

# CONSCIENCE

A NEWSJOURNAL OF CATHOLIC OPINION

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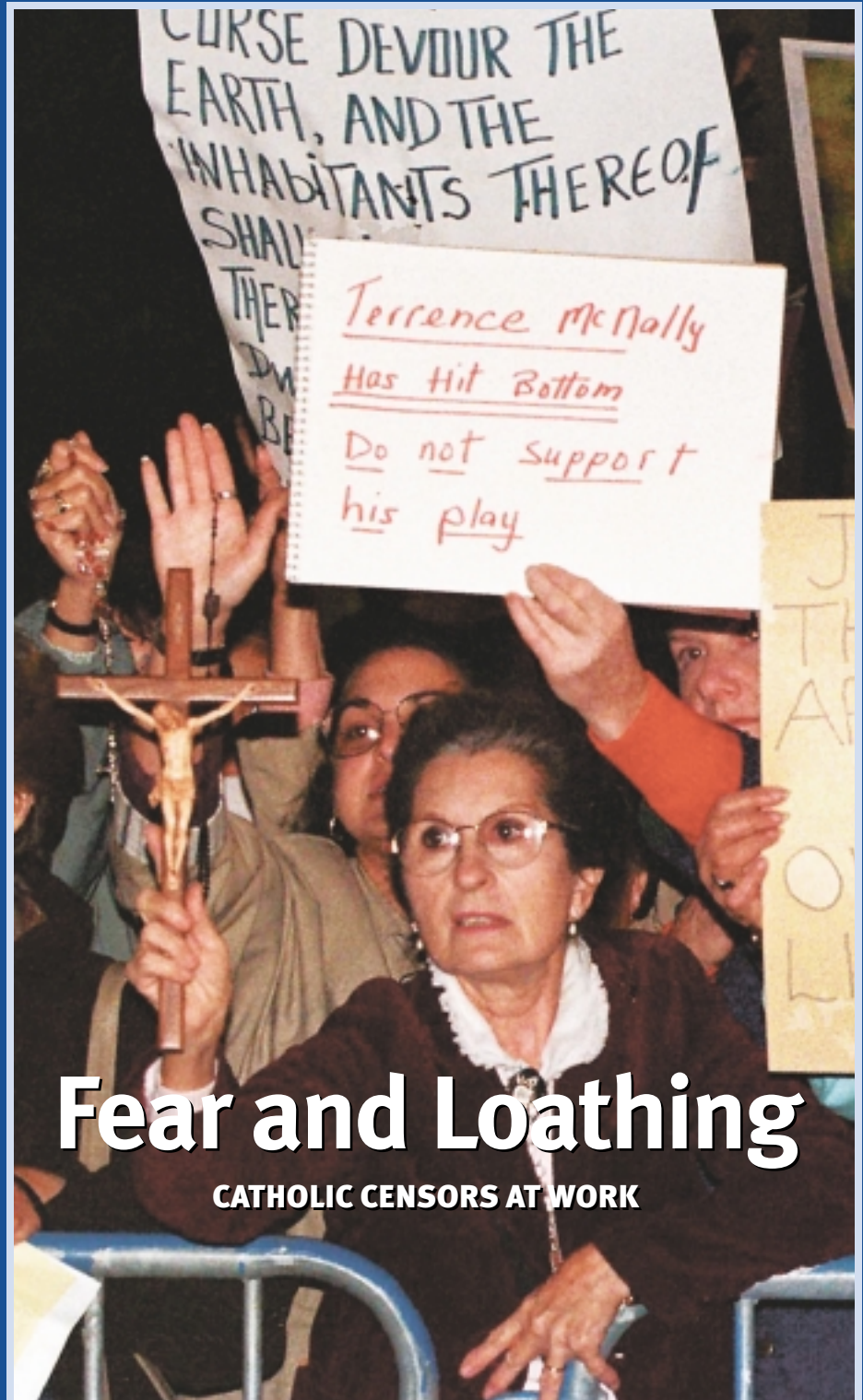
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## Fear and Loathing

CATHOLIC CENSORS AT WORK

*Conscience* is published quarterly by Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC). CFFC shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being, and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make sound and responsible decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education, and advocacy, CFFC works in the United States and internationally to infuse these values into public policy, community life, feminist analysis, and Catholic social thinking and teaching.

