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In the Name of God

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

by

SHARON P. MCCUSKER

Under the Direction of Mark Burleson

ABSTRACT

This exhibition is a direct response to my own religious upbringing. I chose to explore the oppression upon women, gays and people of color by religious intolerance. The Church dictates social and political mores that affect our society and culture and the way we are treated and governed. The use of the bible and conservative belief structures to defend the ill manner in which we are treated should not be ordained in today’s social construct.

In the Name of god addresses issues from the Inquisition to the current war for control over women’s bodies and our reproductive systems. By revisiting the past and illustrating earlier evidence of religious corruption, I intend to demonstrate this country’s lack of understanding of anything other.

INDEX WORDS: Religion, Inquisition, Gender, Social commentary, Artistic influences, Conservative, Joan of Arc
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SHARON MCCUSKER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009
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SHARON MCCUSKER

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           Susan Richmond

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all of the gender queers, feminists, and straight-but-not-narrows.
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Thanks to my mom, Linda McCusker and my sister, Sheryl Cohen for all their love, support, and endless supply of Kroger gift cards and plane tickets throughout my graduate school experience.

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I have always sought to make an impression upon the world. Some women are able to achieve this through procreation, family. Their names and influence lives on. I think I would find some comfort in that path. I observe my sister’s interactions with her four children and perceive her pride in raising them. I see her reflected in them, their smiles, intellectuality, and endearing determination. My own path has not included reproduction and I do not deny my wonder about the possibility of this other life, if I had become what my upbringing supposed I would. Instead, I am single, a lesbian, and an artist. So why have I chosen this journey? What do I have to say as an artist? What indication will I bequeath to those left behind? These are the questions I ask myself as I create the work in this exhibit and as I subsist.

My father died at the age of thirty-six, only one year older than I am now. It is at this age that I truly comprehend just how young he was when he departed this world. I live my life passionately, hoping to accomplish all that I intend and to have my voice heard. I read a bumper sticker recently that said, “Speak your mind even if your voice shakes.” This phrase is what fills my head when I am making art. Am I doing this? Do I ask the difficult questions about life, society, religion, politics, our world, in my work? “In the Name of god” represents my own struggles with these topics.

For most of us faith provides moral guidelines by which to live our lives. I was raised in a traditional Southern Baptist family and have experienced first hand the effects religion has upon its’ devoted followers. My mother has conservative values and expectations of the roles
men and women play in society. I was expected to become a wife and mother in order to fulfill my responsibility as a good Christian woman. Career was placed second and was less encouraged.

I was kicked out of our church when I announced that I was gay. Our pastor informed me “I would no longer be a proper role model.” This ended my contribution and involvement in organized religion. My mother and I didn’t speak for several years due to her shame over having raised a daughter who is gay. I suppose it was because she suffered an enormous amount of guilt, believing my homosexuality had something to do with my upbringing. She attempted to send me to religious counseling and often sent me literature and books demonstrating how I could fix my problem. She felt it was her Christian obligation to do all in her power to return me to God. Thankfully, she eventually got over it.

Art has always been an outlet for me in dealing with life in general. It enables me to reflect on society’s views and standards of belief and to offer my own thoughts and statements about them. Politics and religion has been a primary subject of Art throughout history. “In the Name of God” confronts issues involving both and how the two commingle.

In this paper, I will discuss how my work demonstrates my resistance to conformity in my personal life and in my beliefs. It will introduce my artistic influences and discuss art and religion and how they have been used historically and politically. In this country there is a very fine line between Church and state. Our leaders frown upon any religious belief that is not our own and seek conversion. “Freedom of religion is a good thing. So is freedom from the religion others may wish to impose on those who differ.” (Kimball p.25)
Figure 1: Gender Outlaw: Following in the Footsteps of Joan of Arc
Figure 2: Transgender Cock
CHAPTER 2
ART AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

I feel it is the artist’s responsibility to comment on social, political and spiritual matters as they have done for centuries. I make art because I have things to communicate to others, my own thoughts and opinions, happenings around the globe that may or may not be getting enough attention. Carol Becker wrote in *The Social Responsibility of Artist’s*, “It is now time for artists in this country to refuse the place of isolation and marginality they have been given and which they themselves romantically have often confused with freedom. It is time for artists to challenge that which they cannot live, and to bring into view that which they refuse to live without.”

Art has been used in the past in making social commentary and in enacting change. In the 1980s and 1990s artists came together to combat the ignorance and negligence of political figures and society as a whole towards the AIDS crisis. They set aside their personal agendas in their own art making and reacted to a cause that was drastically affecting their everyday lives. Jesse Green, from *Art in America* said, “They represent the most successful politicized arts movement in the history of America.” They brought AIDS to the foreground of a homophobic nation. They made T-shirts, posters and stickers and plastered them relentlessly around New York City. They held demonstrations and critiqued political figures that were ignoring AIDS and its casualties. Keith Haring, a member of ACT UP, designed their now famous logo, *SILENCE=DEATH* and *STOP AIDS*.

