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CATHOLIC NEW YORK

Catholic New York

August 24, 2000

The Word as Art

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Keith Duncan describes his "biblical-political paintings" as "storytelling of a universal theme for the Masses." Above, his "Angel of 125th Street."

For centuries the Bible has been a source of inspiration for the artist. One has only to look at the magnificent frescoes in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican to see how Michelangelo reached the heights of biblical interpretation in recording events of the Old Testament--the Creation, Noah, Abraham.

At a time when many people were illiterate, craftsmen were employed to decorate the interiors of churches and cathedrals with religious themes. Most popular of these depictions were scenes relating to events in the life of Mary and the crucifixion and death of Christ.

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In modern times, while religious themes were still popular, the artists moved toward a more subjective execution. Paul Cezanne's "The Yellow Christ," Salvador Dali's "The Crucifixion" are examples.

The American Bible Society, 1865 Broadway, Manhattan, in its latest exhibition, "The Word as Art: Contemporary Renderings," presents a modern showing of the Bible as artistic inspiration. More than 50 works by 14 contemporary artists from the United States, Israel and Korea are on view.

The Archdiocese of New York is represented by cartoons or preparatory sketches by the German-born Albinas Elskus for the stained-glass windows of St. John the Evangelist Church in Mahopac (1970) and also by his watercolor sketches for windows in Epiphany Church in Manhattan (1967).

The designs for St. John's are classical representations of the Crucifixion, God the Father and the Resurrection on one panel with the archangel Michael, symbols of the Evangelists and St. John on the other. The sketches in the show are much smaller, of course, than the actual 75 feet long by 16 feet high final installation.

The watercolors for Epiphany Church are abstract designs rendered in liturgical colors.

The American artist Sandra Bowden, whose works are in the Vatican Museum of Contemporary Art, has several paintings in the show but two oil on acrylics are stand-outs: "Crucifixion" (1973) and "It Is Finished" (1976), burlap and corduroy, with rusty nails representing the crown of thorns.

Many of the artists in the show see religious experiences in everyday life. The Harlem-based artist Keith Duncan in his "Angel of 125th Street" envisions a crucified Christ hovering over the elderly; his "Angel of El Barrio" has Mary standing guard over an accident victim; in "Angels of Central Park," the homeless are protected by heavenly bodies. (All executed 1996.)

Mary McCleary offers a modern-dress "Good Samaritan" (1995) and "Prodigal Son" (1996), both mixed media collages on paper.

Christina Saj stylistically reinterprets icons of the Eastern Church. Her "Last Supper" (2000), mixed media on canvas, and "Madonna and Child" (1998), tempera on gold leaf, are good examples.

Photography also is represented in the show. Jill Greenlaw has images of "St. Joseph and the Baby Jesus," "St. Francis and Mary," "Backyard Mary" (all 1987). Rather than the statuary usually found in churches, these images are the garden-variety type usually found in the front yard of the devout. In one instance, "St. Theresa" overlooks the family wash.

What is most striking about the show is that the majority of the art dates from the 1980s; some were executed this year. But there is a great deal to see. Some works will be passed over quickly; but others will hold the viewer's attention with their power, imagination and interpretation.

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Accompanying placards allow the artists to speak to the viewer, describing their creative experience.

"The Word as Art," arranged by Ena Heller, will be on view through Saturday, Oct. 21, in the society's gallery. Hours are Mondays through Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Special events have been planned in conjunction with the show on Thursdays at 6 p.m. On Sept. 14, Ms. Heller will give a guided tour of the exhibition. On Sept. 28, Father James Blaettler, S.J., in residence at Corpus Christi parish in Manhattan, will lecture on "The Aura of Language and the Discourse of Art." On Oct. 21, Marcus Blake, curator at the Hispanic Society of America, will discuss "Religion and Art: After 2,000 Years, Can This Marriage Be Saved?"