallery, Northeast Los Angeles

by Ray Zone

A diverse collection of artworks provides a new assessment of the subject of religion and spirituality in art. Curator Ron Steen has assembled a wide-ranging group of twenty-five artists for their contributions referencing concepts of faith and religious symbology.

While the subject of religious practice and dogma is actually foregrounded, the exhibit, titled "The S-word: The State of 'Spirituality' in Contemporary Art," is also visually engaging.

In a curatorial essay Steen grapples with gathering the different artworks under one thematic umbrella. It's a problematic undertaking, however, and Steen was well-advised to put the word "Spirituality" in quotes when titling the exhibit. How, after all, does an artist reference the intangible, the immaterial, something which is ultimately invisible? Religion itself is not spirituality, nor are the artifacts and symbols of religious practice. By depicting devices and texts of such practice, an artist may be only tangentially addressing spirituality, and might actually, in fact, be subverting or satirizing religious belief. A thin gray line encircles the eye of the beholder, separating mortal error from transcendence.

The signature work for the exhibit, a 1989 20 x 24 inch oil-on-linen titled "Still Life with Grape Juice and Sandwiches (Xenia)" by David Ligare is a luminous realist work that depicts a glass pitcher filled with juice beside a stack of white bread sandwiches on a small cut-away stage or altar by a body of water visible only at the right edge of the image. It's a deftly updated commentary on the eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, and the rendering conveys a presence, even a reverence, that is surprising. Painted with that southern light



David Ligare, "Still Life with Grape Juice and Sandwiches (Xenia)," 1989, oil on linen, 20 x 24".



Betye Saar, "Riddle of Reality," 1975, wooden box assemblage, 10 3/4 x 7 1/4 x 4 1/4".

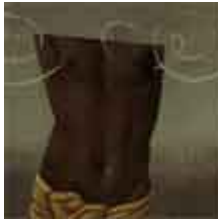


Lyn Aldritch, "Primary View #1 (Faith)," 1989, cardboard carton/transparent sealing tape, plexiglas, 48 x 15 x 10".

that filled Salvador Dali's painting of "The Last Supper," it also recalls Dali's stereoscopic paintings depicting Christ on the cross.

The idea of the sacred text is explored in prints, books and assemblages by Betye Saar, Mark Ryden, Sandow Birk, Raymond Pettibon and Ed Ruscha. Executed with artisanal precision, these works are mostly tangential to spirituality. Saar's work, however, conveys a presence that is authoritative. There, is after all, the letter as well as the spirit of the law, one frequently opposed to the other in dramatic contradistinction.

A small watercolor by Wes Christensen quietly contemporizes the Passover ritual of washing a doorway with lamb's blood as protection against God's plagues. This work, with its casual air and contemporary feel, exemplifies the letter of spiritual law enacted as a necessary act of survival.



Bari Kumar, "33," 2005, oil on canvas, 12 x 22".



Laura Lasworth, "St. Thomas & Mr. Eco," 1993-94, oil on two shapes panels, diptych, 78 x 33" each.



Kim Dingle, "My Struggles with Jesus," 1995, mixed media,

More deeply philosophical, numinous paintings by Bari Kumar, Aaron Smith and Jon Swihart look and feel contemporary, yet invoke an invisible world in which a living presence seems about to reveal itself. Their works, along with a dramatically lit realistic painting by F. Scott Hess titled "The Myth of Creation," most embody real spirituality. Fraught with a portentous atmosphere, seemingly charged with meaning, these artists dispense with the subject of religious practice and plumb the subject of spirituality through visual enigmas.

Hess's painting overtly references religious mythology, depicting a painter embellishing what can only be the name of God on the forehead of a casually dressed contemporary who acts as a stand-in for the canvas directly behind him. The juxtaposition in the composition is jarring, yet the work invokes ancient Judaic tradition, the ancient Mosaic law, and art as a form of mortality.

Ruth Weisberg's *oeuvre* often addresses spirituality, and her large atmospheric mixed-media piece, "Witness," rendering the body ethereal, is no exception. This work conveys the physical body as a luminous presence. It is understated and more powerful as a result.

Other works, such as Peter Zokosky's oil painting titled "Two Saints," and Laura Lasworth's clever diptych juxtapose religious practice with secular results. Kim Dingle's highly original mixed-media construction, titled "My Struggles with Jesus," by displaying various dolls in disarray and in the process of unraveling, constitutes a devastating moral

31 1/2 x 50 1/2 x 24 1/4".

query.

Gallery patrons may quibble with individual works and their relevance to the theme of the exhibit or, in fact, debate whether the concept of the exhibit itself is fully realized. Taken as a whole, however, this provocative presentation succeeds as a contemporary realist oriented overview of a complex subject.

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