The group attacked the Catholic Church and the Pope for comments made about the distribution of condoms and preventative information. The Pope stated, “The truth is not in
condoms or clean needles. These are lies…good morality is good medicine.” Gran Fury made a
poster with his image and this quote. Also on the poster was their retort.

The Catholic Church has long taught men and women to loathe their bodies and to fear
their sexual natures. This particular vision of good and evil continues to bring suffering
and even death. By holding medicine hostage to Catholic morality and withholding
information which allows people to protect themselves and each other from acquiring
HIV, the church seeks to punish all who do not share in its particular version of human
experience and makes clear its preference for living saints and dead sinners. It is immoral
to practice bad medicine. It is bad medicine to deny people information that can help end
the AIDS crisis. Condoms and clean needles save lives. AIDS is caused by a virus and a
virus has no morals.

Today there are artists who attempt to showcase their work outside the gallery so that their
message may be seen by those members of society that would not typically enter the gallery
scene. The Guerilla Girls place their images on billboards and street signs. It is my goal with this
exhibition to print books and postcards of the images and material and distribute them in places
where everyday people may receive them.
CHAPTER 3
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

My most direct artistic influence is Robert Arneson. He is known for his non-functional ceramic sculptures and was greatly influenced by Peter Voulkos. Arneson created a vast number of self-portrait heads much larger than life size. He also did a series of sculptures about nuclear war, American soldiers and the cold war. He was part of the group in California called “Funk Art.” Arneson is influential to my work because of the way he incorporates humor and irony into his sculptures. His self-portraits seem to represent different versions of himself. He creates comical, satirical work and serious conceptual work. I appreciate his ability to accomplish both subjects successfully.

The first pieces I saw from Arneson were his self portraits. They are larger than life in scale. I started doing self portraits because I was always available as a model. Over the years they have come to represent the different aspects of my personality that may not be visible to the outside world. Arneson uses the events in his personal life to direct his own work. When he began his battle with cancer his work became more somber and dark. He portrayed images of death and destruction in his Warhead series possibly a reflection of his own slow demise. It is for these reasons Arneson is my biggest influence. It is his dark humor, self portraits and use of his own life in his work that I relate.
Figure 3: General Nuke
CHAPTER 4
IN THE NAME OF GOD

My thesis “In the Name of God” demonstrates the many horrific things that have been done in history and continue today because of religious extremism and the corruption of the Catholic Church. Faith, for me, is a positive force in our world and provides hope and commonalities. It can also be the cause for tension, instability and war.

Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. The record of history shows that noble acts of love, self-sacrifice, and service to others are frequently rooted in deeply held religious worldviews. At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other force in human history. (Kimball p.1)

Fundamentalist Christians have attacked and even murdered doctors who perform abortions. Two men who admittedly killed doctors are part of a national organization of Christians called the Army of God. This group claims as part of their absolute truth: abortion is legalized murder; abortion is an abomination to God; true Christians must engage in direct action to stop what they see as a slaughter of innocents. They frequently used verses from the Bible selected for their own purpose and affirmation to support their truths. They choose to ignore the texts that do not assist in committing murder. My piece, “The Army of God”, (Figure 5), is a direct illustration of this groups purpose.
The Bible has long been a tool used in shaping and manipulating behavior. It was not written by God, but by men. It has been translated so many times and for so many years who is to say what its original message was meant to be. Women were framed as obedient wife servants or whores. We are forever labeled the temptresses of man and the first to commit original sin. It was enforced by the church that life is a punishment for our sins. Heaven is our reward for endurance.

If life is inherently evil, the church fathers needed someone to blame; and who better to blame than woman, who creates life from her own body? Living women, also can be publicly punished, as the iconic and illusory Devil can never be. (God the Mother p. 298)

During the Inquisition, millions of people were burned as witches. Of those, eighty percent accused, tortured and burned were women. The mid-wives were sought after because they took away pain during childbirth, a punishment written in Genesis that women were born to suffer. The church forbade contraception’s and abortions, even when the life of the mother depended upon it. The main installation in this show is an image of a woman being burned at the stake. She stands in a large pile of skulls, toy mines, contraceptives, IUD’s, grenades and land mines. This piece is meant to illustrate the war on women’s bodies by the Church. It began during the Inquisition, and today the Church still tries to enforce laws upon women’s bodies and their reproductive rights. “Crusades” (Figure 6) is a work that shows men in battle over religion. Along with the arms used during that time, I added nuclear weapons to illustrate how different a religious war that occurred today may look.

