

David Dreher



**NOSTRA
AETATE**

(Our Times)

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We live in a secular society and the art world is particularly worldly. Religious art is only granted entrance when it is antique or exotic enough to delight without instructing. But contemporary celebrations of denominational faith are never permitted into publicly funded art galleries. However, spiritual expressions that are struggles with, rather than professions of, faith are occasionally permitted. In other words, contemporary expressions of faith are only invited into the art world if they are more spiritual than religious, and more art than sermon.



David Dreher's recent paintings belong in this latter category. While there is evidence of his Catholicism here those traces are complemented by images from other religions. There is a bleeding-heart Jesus, a sad-eyed Virgin, and a bird-friendly St. Francis, but also a smiling Buddha, an elephant-headed Ganesh, a dancing Shiva, and many more. This exhibition is less about religion than it is about the best intentions of people of faith. It is the expression of a utopic desire to construct a space where opposites are balanced, chaos harmonized, everyone feels welcome, and where art and empathy heal all wounds. And yet, this hope is haunted by the fear that human beings are incapable of rising above ignorance and selfishness.

Dreher has an ambitious agenda for Nostra Aetate. He wants "1) to stress the importance of theistic and cultural tolerance in a very tumultuous age; 2) to impart the importance of religious and spiritual beliefs while acknowledging religion's failings due to human egotism and ignorance" (from his artist statement). This is a difficult task. How can a painting show the value of religious beliefs while at the same time acknowledge its failings? Can the artist be both believer and critic in the same work? The phrasing of his second point seems to hint at a way of mapping these seeming contradictions. Dreher suggests that we have three aspects of our beings: a spiritual side at one extreme, an egotistical and ignorant (human) aspect at the other, and in the middle is religion where we try to sort these forces out to the best of our ability.

Nostra Aetate (Our Times) is the formal title of Pope Paul VI's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions" (1965). The document emphasizes the similarities among the world's religions, especially regarding spirituality, goodness, love, and morality. It is an optimistic text and was a big step for the Church. In his exhibition, research and life, David Dreher tries to live this lesson. He looks beyond Catholicism (from Catholicism) to the art and teachings of the world's



"Kali and the Swedish Berries", oil on canvas, 36" X 36", 2005.

great religions for wisdom – a common rhythm in the heart of all that lies behind the world of appearance and difference.

The exhibition consists of fourteen photorealistic paintings; all but three are square canvases set within broad square canvas frames. Each frame is painted with a brightly coloured field of candies or a rich bed of chocolates. There are also a few toys, beads, flowers, and other small objects lying on the sweets. Each centre panel features a painting of a holy figure from Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism: Jesus, both boy and man; the Virgin; St. Francis; St. Theresa; Ganesh; Hanuman; Shiva; Kali; Kuan Yin; Red Tara; Green Tara; and two Buddhas. Most of the deities are based on plastic, ceramic, or metal figurines. Behind each figure is a monochromatic clock face. The position of the hands indicates a passage from the Bible that Dreher feels best relates to the image (the chapters titles are faintly inscribed on the clock).

For example, "Kali and the Swedish Berries," features the mother goddess in full creative/destructive mode. She is a dark-skinned, four-armed warrior with a curved knife in one of her raised hands and a decapitated head in another. She also wears a necklace of heads. The traditional girdle of men's arms is absent in the center panel but the missing attributes can be found in the frame, where a doll's severed arm and head float on a bloody lake of glistening red and orange Swedish Berry candies. The biblical quotation refers to Noah and the

Flood, drawing a parallel between Yahweh and Kali as deities who are capable of destroying their creations.

Dreher expresses a duality through these nesting diptyches. The outside (framing) panels represent the material realm, the sweet but shallow world of physical delights. The marshmallow strawberries, hard candies, gummi frogs, chocolate eggs, and cinnamon hearts look tasty but they are also monotonous, uniform, predictable pleasures. And, if you eat too much, you get sick. Candy is nice to look at but does not satisfy as real nourishment. According to Dreher, the candy/material realm distracts us from the more important, eternal realm represented by the religious figures. He sees the inner panel as symbolizing a faith's "core teachings." As through a Tibetan mandala, the viewer moves from external representations toward the inner teachings.

Images of saints and deities are intended as gateways to the spiritual; they are metaphors for the beings they represent and the beings are images of concepts that are beyond representation. The faithful transport themselves to those other spaces through these portals. But the beings represented here are not quite of this class. Based on homey copies of original works of art, they are more simile than metaphor. They are self-conscious representations rather than embodiments. I think that he chooses to paint the deities this way to address the ancient prohibition regarding graven images.