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WE LIVE IN FEARFUL TIMES. THERE IS A MANIFEST FEAR of freedom, a fear of the unknown and a fear of the different. Many openly express an aversion to being provoked, prodded or challenged. We are told that if we want to have a clear conscience, we should “follow the rules.” But whose rules?

This issue of *Conscience* examines many of the responses to these fears and the rules that we are told to follow. We examine the apparent fear that the Bush administration has for the free availability of health care information and the rules it has introduced to ensure we only get its version of the truth. We look at the church hierarchy's longstanding opposition to scientific progress and the lengths it will go to restrict that progress. Political life and the academy are other areas where the church hierarchy is only too willing to curtail free speech. We look at them both. We also examine the chilling impact that indiscriminate charges of “anti-Catholicism” have on political debate.

We devote many of our pages to the impact that artistic censorship has on freedom. The arts have long been at the forefront of debates over decency, freedom of expression and what is and is not acceptable. Mixing religion and the arts tends to raise the debate to extremes, with both sides claiming the undisputed moral high ground. Our roundtable (p29) brings together many artists who have been at the forefront of the Culture Wars.

It is refreshing to hear unequivocal defenses of the right to free speech. Too often today, those who defend freedom of speech and freedom of expression add qualifications that render those freedoms virtually inert. Too often, we see the public discussion of important ideas muted so that nobody who might come into contact with those ideas might be offended by anything they might hear or see. But for ideas to flourish in a free society, feelings will be hurt. The fact that those feelings might be religiously-inspired should not make them untouchable.

A truly free society values and cherishes the right to talk, think and discuss without restriction. Clearly, words can hurt, but a free-flowing exchange of ideas is vital to a vibrant society. Indeed, the marketplace of ideas must become a much more robust animal if we are to transcend the political, artistic and intellectual quagmire that seems to beset contemporary society.

The content of this issue is intentionally provocative. Some may even find it offensive. But that is a price worth paying to live in a free society.



DAVID NOLAN  
Managing Editor

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## ROUNDTABLE

# ART, RELIGION AND CENSORSHIP

Andres Serrano

Laura Ferguson

Christopher Durang

Alma Lopez

Pat Payne

Malagoli

Eleanor Heartney

Sandi Simcha DuBowski

Cynthia Karalla

AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION and art existed before the creation of modern religious systems: the very origins of art can perhaps be traced back to primitive ritual. With the recognition of the power of images, however, comes the desire to control those images. Once the biggest patron of the arts, the Catholic church has also regularly condemned art that it perceived to challenge its doctrine. More recently, conservative religious organizations have been leading participants in the “Culture Wars,” vigilantly monitoring and publicly attacking art that uses religious symbols in unorthodox ways.

Many of the artists whose names define the cultural battles in the last decade of the 20th century—Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Joel-Peter Witkin, Karen Finley, Terrence McNally, Robert Gober—were brought up Catholic; some are still practicing Catholics. The power of religious imagery is not lost on these artists. It deeply informs their work. But they are 20th century artists at the tail-end of a more than 100-year-old

art tradition that questions accepted values and tests cultural boundaries.

Who, after all, owns religious imagery? Can an artist use religious imagery in ways that institutionalized religions do not approve of? And, finally, what purposes do attacks on art serve?

When we speak of respect for a diversity of beliefs, we sometimes forget that our beliefs frequently clash. And, because religious groups also form strong political constituencies, beliefs can have powerful political uses. All too often, people are most easily united in opposition to something they hate. And a painting or a play can be easy to hate, as you never have to see it. The fact that Chris Ofili, in his mixed-media work, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, was approaching the Virgin with religious respect and re-creating her in full glory for another cultural tradition was not politically useful. It was much easier to raise adrenaline levels by simply saying, “dung-smearing Madonna.” Who cares that there is no smeared dung on Ofili’s work? Works of art are open to many interpretations; they only acquire meaning while interacting with an audience. Some people could well see Renee Cox’s nude figure in the center of her recreation of the Last Supper as a personal attack

on their views, others would rejoice to see a black woman in that revered position. Attacks on art, unfortunately, too often reduce complex and ambiguous works to simple sound bites.

Yes, images are powerful, yes, they can be subversive of pieties, and yes, they can transgress the boundaries set by tradition. But, before we decide

to hate, let us try to understand what we hate, and perhaps see the use of religious imagery as testimony of its continuous relevance and richness, rather than as a single- (and simple-) minded attempt at offense.

