

Back to Eden: Contemporary Artists Wander the Garden

by David Carrier

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A decade ago, the art historian James Elkins published *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, a book that offered a highly suggestive observation. The United States is a very religious country, he noted, but very little contemporary art found in the mainstream galleries or museums presents religion in a positive way. But think about it: when was the last time that a major Chelsea gallery displayed unironic contemporary Christian (or Jewish or Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu) sacred art? Or ask: How many churches or synagogues employ contemporary artists? If you consider how important such sacred themes were to the European old masters, and even to many major Modernists (including some who were not themselves religious), then this omission is surprising. While the abstractness of Abstract Expressionist art made it hard to illustrate sacred subjects, some of these artists associated their paintings with traditional sacred ways of thinking. But revival of figurative painting did not open the way for religious art. Indeed, it's hard to name any well-known living artists who are believers. One reason, I think, that the contemporary art world can seem so alienated from the larger culture is its striking lack of interest in sacred art.

Although the Museum of Biblical Art, which is on Broadway at Lincoln Center, is physically close to the New York art world, its proclaimed mission—to celebrate and interpret “art inspired by the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian tradition”—sets it far away from our aggressively secular art world. Supported by the American Bible Society, this Kunsthalle mounts shows of old master religious art, along with displays of contemporary artists, some of whom are believers and others who deal in religious themes. *Back to Eden* includes six new works commissioned by the museum and thirteen older paintings and sculptures. Some artists depict the scene in the garden. Barnaby Furnas's “The Fruit Eaters” (2013) shows the moment when Adam and Eve bite into the forbidden fruit. The paint runs and blurs, rendering details indistinct. Anonda Bell's “Neither Shall You Touch It” (2013 – 14), replaces Eve with the apocryphal figure of Lilith, who according to rabbinic legend, was Adam's first wife before Eve. According to one feminist revisionist account rooted in medieval demonology, Lilith refused to submit to Adam and fled to mate with demons. Mark Dion's “TheSerpent Before the Fall,” (2014) shows the serpent with legs, before God reduced him to a crawling animal, in a diorama like that in a natural history museum. Fred Tomaselli's mixed-media painting “Study for Expulsion” (2000) depicts Adam and Eve, as quoted Masaccio's “Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden” (c. 1424 – 27), surrounded by psychotropic drugs, flowers, plants, bugs, birds, and snakes. But other artists use Eden as a starting point for more personal gestures. Jim Dine's “Garden of Eden” (2003), a gate constructed from brightly colored tools, evokes the hardware store of his grandfather, a place he remembers fondly. Alexis Rockman's “Gowanus” (2013), an intricate, large-scale painting, depicts a Brooklyn Superfund site as a wasteland—an anti-Eden. Mary Temple's “North Wall, South Light, Garden” (2014), a painting which shows light filtering through an imaginary window, falling on the gallery wall, creates an

imaginary, fictional site—a garden of Eden, if you will.

When visual art is based upon a text, it's often important to learn what portions of that writing are *not* represented in the image. Genesis 2:4 – 3:24, quoted in the exhibition catalogue, presents three discrete events: it describes Adam and Eve in Eden; it says that after eating the apple, they realized that they were not nude but naked; and it says that God expelled them from the garden because eating the apple made them, too, god-like, knowing the distinction between good and evil. The artists in *Back to Eden* describe the ideal garden, or its corrupted opposite. None of them present the contrast between nudity and nakedness, which in the context of Genesis presupposes some conception of sin; or discuss the consequences of eating the apple, which is not easy even for learned Christian theologians to understand. These contemporary artists focus on the portion of this sacred text that can be easily secularized, treating Eden as a more generalized utopia. And so although there is a lot of good art here, *Back to Eden* is less than the sum of its parts. Puzzling over my disappointment, I recalled a painting I've not seen for some time, "The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise" (1445) by Giovanni di Paolo, in the Robert Lehman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is a naively powerful image because it expresses a passionate belief in the fable it depicts. In a religious culture, or in a museum gallery presenting the old masters, viewers can respond sincerely to images of the Fall. But since ours is an essentially secular society, it's unsurprising that these contemporary artists—whatever their personal beliefs—mostly don't present the story of the disobedience of Adam and Eve as told in scripture. It's become hard, if not impossible, I think, to display Christian doctrines to an art world that, for the most part, doesn't believe in original sin.

