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## **ART REVIEW; Creative Souls Who Keep the Faith or Challenge Its Influence**

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There is nothing, really, to incite a politician's headline-hunting interest in the soberly titled show "Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium," organized by the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art here. That's a shame, in a way, because although "Faith" seems to be racking up a nice attendance, a small political flap would certainly give it a boost.

But then the show contains no simple red-flag symbols, like the elephant dung adorning an image of the Virgin that caused a recent mayoral to-do at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's otherwise secular "Sensation" show. Even Andres Serrano, fabricator of the infamous crucifix steeped in urine that caused a ruckus when it appeared in a 1988 show at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, is represented in the Aldrich display by two large Cibachromes of inoffensive subjects (a Polish woman praying and a close-up of a Parisian church door whose padlocked panels suggest a medieval chastity belt).

The closest this exhibition comes to human body fluids is the menstrual blood used by Linda Ekstrom in "Menstrual/Liturgical Cycles," which comments on the limited role of women in the Roman Catholic church and in society.

Of much more interest than the exhibition's low political -- though not religious -- shock quotient, however, is that the museum has turned up so many contemporary artists of varying approach (and talent, to be sure) for whom Christian or Jewish faith translates into art -- affirmative, negative, critical, questioning or simply aesthetic.

Although Western art was raised on religion, 20th-century modernism more or less tuned it out. Yet in the last few decades artists, if not curators, have become more open to the subject; in fact, of the show's 36 participants from six countries, about half identify with a religion. There are eight Catholics, four Jews, two Baptists, one Mormon and one Quaker, with two listing themselves simply as Christians. The idea is to present objects of specific religious association rather than work of a vaguely spiritual nature. The museum has taken pains to involve local congregations so that pieces by several of the artists are also exhibited at three nearby churches and a synagogue.

Alas, with one exception -- an installation by Osvaldo Romberg -- only traditional Western religions are represented in "Faith." The problem, said the museum's director, Harry Philbrick, who organized the show with Mr. Romberg and another participating artist, Christian Eckart, is one not only of space but also of curatorial inexperience with non-Western creeds. More

positively, however, according to Mr. Philbrick, they "wanted to explore the art made in the context of the dominant religious and art-historical influences of our Western culture." Since few museums have done that lately, the material on view is all the fresher.

Within its limits, the exhibition is benignly ecumenical. The range is from Alan Wexler's compact, wheel-borne sukkah -- the outdoor hut used to celebrate the Jewish feast of tabernacles -- made from a Home Depot garden shed, to a group of 42 domestic objects by Barbara Broughel (1991) that serve as portraits of accused witches in 17th-century New England.

There are pieces protesting the hypocrisy of religion, like the South African artist Willie Bester's booby-trapped Bible, cut open to house a tangle of suspicious-looking wires and mechanical devices, and those affirming religion's powers, as do the large, slick photographs of Bettina Rheims and Serge Bramly that give a campy, 20th-century twist to biblical visions.

One of the strongest protest voices is that of Michael Tracy, whose "Chapel of the Damned" (2000) reveals a passionate love-hate relationship with Catholic beliefs and rituals in a full-scale installation that commemorates "disappeared" victims of Latin American civil unrest. Implying church complicity in the disasters, Mr. Tracy's not-for-the-squeamish presentation includes neutral elements like votive candles and picturesque old Spanish pews, but also a group of bronzed likenesses of the tortured, with flayed heads, knife-pocked faces, needle-stuck tongues and severed body parts. An elegantly columned shrine displays a lumpy wall of what looks like pounded flesh.

A smaller, room-size protest that is easier on the viewer is Helene Aylon's "My Notebooks" (1998). Highlighting her struggle between her Jewish and feminist selves, it addresses male authority in the Orthodox Jewish faith with a spare setting that reflects Ms. Aylon's all-female Orthodox school days, when female teachers could convey the commentary only of male rabbis. A sternly formal wall of blank notebooks laments the lack of female scholarship, and an adjuration written on a blackboard urges young women to rethink Jewish tradition.

Church architecture, the codification of beliefs expressed in stone and wood, is another lively subject here. In a work meant to demonstrate the potential of differing religions to cooperate in peace, as evinced by the pope's efforts on his recent trip to the Holy Land, Mr. Romberg has brought together Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam in a mazelike outdoor installation of stacked fire logs. His work, "Syzygy II," incorporates the floor plans of four structures -- Lutomiersk, an 18th-century synagogue in Poland; the Cishi Pavilion from the Buddhist Longxing Monastery (circa 971); the San Sebastiano Basilica of Milan (1577); and an Iranian mosque from the Seljuk period -- all flowing into a common meditation room.

Another ambitious architectural undertaking is Nicholas Kripal's suite of four cast-concrete sculptures derived from the floor plans of four Italian cathedrals: those in Pisa, Orvieto, St. Mark's in Venice and San Zeno Maggiore in Verona. The hollow sculptures, filled with water like baptismal fonts, are made from impressions of cathedral models and presented upside down, so that the viewer looks into their ceilings, getting a close look at structural details.

Artful color photographs of churches by two German-born artists, Christof Klute and Roland Fischer, take different approaches to their aesthetics. Mr. Klute focuses on the spare, high-modernist style of four German church interiors and their prim perfection of detail, neat but sterile without the presence of celebrants and congregants. Mr. Fischer concentrates on the grandeur of Gothic cathedrals in Cologne and Strasbourg, melding by digital means their exteriors and interiors to give the full impact of their heaven-aspiring structural schemes.

Paintings range from the exactly rendered old-masterish canvases of Lisa Bartolozzi to the explosive abstractions of Matthew Ritchie. A small, witty work by Ms. Bartolozzi, "The Marking of Foreheads" (1994), shows only the wrinkled forehead of a person designated by a mark as one of the saved. Mr. Ritchie's ambitious installation, "Chapel Perilous" from the legend of the Holy Grail, displays four paintings that celebrate significant moments in the history of the universe: the big-bang creation, the fall of the angels and the expulsion from Eden, with a floor piece that works them into a simultaneous whole.

Another arresting painting is Manuel Ocampo's cartoony "Jesus Christ Kama Sutra (Alpenliebe)" (1998), a ferocious allusion to the Holocaust in which the twisted body of Jesus on the cross dangles a Jewish star from its arm. The title implies a connection between Jesus's suffering and sexual arousal, but there are further complexities. The vignette is made to appear on the bloodstained cover of a Swiss magazine, *Alpenliebe* (love of the Alps), a hint at Swiss complicity with the Nazis.

Of a very different stamp are the Byzantine-style paintings by John B. Giuliani, a priest, of American Indians in traditional Catholic scenes. "Jesus and the Disciples" (1995), for example, shows a proud lineup of Indians wrapped in gorgeous tribal raiment on either side of a stern Jesus blanketed in austere black and white.

Humor in the exhibition is sometimes more forthright, as in a large-scale photograph (1997) by the Rev. Ethan Acres, an artist and ordained evangelical street preacher from Las Vegas. The minister is shown blessing a dead dog in the street while overhead the dog's soul, in the form of an exuberant mutt, leaps gleefully toward the heavens.

There is aural expression, too. A pair of large bronze gongs by Jaume Plensa -- one titled "Born," the other "Die" -- reverberate unto the heavens when hit with the heavy strikers that accompany them. They add soul to the Aldrich's engaged, and engaging, endeavor.

*"Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium" remains at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn., (203) 438-4519, through May 29.*