**SVETLANA MINTCHEVA**

*Arts Advocacy Coordinator, National Coalition Against Censorship*

## Ambiguously Provocative

By Andres Serrano

IN 1989, ONE OF MY WORKS, *Piss Christ*, came under attack. The misrepresentation of my work in Congress and in the media and the cavalier and blasphemous intentions ascribed to me on the Congressional floor bore little semblance to reality.

I was appalled by the claim of “anti-Christian bigotry” that was attributed to my picture. The photograph—and the title itself—are ambiguously provocative but certainly not blasphemous. Over the years, I have addressed religion regularly in my art. My Catholic upbringing informs this work

which helps me to redefine and personalize my relationship with God. My use of such bodily fluids as blood and urine in this context is parallel to Catholicism’s obsession with “the body and blood of Christ.” It is precisely from the exploration and juxtaposition of these symbols that Christianity draws its strength. The photograph in question, like all my work, has multiple meanings and can be interpreted in various ways. So let us suppose that the picture is meant as a criticism of the billion dollar Christ-for-profit industry and the commercialization of spiritual values that permeates our society; that it is a condemnation of those who abuse the teachings of Christ for their own ignoble ends. Is the subject of religion so inviolate that it is not open to discussion? I think not.

In writing the Majority Opinion in the flag burning case, Justice William J. Brennan concluded, “We never before have held that the Government may insure that a symbol be used to express one view of that symbol or its referents.... To conclude that the Government may permit designated symbols to be used to communicate only a limited set of messages would be to enter into territory having no discernible or defensible boundaries.”

## Continue the Conversation

### Art, Religion and Censorship

Catholics for a Free Choice and the National Coalition Against Censorship collaborated on this roundtable, inviting artists, playwrights, critics and film directors to contribute their thoughts on this multi-faceted debate.

As explained in the captions and our contributors’ essays, the art that illustrates the roundtable has all come under attack, from a variety of sources. The editor’s note on page 1, and Svetlana Mintcheva’s introduction to this roundtable, lay out where Catholics for a Free Choice and the National Coalition Against Censorship stand. But where do you stand? What are your thoughts? Tell us, and we will include a selection in our Summer issue.

You may email your responses to [conscience@catholicsforchoice.org](mailto:conscience@catholicsforchoice.org); fax them to +1 (202) 332-7995; or mail them to Roundtable Feedback, *Conscience*, c/o Catholics for a Free Choice, 1436 U Street NW, #301, Washington, DC 20009, USA.



Artists often depend on the manipulation of symbols to present ideas and associations not always apparent in such symbols. If all such ideas and associations were evident there would be little need for artists to give expression to them. In short, there would be no need to make art.

Do we condemn the use of a swastika in a work of art that does not unequivocally



***Piss Christ*, © Andres Serrano, 1989. Reproduced with the permission of the artist. This work has been physically attacked and attacked in print, and lead to ongoing debates over the funding policies of the National Endowment for the Arts.**

denounce Nazism as anti-Semitic? Not when the artist is Jewish. Do we denounce as racist a painting or photograph that is demeaning to African Americans? Not if the artist is Black. When art is decontextualised however, it can pose a problem and create misunderstanding.

Debate and dissent are at the heart of our democracy. In a free society, ideas are not dangerous. The only danger lies in repressing them.

**ANDRES SERRANO** is an artist living in New York City.

## Nude Body Beautiful

By Laura Ferguson

OUT OF THE DESIRE TO RESPECT EACH others' diversity of cultures, views, ethnicities and religious or moral values, comes the rationale that art that might be perceived as offensive by one person or group should not be shown. But almost any image may be distressing to someone. Should work that is meaningful to many not be shown because it may make a few feel uncomfortable? Should those who find something shameful or embarrassing in the image of the nude body be allowed to brand it as shameful for everyone else?

I have been making a series of paintings of my own body and its skeletal interior as it is deformed by scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. I want my work to be seen by people who may not be frequenters of

art galleries or exhibitions, especially those with disabilities or issues concerning their bodies. For that reason, I welcome opportunities to show my work in public spaces and non-traditional settings.

