

The 20th century citadel known as the “art world” has been insistent that religion would not be allowed through the gates. This cultural breach between art and religion has been getting considerable attention recently. Much of the discussion has been generated by art historian James Elkins who teaches at the Art Institute of Chicago. His 2004 book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* has been a catalyst for new conversations that explore the relationship between art and religion. In the concluding chapter of the book Elkins articulates a view that should spark conversation not to say controversy among artists of faith. He writes “I have tried to show why committed, engaged, ambitious, informed art does not mix with dedicated, serious, thoughtful, heartfelt religion. Whenever the two meet one wrecks the other.” (p.115)

Elkins’ contention invites response and certainly raises all sorts of questions. It is important to know that Elkins is speaking about a limited range of art. He holds to an account of art that is “institutional”. This means that art is that which shows up in museums and galleries and is the subject of publications whose focus is contemporary art. This way of understanding art

emerged when artists began to do work that would not fit traditional forms of art or comply with accepted philosophical definitions. It is common for those who hold this view to take a further step and affirm such art as the standard by which all other work is to be judged. Religious art becomes unacceptable because it is indebted to

another tradition, an earlier time, and fails to fit with the prevailing ideas of today’s “art world”. Given this

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The Elements by Mary Abma



Untitled lumen print by Mary Abma

Mary Abma, a resident of Bright’s Grove, Ontario, is an artist who works in a variety of media. As a full-time artist she has exhibited in several group and solo exhibitions at galleries over the past fifteen years, both regionally and nationally. From the early 1990’s until her solo exhibition, *If Remembered*, in 2003, she explored the art of portraiture and figurative painting always seeking to push the limits of expression of human form so that by the end of this period, efforts to capture the essence of the person became more important than attempts to portray a physical likeness. After that time, her artistic focus shifted and her art works, which consist primarily of conceptual paintings, explore themes that allow her to incorporate her interest in theology, passion for science, and desire to find visual expression for her thoughts about the human condition.

She had a solo show in 2008 at Sarnia’s Gallery Lambton titled *Peregrinatio*, meaning “pilgrimage”. This term is used metaphorically to describe an inner spiritual journey or quest. In that show her work engaged the physical world. The earth holds a narrative, a story that reaches from a distant past to a future yet to be fully revealed. The artwork for that exhibit references earth’s fossils, geodes, geological formations, and petrified wood. Through this work the objects are used as metaphors for memory, transformation, legacy and transcendence. *The Elements* is one of the works from that show.

Working in a variety of media, Mary is currently developing a series of artworks that integrate science and art to create a metaphorical cabinet of botanical study. In an attempt to understand and to wrestle with issues surrounding ownership, bounty, blessing, sanctification, use and misuse of our natural environment, she has focused her artistic lens on her own yard, its soil, its seeds, and its flora.

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Book Reviews

God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art

By Daniel Siedell, Baker Academic, 2008.

Those of Christian faith persuasion commonly express dissatisfaction with contemporary art. Why is it so difficult to understand? What is it suppose to represent? What does it mean? These and other questions result in many taking leave of contemporary art and settling for the comforts of more traditional and familiar works. In his recent book Daniel Siedell provides an invitation to Christians who have stepped away from modern art to give it another look. *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* offers a sustained case for serious engagement with modern art by those who walk the Christian path. The author writes not as a theologian or philosopher but as an experienced curator and now a professor of modern and contemporary art history and criticism.

His argument begins by invoking the example of Paul in Athens engaging the philosophers on Mars Hill. Paul's tack was to use the artifacts present in the culture – altar and poetry – and “in a radical move bent them toward the gospel”. Siedell is an advocate for an understanding of art that focuses on contemplation. This is only one of many ways that art functions in our cultural setting. He takes up the subject of icons in the Eastern Church and explores their potential as a resource for fresh understanding of contemporary art. He calls us to harken back to ancient and medieval sources to discern a countervoice to modernity.

Clearly Siedell sees in all art, whether explicit or implicit, spiritual sensibilities and aspirations which are commonly shaped by the cultural presence of the Christian faith. These themes may be discerned he argues, despite counter claims by artists who would eschew the spiritual or religious nature of their work. He devotes one chapter to recount his own journey of discovery in the work of artist Enrique Martinez Celaya.

It is Siedell's view that the Christian faith community has the capacity to be an engine for both cultural critique and cultural change. The Christian church has in hand

the rich and diverse history of creedal faith over the centuries. He contends that it is the divine liturgy that engages all the aesthetic faculties that opens the way for exploring artistic practices. In this, says Siedell, it serves a twofold purpose, “...it brings greater clarity and understanding to contemporary artistic practice; and ...it demonstrates the richness of the gospel that fulfills and completes rather than replaces or denies secular understanding and practice of art.” (p.151)

The final chapter of the book serves as a coda – where the author takes up the vexed issue of Christian art and Christian artist. He articulates some key difference with the two important figures whose work has served to shape much Christian conversation about art, Hans Rookmaaker and Francis Schaeffer. He points to weaknesses in their approach but is more interested to highlight his alternative paradigm than to engage in warfare over specific differences.