Religion was included in the reasons behind the events at Waco, Texas, the Manson murders, Heaven’s Gate suicides, and the massacres during the Crusades. Even Hitler claimed to be finishing the work of Christ. In “Sunday Social Gathering” (Figure 8), two slaves are being
hung as a crowd of people watch. It was often the deacons of the church who were also allegedly members of the Ku Klux Klan, who instigated these hangings and made them spectacles.

The world record for mass killings is held by Christians. Hundreds of millions of human beings, in the past two-thousand years, have been tortured and slaughtered, in an infinite number of hideous ways, in the name of Christ—and by people who believed, or who said they believed, they were exterminating ‘agents of the Devil.’ (God the Mother p.311)

“In the Name of God” addresses the corruption of religion and its’ massive effect on our society. From the number of deaths directly caused by the Catholic Church through the witch hunts, to their protection of priests who admittedly molested children, the effects of intolerant dogma can not be ignored.

Religious structures and doctrines can be used almost like weapons. We [have seen] examples of people becoming enslaved to ideas or going to great lengths to protect their religious institutions against perceived threats. If religious institutions and teachings lack flexibility, opportunities for growth, and systems of checks and balances, they can indeed be a major part of the problem. Like other institutional structures, some religions cease to serve the purpose for which they were intended. (Kimball p.32)

In the work, “Father Please Forgive me”, is a Catholic priest demonstrating shame or guilt upon his conviction with gagged little boys being hidden underneath his robe. I struggled in making this piece with the question of insensitivity and humor. The priest’s that were found guilty were often only moved to different locations. The boys’ families often settled out of court and were bound legally not to speak of their stories. I decided to include this piece to illustrate the fact that these children were unable to speak or to communicate the vast amount of damage inflicted upon their lives by men of God.
Figure 4: On the Wheel
Figure 5: Army of God
Figure 6: Crusades
Figure 7: Remembering Matthew
Figure 8: Sunday Social Gathering
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

My argument behind this exhibition is a personal one. It has been my experience that Christians persecute those who threaten their authority. In creating this show I have found out a lot about myself. The most important piece for me in this show is “Gender Outlaw: Following in the Footsteps of Joan of Arc” (Figure 1). It is a self-portrait of me dressed in men’s clothing. Joan of Arc was captured in 1430 by the Burgundians whom “referred to her as hommasse, a slur meaning ‘manwoman’ or ‘masculine woman.’ She was turned over to the Inquisition where the charges of witchcraft against her were dropped. “The core of the charges against Joan focused on her cross-dressing, the crime for which she was ultimately executed.”(Feinberg, 35) This is a quote from the verbatim court proceedings during her interrogation:

You have said that, by God’s command, you have continually worn man’s dress, wearing the short robe, doublet, and hose attached by points; that you have also worn your hair short, cut en rond above your ears, with nothing left that could show you to be a woman; and that on many occasions you received the Body of our Lord dressed in this fashion, although you have been frequently admonished to leave it off, which you have refused to do, saying that you would rather die than leave it off, save by God’s command.

When I enter a woman’s restroom I am often mistaken for a boy or a man. We have such narrow depictions of men and women in society and of what they should wear and look like. We should not be tied to a “single sexual identity” and should not “be content to reside within a category measurable by social scientists.”(Queen 23) I used to believe that Joan was killed because she was suspected of witchcraft, not simple because she dressed like a man. Is our appearance so
relevant to our position in life and in religion? I’m tired of living life to others, especially religious expectations. I choose to live in between our binary system of man and woman. After all, do we not all possess both masculine and feminine characteristics? I embrace both and am no longer ashamed to do so.

The story behind *Transgender Cock* (Figure 2) is taken from the same time period. The Church put a rooster on trial because it laid an egg. “The rooster’s lawyer argued that the act was involuntary, and that animals were not capable of making pacts with the devil.” (Feinberg) The cock was found innocent, but the court “attributed the act of laying an egg to a sorcerer masquerading as a cock.” (Feinberg) The rooster and his egg were burned at the stake. To illustrate the absolute absurdity of this historical fact I created a rooster in drag with an egg. He stands in leather boots, a corset and a pink skirt. I figured if he were going to be punished for being trans he should look the part!

So what is the artist’s responsibility to society? As artists, we can not discount what is happening in our society by making art objects that say nothing about current trends in American culture. As Carol Becker says, “the creative vision of an artist can be utilized both to construct art, and to construct a new society, because these goals each depend on bringing into creation that which does not as yet exist.” While the creating of art itself can not change the world, it can begin a much needed dialogue about society and it is this dialogue that will truly make a difference.
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