However, along with a growing interest in and appreciation for my work, the presence of nudity appears to present problems for a number of exhibition spaces. In 2001, my work was rejected by the US Senate venue of "eMotion Pictures: An Exhibition of Orthopaedics in Art." Recently, a prominent university medical center told me they had to "operate with care re having works involving nudity in the hospital," and could only exhibit certain of my images, even though "everyone here recognizes the profound beauty and meaning of your work."



***Stretching/Kneeling Figure Visible Skeleton*, © Laura Ferguson, 2002. Reproduced with the permission of the artist. The US Senate ordered that it be left out of a touring exhibition organized by the American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons when it reached the Capitol.**

The objections to nudity may have their basis in a religious tradition that separates “body” from “soul,” finding one base and the other spiritual. But the making, or viewing, of something visually compelling, whole or beautiful enables us to feel wholeness and beauty in ourselves.

Our culture bombards us with images of “perfect” bodies and pressures to conform to this ideal. Those of us with disabilities or unusual anatomies especially feel the pressure to hide or feel ashamed of our bodies. Art is one of the few arenas in which the less-than-perfect body can be portrayed with its own kind of beauty, grace, sensuality, and originality. Most people are not able to visualize the insides of their bodies without thinking of a medical textbook, where everyone looks alike. Yet our bodies are as individualized inside as outside. My images, anatomical but also personal, suggest that viewers perceive the body in a new way, and feel a closer relationship to their physical selves. For the same reason, some of my drawings portray my body in the embrace of another figure or with another’s hands touching or holding me. This is the visual language I use to explore the self-other connection, a way of transcending the isolation that differentness can bring.

I suspect it is the combination of nudity and disability in my work that causes the most discomfort. There are those who find it hard to look at people with physical flaws or unusual anatomies. But shouldn’t our public institutions be on the side of helping to overcome such fears or prejudices, rather than catering to them? Can we not be open to the possibilities of art to change our perceptions and widen our understanding? Although it may disturb, art can make people think, help them to relate to others outside the boundaries of their own experience and deepen their sense of humanity.

**LAURA FERGUSON** is a New York artist currently working on a book and a traveling exhibition of her “Visible Skeleton” series. The multi-layered works on paper that make up this series are based on medical images of her own skeleton, including a 3D spiral CT scan, made in collaboration with radiologists and orthopedists. Her website is [www.lauraferguson.net](http://www.lauraferguson.net).

## More than the “right to be wrong”

By Christopher Durang

I COME FROM A (MOSTLY) IRISH CATHOLIC family where dissent among family members was not tolerated. This was on my mother’s side, where Joe McCarthy was admired, where they voted for Nixon over Kennedy and where the best you could hope for was to be told, “you have a right to be wrong” (though the emphasis was not really on your supposed right, but on the judgment you were wrong).

I also grew up in the church of the 1950s and 1960s, where we had to stand and take pledges to follow the Legion of Decency ratings and avoid the “occasion of sin” apparently caused by movies as diverse as *Some Like It Hot* (morally objectionable in part) and *Gigi* (condemned). When I was seven, I was taught that the commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” forbade all impure acts, alone or with others; and that indeed disobeying this commandment sent you to hell, just as murder did. It’s intriguing how many meanings the word “adultery” had, according to the Baltimore catechism. Who knew it also meant masturbation, sex between unmarried adults, not to mention gay sex? But it was taught as fact to us children; and I accepted it as fact.

I was a very believing Catholic and a rather obedient child, to parents and church both. In late high school, I became a “liberal” Catholic and started to believe that Christ maybe *meant* “turn the other cheek” and “blessed are the peacemakers”—as opposed to just saying those words like a passing pleasantry. And I, like many in the church and the country, began to oppose the war in Vietnam. (Indeed this was the trigger to my uncle’s “you have a right to be wrong.” Thanks a lot.)

As life went on, I went through a deep depression. I “lost” my faith as the phrase goes, and I eventually came out the other side, mostly functional but no longer a believing member of the church.

I became a playwright. One of my plays, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, was an early success for me: critical acclaim, “10 Best” lists, Obie award and an off-Broadway run of over two years.

I wrote the play looking back at all the things I had been taught were fact. If you said a certain prayer, you were spared 467 days in purgatory. As a child, I thought, oh. As an adult, I thought—huh? Who came up with that? Who told them?

Also, in the early 20th century, masturbation was said to cause blindness and possibly drive you mad. By the late 1960s, psychologists were saying it was a normal part of development. The church still said it sent you to hell. (So deep is the church’s revulsion to the body, I still don’t think you can find any official church person willing to call masturbation normal. Can you?)

So I wrote the play out of those thoughts, looking back in amazement. The play came across to audiences funnier than I imagined...“explaining” the concept of limbo, or how eating meat on Friday used to send you to hell but didn’t anymore—simply sounded crazy. Even critic Walter Kerr, a practicing Catholic and not a fan of mine, admitted I told the dogma fairly straightforwardly.

From 1982 until about 1989, the Catholic League protested my play. It claimed the play was anti-Catholic, and said things like, “if a similar play made fun of Jewish or black people, it wouldn’t be tolerated.” Hmmmm. Yes, but I’m a Catholic, writing about my own back-

ground. You can disagree, but...anti-Catholic? Try to shut it down?

The attack quickly moved to tax funding—almost all theatre in America has some sort of tax funding in it (except straight commercial plays on Broadway or off-Broadway). So when a small theatre in St. Louis announced their intention to do my play, all hell broke loose. The theatre lost its lease (papers hadn't been signed yet), but in deference to free speech, two universities offered space. Then pickets followed, the play became a hot ticket; but after it closed, the Catholic League got two Missouri state senators to try to withdraw state arts funding from any theatre that did any play that offended any religious or ethnic group.

They failed in St. Louis, but they came close to winning. This rigmarole was repeated in other cities; sometimes the productions were cancelled, sometimes they

weren't. In Florida there was a bomb threat. You see how powerful my words apparently are? They must be stopped somehow!

I don't have space to tell you more. The Catholic League went on to protest and try to shut down other projects: the films *Last Temptation of Christ* and *Priest*, Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*. The last two also had bomb threats.

It's very hard to know what to do with speech with which you disagree. I became more politicized by the protests against my play; and came to believe in the ACLU's dictum that the remedy to speech you don't agree with is more speech. Now if only more people in America could come to believe that.

**CHRISTOPHER DURANG** is a playwright/actor. His most recent works include *Betty's Summer Vacation*, *Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge* and the musical (under option) *Adrift in Macao*.

play until the exhibition closed in October 2001. It was not removed due to the swell of support from diverse communities of Latina/os, women, students, professors, advocates of free speech, anti-censorship groups and countless others as well as the exhibiting artists, the governor and the museum.

*Our Lady* was inspired by my experiences growing up with the Virgen of Guadalupe icon. I was born in Mexico and raised in California. The image is prominently displayed in my home and community. She appears on framed pictures in homes and businesses as well as painted murals, mugs, blankets, clocks, stickers, shirts and a plethora of other items. She is even depicted in tattoos. For example, a book on the Guadalupe imagery in New Mexico includes a photograph of a man's tattooed back.<sup>2</sup> On the lower left is the image of the Virgen of Guadalupe with head bowed, hands clasped in prayer and wearing such a long dress that it would be physically impossible to walk. On the upper right is a semi-nude female torso with no legs. Both are unable to walk. This photograph visually documents the expected and culturally socialized gender roles reinforced with Virgen of Guadalupe iconography: women are forced to serve as either nurturing mothers or sexual objects. Why didn't anyone in Santa Fe protest that photograph?

Catholic or not, as Chicanas/Latinas, we grow up with the ever-present image of the Virgen de Guadalupe. I am continuing a tradition of Chicanas who, because we experience cultural and gender oppression, assert our voice. I see Chicanas creating a deep and meaningful connection to this revolutionary cultural female image that appeared to an indigenous person at a time of genocide, and an inspiration during liberation struggles such as the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement.

After this controversy, I am not the same artist nor person. Today, I am a greater believer in the power of the image of the Virgen of Guadalupe. I am much more aware of the distinction between the meaning I intend in my work, and how it is interpreted

## Our Lady of Controversy

By Alma Lopez

"WHAT A SHAME THAT YOU USE YOUR exquisite talent in such a shameful, and artistically ludicrous way. Your depiction of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a bikini offends me." [John Correll in an email dated February 18, 2003.]

After two years, I am still receiving emails regarding the digital print, *Our Lady*. I have collected over 1,500 emails and numerous news articles on my website that I designed immediately after the controversy erupted in order to update friends, ask for support and share information in the important discussion about art, culture, religion, gender and censorship.