This is an important book for anyone interested in the subject of faith and contemporary art. Siedell is a new voice and he brings rich experience and fresh insight to the topic. This work is likely to become a reference point for all future conversations about Christianity and contemporary art.

Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling

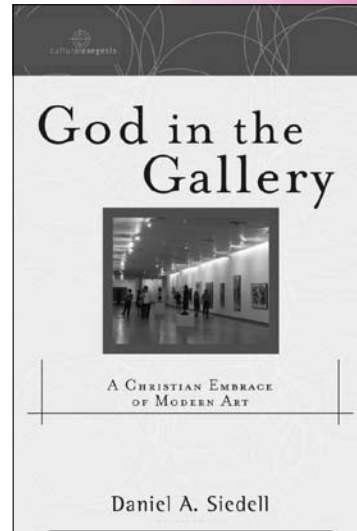
By Andy Crouch, InterVarsity Press, 2008.

Exploring the relationship between Christianity and culture has occupied the faith community from its very beginning. It can be traced within the biblical narrative and through writing in every phase of the history of the church. In the twentieth century H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* became a reference point for discussion. The “culture wars”, issues of faith in the public square, the renewed attention to the arts and the recent recovery of talk of transformation have all fuelled the conversation often generating more heat than light.

Culture Making by Andy Crouch provides a calm and insightful exploration of what it means to be faithful in the context of what we call culture. At the heart of his argument is the idea that culture is something that you do. It is not just a thing that I observe or a collection of things that shape my life though both of these may be true. It is an activity that requires some intentionality.

Among the common approaches we practice are; condemning culture, critiquing culture, copying culture and consuming culture. As an alternative to suspicion and critique Crouch invites us to consider the postures of artist and gardener. Here each begins in contemplation, paying close attention to what is there, and then moves to do purposeful work.

Both are creaturely creators, tending and shaping the world the Creator has made. (p.97)



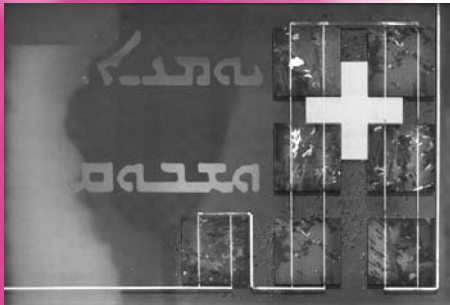
At the heart of the book the reader is taken through a careful reflection on the cultural mandate in Genesis, given a glimpse of the sweep of the biblical narrative which begins in a garden (Genesis) and ends in a city (Revelation), and finds a case for Jesus as cultivator and culture maker. Crouch makes clear that the cross prevents us from “any sort of cultural triumphalism” while the resurrection may be “the most culturally significant event in history. The discussion is shaped by a keen biblical and theological understanding.

While one might expect a book with the title “culture makers” to be a work promoting the power to change the world – Crouch is very cautious on this subject. In the chapter

Vancouver's Solar Tower receives American Institute of Architects Award

A Canadian architect and a Canadian glass artist, each distinguished in their own field, shared centre stage in San Francisco in April when they received the prestigious *Design Merit Award for Sacred Landscapes* from the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The award was presented to architect Clive Grout and glass artist Sarah Hall on April 29th for their collaborative work in creating a dramatic and innovative wind tower for the new Theology Library of Regent College in Vancouver.

Awarded through the AIA's Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art & Architecture, the Sacred Landscape Award will recognize the pioneering work of Grout and Hall in creating an architectural landmark that combines art, spirituality, and ecology.



titled "Why We Can't Change the World, he provides a realistic assessment of what can or cannot be done. In this he confronts a paradox. Human beings are to make something of the world – to give it shape and a transformed culture is surely something the Christian faith advocates. But says Crouch "Changing the world is the one thing we cannot do". (p.189) He contends that when we move into the larger scales of culture we quickly leave behind our ability to change very much. (p.197) This is a complex problem and you will need to read the book get the authors account.

There is much in this book to instruct and to challenge. It provides an in depth look at how culture fits with the Christian call to faithfulness. It provides a bracing challenge to consider an alternate path to those that have been common fare in our current thinking. It is a book that will reward readers with new insights and expanded horizons for the faith and culture conversation and move them to confident engagement as makers of culture. ■



Rising from the center of the park, the forty-foot high triangular glass wind tower provides passive ventilation for the library below and is a significant landmark for the

College. Integrated into the south face of the tower is a dramatic art glass work – the first permanent installation of photovoltaic glass art in North America. A luminous column of silvery, fused and etched glass is inscribed with the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic – inspired by a manuscript in the Library below.

