

ART

Getting Art, Getting Religion

Excavating the Image: Biblical Subjects by Wayne Forte. At the Reynolds Gallery, Westmont College, through October 18.

The Big Story has it that, by and large, religion and art parted ways around the turn of the 20th century, after centuries of a symbiotic relationship. Modern art celebrated its secular liberation while a new cloistered field of "religious art" went effectively underground, out of view of the salon. That, of course, is the simplistic, inadequate overview. In fact, religion and spirituality never left art, but changed shape and meaning; nor did the powerfully resonant legacy of church-sponsored Western art magically depart. It is too embedded in fine art's DNA.

Taking the longer view, it shouldn't be so surprising to find a vigorous, semi-abstract, post-Modern approach to Biblical subjects, as Wayne Forte currently presents in a dazzling show at Westmont College. Once you banish assumptions, the appreciation begins.

This is a big show in scale, quantity, and gesture. Paintings fill the official gallery space, the hallway, and spill into the back classroom. The ambitious exhibition, also the subject of Westmont's first elaborate four-color catalogue, could use a larger venue, such as the new, expanded art gallery now in the planning stages on campus. Still, the effect in this compacted presentation intensifies the viewing experience. In a painting like "Four Aspects of Jonah," the composite, roughly overlapping imagery, aids in telling a complex story, while also commenting on the ambiguous, evolutionary nature of Bible stories passed down through time.

Forte cites the central influence of Rubens (in "Cain and Abel"), Rembrandt (in "The Tablets"), and Fra Angelico (in "The Ravishing"). But other more contemporary references arise, including Georges Rouault's dense, mythic religious art and Max Beckmann's compositional muscularity. Forte sometimes includes relevant concrete objects in his surfaces, such as paintbrushes and carpenter's nails, touching on the neo-Expressionist fashion of Julian Schnabel. Of course, Schnabel was another "secular" artist with more residue of religious art than he'd probably care to admit.

Forte's show manages to spur questions about art world presumptions. At the same time, its broad drama appeals to the eyes and mind, on its own particular aesthetic terms.



Wayne Forte's "The Ravishing" (after Fra Angelico) currently hangs in his show at Reynold's Gallery, Westmont.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard