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Maryland News

Gotta have 'Faith'

Exhibit catalog more than a coffee-table book

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Religion is increasingly in the public eye, but for thoughtful people the picture is often disquieting.

Faced with the media spectacle of stringent believers who seemingly oppose any law or lifestyle too unlike their own, and of youthful mobs slamming their heads to Christian rock groups as monotonously untalented (and commercially overproduced) as the usual radio fare, you almost long to see the more genuine side of religion. That is, not the political or the mob-identity side, but the private and personal side - the one concerned not with power and popularity, but with thought and the arts.

Thankfully, the more genuine side still exists, even if network news anchors don't get around to mentioning it. But that's what we book critics are for in a certain sense, since not all culture can fit in a two-minute TV segment.

On that note, I'm pleased to divert your attention from the boob tube and toward the catalog of a juried art exhibit titled "The Next Generation: Contemporary Expressions of Faith" is a catalog of an exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art. "Allegory of the Senses," 2002, by Mary Fielding McCleary. Courtesy photo



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Contemporary Expressions of Faith" (Eerdmans Publishing, \$60).

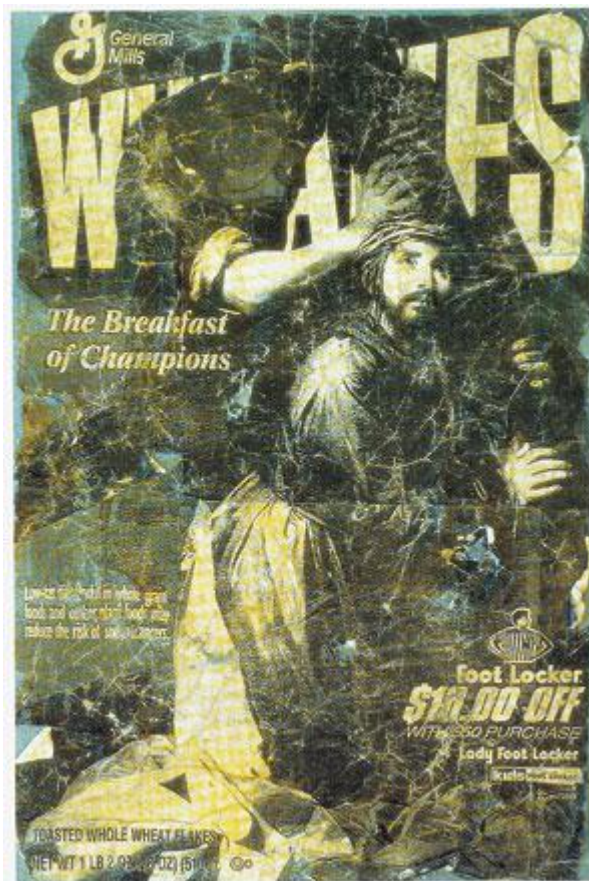
The show runs Aug. 20 to Nov. 13 at the Museum of Biblical Art (known also as MOBIA) in New York City, which bills itself as "New York's newest museum," although it was formerly (since 1998) the Gallery space at the American Bible Society, which itself was founded in 1816. But that administrative footnote aside, "The Next Generation" is a show with a lot of variety and talent, among its 44 contributing artists.



Contemporary styles

With surprisingly few exceptions, the 44 works here are eye-catching and provocative. There isn't a piece here that lacks a significant amount of preplanning, and the execution seems done by competent - and often excellent - hands.

How the artists were chosen for the exhibit remains something of a mystery, since the curator-editors merely point to the evaporating definition provided by Theodore Prescott, one of the artists chosen. Prescott remarks that "Christian art" can refer variously to work with Christian



"The Breakfast of Champions," 2004, by David E. Levine. Courtesy photo

subject matter, work with a Christian worldview, work made for a Christian audience or, most simply, work made by someone who's Christian.