There is a central puzzle in this work. Dreher's written goal is sober, emphasizing spirituality over greedy materialism, but his chosen vehicle for delivering these messages is practically carnal. His paintings invite an ocular pleasure that stimulates the eye and the palate. These paintings are good enough to eat. This effect is primarily due to style. Photorealism is the art of the surface. It is concerned with the appearance of things; typically, slick consumer goods. It emerged from Pop art, and tends to retain the ironic wink when it isn't just a blank stare. Photorealism is a totalizing gaze that renders all before it into its democratic subject. While it is possible to create symbolic paintings in this style (John Hall and Audrey Flack), it is nearly always done through the representation of shiny goods (because those things come off most convincingly in this style). It is difficult to evoke the immaterial through such resolutely material means.

By basing most of his 'holy' figures on cheap copies, I think that Dreher is pointing out the fact that real deities are beyond our imaginations, and that any effort to reproduce them will be inadequate at best. Traditional religions have had a love/hate relationship with representations generally and of holy figures in particular. The King James Bible includes this written commandment from God: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.

Most Christians read the sentence as a whole and understood the prohibition as being directed at idols; that is the creation of

representations that are then worshiped as though they were divine. But there have been numerous iconoclastic movements that have read this commandment more literally and have sought to ban or destroy all representations, especially of holy figures. Many contemporary Christian churches are still not keen on religious imagery (Calvinists and Baptists). In 1998, the Taliban destroyed the two colossal images of the Buddha in Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan. It was part of an overall strategy to cleanse the country of all graven images. Similarly, Muslim and Jewish traditions have a range of opinion about such images. Conservatives of both religions have banned these representations as blasphemous.

To many, the idea of people rendering metaphysical beings in gross material seems antithetical if not heretical. And it is a great problem for even the well intentioned. Sacred art objects are more than mere real things, but they are not quite the metaphysical beings they endeavour to describe. Given this tension, Dreher's choice makes rhetorical sense. He is not trying to incarnate deities; he is making representations of those representations. He is not intending people to pray before his paintings. These pictures refer to those other works without becoming them. Dreher's choice to copy these weak imitations, and the fact of so many competing deities, should cause viewers to treat them as meta-discursive art objects, not as votive objects. Dreher is not creating idols; he is referring to them, he is pointing toward various faith traditions through their artefacts and inviting us – as the *Nostra Aetate* suggests – to recognise similarities among them.

To reinforce this point, Dreher has a back-up device. Behind every venerated being looms a glowing clock face that may represent both time and timelessness (the clocks are stopped). The spiritual or metaphysical realm is differentiated from the material realm by its timelessness and unknowability. Clocks, particularly in the Dutch *vanitas* still life tradition, often represent the transience of life. The material world and its pleasures are mutable, only the metaphysical realm offers everlasting life. In these paintings, each face of time seems to stand between the weak material copy of a deity and the infinite, impossible-to-represent space of their domain. The clocks may symbolize the impenetrability of the metaphysical to those who remain attached to material concepts, like time, or the mere material aspects of the sacred.

Dreher has been working to express his struggle with faith in his art for many years. He explained in conversation with me that one of the spurs for his recent work was an exhibition I curated for this gallery in December 2004, *Sophisticated Folk*, especially the work of Prince Albert artist Michel Boutin. Dreher felt that Boutin's work, with its demons and crucified rabbits, verged on the sacrilegious, if it didn't indeed go right over that line. Of Michel's work I wrote:

Michel seems to take a pretty jaundiced eye toward-well-everything! His pictures do not show much hope for human nature and our institutions. However, I am not sure that a true atheist or resolute sceptic would spend such care and attention to the painting of spiritual/religious themes! I see these works as expressions of a personal and spiritual struggle.

Dreher and Boutin seem to be on similar paths. Both paint religious subjects in a predominantly materialist culture at a time where such images are heavily contested, if allowed to appear in secular institutions at all. Both blend Christian symbols with those of other faiths. They seem to see the world as a battleground where the competing forces of materialism and spirituality struggle. It may be that Boutin is a libertarian who chooses to emphasize the darker aspects of organized everything while Dreher is more optimistic, or at least more compassionate. But both are deep feelers who have a sensual awareness of the complexity of religious and moral feeling and are simultaneously drawn to the dark and the light, the high and the low, and attempt to balance these forces in their art. Because you cannot balance something you cannot represent, their paintings hold both the sacred and the profane.

I see Dreher's painstaking paintings as a form of devotion, of prayer. He spends an incredible amount of time making these beautiful things. And he wants them to be taken seriously, to be contemplated by others in both an aesthetic and spiritual mode. He is not a theologian trying to illustrate a theory. He is an ordinary human being looking to find resonances among the great religions, and a way to balance the great complexities in his world. I believe that he is trying to point out the difficulty of living in faith in a secular world full of temptations. His paintings seem to suggest that you should use whatever means you like to reach the spiritual but that all material means are limited. While he does not offer answers, he poses some fine questions. This work is not the expression of certain faith, but of a questing spirit.

– David Garneau

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