

# OF ARTISTS



## YOU KNOW TIMES ARE CHANGING WHEN MICHAEL JACKSON BECOMES A RELIGIOUS FIGURE

By Ello Iannacchi

Some declared blasphemy, some declared controversy and some even declared genius when Andres Serrano's large color photograph, "Piss Christ," made world headlines in the early '90s. Depicting a small plastic crucifix flooded in the artist's urine, the photograph depicts a faded, red and yellow image of the well-known symbol of persecution and an extreme Christian visual representation of the son of God. Like any great art achievement, debates still continue on Serrano's creation, its meaning and its impact. Whether Serrano's conception was a deliberate attempt at attacking the church, criticizing Christianity or empathizing with Catholicism's decline in popularity still remains to be seen today. One detail has become obvious from all the hoopla produced in Serrano's Christ kafuffle. His picture of a little man on a cross drowning in amber colored discharge has become more than just your typical artistic message — it has marked many new generations of artists. In essence, Serrano's piece ended up directly motivating many modern artists to challenge the way they referenced Christianity in the new millennium.

Of course, this isn't anything new. Artists have been referencing Christian iconography for centuries — from Michelangelo's humanistic approach to masterpieces like his world-renowned "Pieta" in the late Renaissance to the quiet, home-grown controversies involved with great paintings such as "Trinity" and "Obsession" from Ethiopian-born artist Worku Goshu — modern art has seen the likes of Christ and the Madonna in more outfits, angles and backgrounds than any celebrity to walk the earth. Even in the past two years, famous artists like Julian Schnabel have continued to devote works to images that reflect Christ's last day on earth, making it as clear as yesterday that even through the unconventional spheres of modern art, a thread of tradition still holds fast.

James Yood, one of Northwestern University's leading lecturers in the Art Theory and Practice department, calls the next generation of artists who reference Christian icons yet another "sign of the times." Yood believes that in the last 200 years, religious art has been far in the minority of what constitutes contemporary art. "In many senses," Yood explains, "spiritually-based art has replaced religious art in the modern and contemporary scenes."

Yood's definition of Christian art respects that Christian iconography and subject matter "must refer specifically to the biblical tradition of Christianity" (citing images of the Madonna and Child, Christ's crucifixion and the saints as prime examples) but clarifies that spiritual art "is not totally identifiable with any religious sect but speaks to a larger sense of God or nature or metaphysical essences that constitute life."

Nowadays, Yood feels artists are finding extremely innovative ways of dealing with Christian subjects other than just "employing straight, pictorial, realist narrative." This month in Chicago, a number of galleries are exhibiting these many innovative ways in which Christian iconography are being employed (just in time for Easter, of course). One such recent related group show — "Traditions: The Blessing & The Curse" (through May 15 at womanmade gallery, 2418 W. Bloomingdale Avenue, 773/489-3600) support Yood's observations fully. Although a great deal of spiritual works occupy the womanmade gallery space, not a trace of art that traditionally employs Christian iconography is hanging on or surrounding the gallery's walls. What can be found is a slew of works that indirectly incorporate Christian icons into canvas, sculpture and drawing.

# AND ICONS

Part of the line-up of artists at the "Traditions" exhibition includes Arizona-born Galen Bell Smith whose painting, "Melancholy Redemption," builds on the popularity of contemporizing the Christian icon with spirituality. Smith, who feels many modern artists are now straying away from literal Christian referencing because "it can be easily seen as cliché," admittedly struggles with using Christian symbols while still embracing them in her work. "Melancholy Redemption"'s striking image of a worn-down, gray-marked and obese Madonna surrounded by peace Doves (equally dulled-down and reminiscent of mere pigeons), indicate Smith's artistic exploration is far from the devotional.

"What I am doing" Smith expresses, "is cleansing a lot of the shame and guilt previously involved with Christianity and the church by what I am creating. The fact that 'Melancholy and Redemption' is a big fat lady with Christ's halo on her and does not look anything like a typical virginal Madonna defines [my work] as spiritual and not religious."

Like-wise, artists such as Los Angeles-born Deborah Torchinsky have also taken space at the Hyde Park Arts Center (5307 S. Hyde Park Blvd, 773/324-5520) exhibit, "Zounds: An exploration of the sacred in contemporary art." Seizing the same spiritual touch-points as Smith, Torchinsky's thought-provoking "Michael" — a 54-by-40 inch ink work that resembles pop star Michael Jackson — flirts with the power related to the Christian icon. Torchinsky's image of Jackson (he stands in a crucifix like stance) speaks volumes of the way traditional religion has been overshadowed by popular celebrity. Michael's black-haired, plasticine image can be easily viewed as a hybrid of both pop and Christian icons continuously reflecting the old and new world ways of worship. "I don't want to say that Michael is Jesus, but I do see how my work can, in a popular sense, [bring up] an aspect of asking, 'Who is our God?'" she adds. "I am exploring the fact that humans are increasingly taking on terrain that was previously thought of as the providence of God."

Jeremy Biles, PhD candidate at the University of Chicago Divinity School and curator of the "Zounds" exhibition, also points to one of the most controversial works in "Zounds": Michael Hernandez's stamp-art series depicting the figure of Christ getting crucified with the words "pedophilia," "rape," "incest" and "murder" hovering behind the image. The figure's tortured presence paired with such strong and critical words serve to renovate the meanings of Christian iconography to make political statements. "The way in which the Christ figure covers up these words [is] a nice visual way of saying the institutional body of the church covers up and gives rise to these instances of trauma," he explains. "Another way of reading the image is that it is [representing] the church as wounding people" — a fitting expression of the meaning of "zounds," a Renaissance-era expletive short for "God's wounds."

Although referencing Christian iconography is not an unusual occurrence in modern art anymore, coming up with original ideas sure is. The blending of spiritual art with Christian symbols reflects the political, social and emotional temperature of each artist who creates or recreates from these renowned symbolic templates. With Chicago's galleries continuing to support and sometimes encourage these works through group shows such as "Zounds" and "Traditions", this divine exploration will always remain far from finished.

Want to learn more? On April 11, Cardinal Francis George hosts a dinner and an in-depth discussion of religious iconography for the Museum of Contemporary Art's "Feast for the Eyes" series. For more information, visit [www.mcachicago.org](http://www.mcachicago.org) or call 312/397-3868