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Making Christian Art in a Contemporary Setting

By

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Making Christian Art in a Contemporary Setting

Over the past 4 and a half years, I have studied contemporary art and seen countless artworks being made in an academic setting. In doing so, I have come to the realization that religious content is rare in today's time. While it is not actively discouraged, the environment I am in and the current art community does not seem to be particularly interested in merging the two concepts. Without understanding why, I subconsciously kept art and my faith as separate entities for the first few years of my higher education. But as I matured and developed my own artwork, I began to feel as though my identity and my interests should be rooted in my relationship with God. Upon this reflection, I began looking for ways to make Christian art in a contemporary setting that could also be accepted by those who do not share my faith.

While I have always been somewhat interested in creating artwork which reflects my identity as a Christian, I have in the past hesitated to do so in fear of criticism. Though plenty of Christian and other religious works are studied in art history courses, I have rarely seen other students create such work in the studio courses I have taken in my pursuit of a degree, at least with positive intentions. I have seen a variety of artworks meant to convey a sense of oppression felt by religion, either drawing from negative experiences with their families and churches, or criticising radical or aggressive congregational leaders which they assume speak for the majority of Christians. In addition to this, I have noticed that while students are encouraged to be respectful to all beliefs in an open-minded environment, they frequently show an active distaste for Christianity in general. While working on my own projects, I often overhear others criticising this religion, loudly making crude and offensive jokes and pointing out the things they find ridiculous about the belief in God, automatically assuming that no one in the room could possibly be a believer. When I have politely announced that I am in fact Christian, the room

usually goes into stunned silence and I am awarded a few eyerolls. In contrast to this, I have observed nothing but respectful conversation about any other beliefs, with many people enthusiastically discussing Astrology and or creating works which reflect ideas from other religions. This environment, which is not actively hostile but of which I have perceived as subtly at odds with my core beliefs, made it difficult for me to feel comfortable creating Christian art.

In some of my first attempts, I have created artworks which have Christian themes and overtly refer to spiritual experiences, but have lacked the subtlety and originality needed to be successful. In many of these works, light was depicted in high contrast across relatively monochromatic figures, the chiaroscuro a uniting visual element in both paintings and drawings. This light symbolised moments of divine interaction, cutting through the physical and emotional darkness which plagued the subjects in the art. While this symbolism was significant to me, others in the art community viewed it as an outdated and cliched way of communicating my beliefs, given the long history of light symbolizing divinity in Christian art. Simply put, it had been done before, and therefore, was not relevant or particularly interesting. After all, isn't contemporary art supposed to communicate fresh interpretations of ideas, pushing boundaries, using new materials, and creating individual styles? For most of the artists who have critiqued these past artworks, it was not enough to take traditionally well rendered figures with the worn out symbolism of "God-as-light" and mash it with colorful backgrounds that I perceived to be modern touch. While there may be a place for such pieces (and I have had some positive reactions to these works), this was not a strong enough foundation to create images that would be received as high Art. It needed something universal and relatable to a wider birth of viewers, not only communicating something that those who share my beliefs would appreciate, but portraying a fresh rendition of ideas that could be read in a variety of ways.

In addition to my social environment, there is also the disconnect between religion and modern art. Before the late 19th century, art was a means of representing the sacred, idealized, and harmonious aspects of life (Marrrone). Religion and art interacted in a seamless way, with each aiding the other. In the Medieval Art period, churches commissioned Bibles with illustrations to aid in their teachings. Cathedrals were filled with murals depicting scenes from the Bible and/or iconography, such as the endless Madonna and Childs, portraits of Christ, the Crucifixion, etc. Art depicted the things people held most high, and was used as a means to help spread faith. As time went on, focus on things like color, skill, proportion and shadow increased and subject matter expanded as new movements such as Realism emerged. The reception of religious works did not take such a hard turn, however, until the introduction of Modern Art in the Industrial Era (Marrrone). With this came an increase of philosophical ideas that rejected God, and thus, God in art. No longer did people want depictions of beautiful, balanced, and pious scenes. Instead, subject matter shifted towards the individual or political, and all the inner turmoil experienced in life. Art became something separate from religion, something that questioned itself and its own value as artists pushed boundaries visually and conceptually.

With this shift, it seems that religion has lost its value in the art community. And as an art student and a Christian, I have struggled to find a way to merge these things together. My best solution so far has been to create artworks that stem from my beliefs but do not directly reference Biblical imagery. My current body of work depicts the small orbit of people, objects, and scenery which I experience on a daily basis. I reference candid photographs that I take throughout my habitual existence, capturing images which I feel have subtle meaning. I am attempting to elevate the viewers perception of these things by carefully recreating them in my drawings and paintings, giving them reverence and showing respect for the beauty that God allows me to find

in each day. This includes a variety of subjects which range from more obvious to more obscure connections to my faith. The piece with the most palpable relationship to Christianity is a painting entitled *Please Stay After*, which portrays a scene of a mother (my sister in law), and a child (my niece), in a church. The mother sits in a pew looking forward, listening to an unseen speaker. The young daughter stands behind her, entertaining herself by rifling through hymnals sitting in the slots attached to the back of the seats. An early afternoon glow filters through windows to halo their heads, and an American flag is seen in a far spot in the room. The service had passed, and those who were to participate in the upcoming Christmas play were asked to stay after to receive announcements. This is something ordinary but beautiful that I had experienced in one form or another every year for the majority of my life. To me, the significance lies not only in the element of a Christian setting, but in the normalcy of the moment. While this is obviously religious, it is not idealizing a grand moment of worship or miraculous scene, and therefore can be received and contemplated by people from a variety of backgrounds. Another example of this is in my painting *The Old Gospel Ship*, which depicts a man (my older brother), playing a piano and singing, while a young woman (my sister), stands behind him joining in. They are in a small, cluttered room wearing simple clothing, yet they are singing and worshiping in the same manner one would while wearing their Sunday best in a sanctuary.

My other artworks continue with themes of finding significance with faith, but do so in a less obvious manner. In my drawing *Bedside*, I rendered an image of the nightstand beside my bedroom. Arranged on the table are the following items: three-quarter-filled glass of water, a small framed print of the Manet painting *The Luncheon on the Grass*, a half burned jarred candle, and a Bible, which has an obscured title and is not obvious to the viewer. Light filters in through a window behind the stand, and on the sill lies two fake decorative succulents. This

ordinary scene is something that is a constant and a comfort in my life, and is an example of how my faith allows me to find value and importance in the everyday. To further explain, my life is worth living no matter the circumstance, because blessings can always be found. This is rooted in my relationship with God, but is a mindset that can be adopted by anyone. Searching for beauty or significance in the mundane is something that can be universal.

While I am content with this body of work created, I do feel like there is something still being compromised in the end result. My relationship with God extends to the miniscule aspects of my day to day, but to me it is also something that is magnificent and miraculous. I have been uplifted in times when I thought I could not go on, and have seen endless prayers answered. I want to reflect this in my work, but I am still struggling to resolve the problem of creating imagery that would not be seen as cliched, overdone, or overly dramatic. This conundrum is something that is pointed out by James Elkins in "On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art." In this text, he explores the estranged place of religion in Modern Art, and points out the issue with artists who attempt to combine the two. His consensus is that ..." either the art is loose and unambitious, or the religion is one-dimensional and unpersuasive" (Elkins). Simply put, one can not exist without compromising the integrity of the other. Or at least, it has so far. I for one will keep trying to make art that can touch the hearts of believers and non believers alike, glorifying God while remaining relevant to Contemporary Art.

References

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