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Tim Dougherty

Scholar Defends Artists' Use of Refashioned Bibles

Artists who cut, tear or otherwise deface the Bible or other sacred books as a form of expression are not guilty of sacrilege so long as their intention is to challenge traditional interpretations of religious texts, according to a scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Richard Hecht, chair of religious studies at UCSB, says artists such as Santa Barbara's Linda Ekstrom, whose unique book art installations feature shredded Bible pages, offer a valuable perspective on the inequities inherent in Judeo-Christian religious doctrine, and therefore should be defended against criticism from fundamentalists.

"This is an extraordinary phenomenon. More and more religious women are returning to biblical text or turning to the book as a venue for their art. Their goal is to subvert traditional perceptions of the Bible and to present the book as a kind of symbolization for their own lives, their identity," said Hecht, who presented a paper titled "Sacred Books and Sacred Subversions: Linda Ekstrom's 'Altered Bibles,'" at UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center on May 28.

Hecht met Ekstrom when she was a student in one of his classes, and he later served on her MFA thesis committee. Though he was initially fascinated by Ekstrom's work, Hecht now admits comprehending her message took more time.

"I knew she was sincere and not doing it for shock value, but it takes a while to grasp the full intellectual and religious significance of her art. She's a Catholic modernist and a feminist committed to making Catholicism more inclusive of women. She's committed to the Bible because it's the foundation of her own religious tradition, but she wants the Bible to ring forth with equality," he said.

"The Litany of Women" is indicative of Ekstrom's provocative style. Begun in 1995, the installation piece features a small red box and numerous pieces of silk inscribed with the names of every woman in the Bible.

"You pick it up and the inclination is to read these names. Some are familiar but most aren't. Then you find yourself ritually reciting the names and mentally reconstructing the whole biblical narrative, but without men. In that sense it's subversive," said Hecht.

Ekstrom's more controversial works feature shredded Bible pages in jars, set in beehives, and rolled into small pearl-like balls. One such piece, titled "Sophia Logos" and featuring

several pages of shredded biblical text within an otherwise empty book spine, drew a sharp attack from a Westmont College New Testament scholar, who later delivered a sermon charging Ekstrom with desecrating and profaning the Bible.

Beyond challenging us to think of the Bible as an endless source of interpretation, Hecht says such works raise the issue of what might be the place of the sacred in contemporary art. Ekstrom and others demonstrate a new willingness

to render the sacred using---and in some instances, refashioning---previously inviolable cultural symbols. According to Hecht, the trend could indicate a growing spiritual awareness among some artists.

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