The wind tower and the glass artwork, *True North/Lux Nova*, reflect the strong commitment to environmental education and stewardship at Regent College – the same commitment that led it to build its new library underground – leaving room for a three-quarter acre park which welcomes students, staff and visitors. Sited at the main entrance to the University of British Columbia, the park is also a natural crossroads. The glass work contains photovoltaic cells that collect energy during the day to light the tower at night – offering a powerful message for the future and a beacon of light for the community. In this installation – the first in North America – stained glass with its thousand-year history has been revitalized for a new role in the 21st Century.

In ancient times, people would erect Stelae for wayfinding and to celebrate significant events. These were often made from stone with inscriptions carved into them. Markers of this kind tell us about the stories and beliefs of cultures that have preceded our own.

"We consider our wind tower in much the same way – a contemporary Stela which serves as a witness to humankind's constant search for orientation, direction and inspiration," says Hall.

www.ArtGeneratesAmps.com ■

Divine liturgy ...

*demonstrates the richness
of the gospel that fulfills and
completes rather than replaces
or denies secular understanding
and practice of art.*

Daniel Siedell

Imago Evening

Tuesday June 16, 2009 at 7:30 p.m.

Enoch Turner Schoolhouse
106 Trinity Street, Toronto

Performers include:

Laila Biali – Jazz piano
Irwin Barker – Comedy
Marvin Ishmael – Actor/Story Teller
and others.

See www.imago-arts.on.ca

The “art world” *continued from page 1*

perspective reconciliation between religion and the art world seems unlikely – though perhaps not impossible.

What about this idea of “the art world”? It is a widely held notion and one that has been much criticized. (See *\$12,000,000 Stuffed Shark* by Don Thompson) Would it not make more sense to speak of the galleries, museums and publications that champion “contemporary art” as *an* art world? This at least would signal the recognition that there are many art worlds where fine work is being done – including art with religious sensibilities. One has the sense that those in “the art world” are often self appointed gate keepers who set boundaries shaped by their own particular values. This can lead to practices of exclusion that marginalize participants from our diverse culture.

If Elkins is representing the current model of how (visual) art is understood surely it's time for a new paradigm – a different and perhaps more inclusive model that is able to embrace diversity so evident in contemporary art. Part of the reason for “the art world's” discontent with religion is the degree to which that community has accepted loss of faith in modern culture. For some time now we have been operating in a disenchanted world – a world in which spiritual values have been diminished and the “gods” have departed. The impact of this sea change can be seen in various facets of our culture. It has been suggested that Elkins’ “art world” is one in which we discern the absence of God – humanity treading an apophatic path – unable to discern or to accept a divine presence – but longing just the same.

One of the signs that the push to keep religion at bay is weakening is the so-called “return of beauty” in discussions about art. Beauty has certainly been a theme in non-religious contexts. However it is but a short step from the beauty found in art, human life or the natural order to speaking about how beauty is made possible – and the likelihood of a divine source. The return of beauty suggests that a window is now open – if only a little – indicating that our experience of a closed, material, disenchanted world may not be the whole story or more boldly – may be a false story. But it is not just the “return of beauty” that is at work. There is something in our humanity



Contain and Release (detail) by Phil Irish, 2009. Oil on panel.

that resists accounts of life that are merely mechanical or material. We seem unable to live for long in a disenchanted world – before we become restless and long for more.

Twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said; I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view”. What he meant by this is much debated but it does seem to suggest that religious sensibilities are difficult to avoid. I find the recent conversations on religion and art an encouraging sign. Not just because of attention to religious belief but because it suggests that we are acknowledging a more full – orbed notion of what it means to be human.

Imago has been advocating for this link between art and faith for some thirty seven years and we continue to engage that work. Opportunities for discussions, events and the facilitating of creative initiatives are all part of the Imago mandate. My hope is that we might find ways to further the conversation in the Canadian context on this important theme of art and religion.

John .

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Watershed

Visual Artist Phil Irish at the
Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery
May 15 to July 5, 2009.
Artist Talk on June 3 at 7 p.m.

For some time now Phil Irish’s painting practice has relied on a form of collaborative cartography. In collecting hand-drawn maps from diverse groups of people, Irish is able to form a likeness of a place that aims to communicate more than just the physical attributes of land. For Irish and his collaborators, cartography is hardly an objective pursuit. These maps locate places of personal significance – places of revelation, trauma, or even solace.

The narratives often annotated by the collaborators on their maps, become a crucial means by which Irish understands the landscape around him. *Watershed* is a continuation of this process with a specific focus on the people and the landscape along the Grand River. A lifeguard’s account of saving a girl’s life, a believer’s account of baptism, and a young couple on the cusp of a new relationship are just a few of the narratives Irish draws from the river. In *Watershed*, the River is cast as a metaphor for transition and renewal – an essential way of looking at our evolving landscape today.

Adapted from the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery website, www.kwag.on.ca

www.philirish.com ■