If you flip through the catalog, however, nothing really screams "This is religious art!" or "Faith-based paintings ahead!" (For that matter, nothing even whispers "Jew here" or "I'm a Muslim" either.) Rather, the book seems like a sampler of current - the snooty would say last week's - trends in the visual arts, representing a rich and varied range of contemporary styles.

There is, for example, a "manipulated photocopy" by David E. Levine titled "Breakfast of Champions," whose dark and crinkled image depicts Jesus on a box of Wheaties. (There is also a \$10-off coupon for Foot Locker in the lower right corner.) This is exactly the type of sarcastic ad/pop art that you see a lot of punkish hacks toying with, confident of the faint commentary they leave behind about the tentacles of role-model advertising. (I've seen more images of Che Guevara and Andre the Giant, for instance, than I really care to keep track of.) Levine's use of Jesus in this context, however, actually raises the question of whether the piece is irreverent or not. It's a tenuous argument, but perhaps he's even parodying the genre itself.

Along with Levine's photocopy-based entry, there are a few video and photographic pieces, and a good helping of sculptures, installations and full-on multimedia constructions (these last in the imitation of altarpieces and books). But "The Next Generation" also shows off a few examples of the somewhat recent return to figurative painting among artists. These are among the most memorable in the show, and pieces like Joel Sheesley's "Winter Conversation" and Mary Fielding McCleary's "Allegory of the Senses" - incidentally, the first two pieces in the catalog - will leave a lasting impression of shifting realities.

Area talent

The exhibit features work by two Virginia residents as well. Anita Breitenberg Naylor's "Revelation 3:5" is a lavish, meticulously executed collage, that looks on the page like a cross between a Byzantine mosaic and a flying carpet. She describes its visual elements as a mix of "Tibetan mandalas, Indian rangolies [painted

prayers], kaleidoscopes and architectural domes" - I searched in vain for a kitchen sink here (Christine Huck did an arresting portrait of a faucet, after all) - but despite this panoply of sources, the resulting image is a lush, well-harmonized whole you feel like plunging into.

Virginia-based painter Edward Knippers is also represented, though his 8'x12' (yes, that's in feet, not inches) oil painting "Ash Wednesday (Christ and the Demoniac)" certainly loses something by being reduced to a 5x8-inch color plate. Nonetheless, Knippers' giant figures make an impact on the page, and his work easily brings the similarly large and dramatic paintings of Rubens to mind.

An informative essay

Art historian Wayne Roosa guides the reader from piece to piece in his long catalog essay, providing astute commentary on the artworks and revealing how various traditions of both craftsmanship and metaphysics underlie the creations here. The essay alone makes up about a third of the book's length, and art lovers with a touch of the scholar about them will enjoy reading it straight through.

The less bookish, of course, can always just hunt through Roosa's text for the parts dealing with their favorite pictures. Either way, it makes for informative reading.

Yet an experienced reader may get the impression that the purportedly religious themes Roosa discusses - the phenomenon of "presence," the ephemeral nature of time, the slippage between a material world and an intellectual or spiritual higher reality - are really just the stomping ground of imaginative art in the West.

Perhaps this is why most of the artworks in "The Next Generation" don't seem religious so much as artistic; and perhaps packaging the artists' works under such an aegis - even if it appeals to a certain demographic - will ultimately pigeonhole both the catalog and the exhibit, thanks to the bad name religion gets from its less creative (if more creationist) fans.

If it does, it'll be a readily foreseeable error; but it'll still be a shame. Roosa's text and the artists' pieces really do repay

attention.

So if you're heading to New York between Aug. 20 and Nov. 13, and you're in the mood for a thought-provoking experience, check out the exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art. And if you're not going to be in New York, check out the catalog in a bookstore for what promises to be more than a coffee-table book.

"The Next Generation: Contemporary Expressions of Faith," ed. Patricia C. Pongracz and Wayne Roosa

Museum of Biblical Art Exhibit Catalog

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Hardcover with color plates, 205 pp. List price: \$60

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