Before the controversy, *Our Lady*, a small digital print produced in 1999, had been exhibited extensively and was an award winning cover on a book on US Latina theatre.<sup>1</sup> This print drew international attention

when it was included in an exhibition titled, "CyberArte: Tradition Meets Technology," at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The exhibition, curated by Dr. Tey Marianna Nunn, was created as a dialogue between the traditional cultural Latina/o iconography and new technologies.

The protest against the digital print *Our Lady* began soon after the exhibition opened on February 25, 2001. It was led by self-proclaimed community activist Jose Villegas, Deacon Anthony Trujillo, Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan and Catholic organizations such as the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property. After several rallies, much media attention, two large community meetings and many physical threats—to the artist, the curator and the museum—the work remained on dis-



by different people. I have experienced how insensitive and mean we can be to each other in the name of religious beliefs. I am much more conscious regarding issues of censorship as well as the need to protect our rights to freedom of expression.

In December 2002, I did a silkscreen titled, *Our Lady of Controversy*. It is based on *Our Lady* and the experience of the



*Our Lady*, © Alma Lopez, 1999. Reproduced with the permission of the artist. Attacked during a showing at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, by conservative groups.

controversy. The only significant difference between these two prints is that the new one illustrates the woman wearing boxing gloves. The gloves are meant to make the statement that at times we may need to be prepared to defend our rights.

#### NOTES

- 1 Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology*, University of Arizona Press, 2000.
- 2 Jacqueline Orsini Dunnington, *Viva Guadalupe!: The Virgin in New Mexican Popular Art*, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1997.

**ALMA LOPEZ** is a visual and public artist. She primarily works in digital media and painting. She was born in Mexico, raised in Los Angeles, and is currently an artist in residence at the 18th Street Arts Complex in Santa Monica. Her website is [www.almalopez.net](http://www.almalopez.net).

## Violence In Religious And Sexual Imagery

By Pat Payne

I AM TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OUR species' propensity for violence and the degradation of others, and have noted that two common sources of depictions of that inhumanity are found in religious (specifically Catholic) and sexual imagery.

The idea for combining the two types of images came to me when, a few years ago at a New York City flea market, I looked through a box of old black & white bondage photos from the 1950s. I bought one that showed a woman whose arms were tied straight out from her sides in a crucifixion-like manner. My first image "blend" was an attempt to combine that image with the full-color image on the inside front cover of the missal I'd received in first grade, at age six—that of an emaciated, bloodied, dead man whose hands and feet were nailed to a cross.

I don't make these images to shock or offend, but to try to come to a better understanding of the concepts/perceptions of spirituality and sexuality, acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and images, veneration, arousal, morality and objectification. The longer I've worked on this project, the more questions I've raised for myself. I'm hoping to get closer to understanding faith, true love, reverence, pleasure, eroticism, fear, control, power and how and where any lines or boundaries get blurred or crossed or forgotten.

My show "A Look At Violence In Religious And Sexual Imagery" opened in February 2002 at Gainesville's Santa Fe Community College (SFCC). During the months preparing for the show, there were times when I couldn't work on the pieces. The depictions of



*St. Sebastian*, © Pat Payne, 2002. Reproduced with the permission of the artist. During a show in Santa Fe, New Mexico, this piece and others by the artist were moved out of the public gallery space and into a professor's office.

horrific things, no matter what the intent, became overwhelming. I'd hoped, perhaps naively, that viewers would explore how wrapped up in violence two of the most powerful forces in the world are, and be concerned about how it affects all of us. Instead, I faced physical threats because I had grouped religion and sex together.

In the days and weeks that followed the opening of the show, the local newspaper carried cheap-shot cartoons



and countless letters of complaint. The college endured the rage of parents who didn't want their sons and daughters exposed to such depravity. Santa Fe organized a special panel with representatives from the school's student body and faculty to offer opinions and answer questions from the audience. The Dean of Fine Arts, Leslie Lambert, trying to keep me out of the line of fire, endured as much or more hatred than I did.

A web account I set up to answer questions about the images got requests to take down the show while there was still time for the Lord to save me. The Catholic League's website posted a banner, in red capital letters, that continually scrolled "JESUS SHOWN SODOMIZED, MUTILATED & MASTURBATED." According to the League's president, William Donahue, (in a February 28,

2002, press release), the group was aking its complaint about my show to the president of the college, the school's trustees and those members of the Florida State legislature whose duty it is to oversee education funding. The League also wrote to every parochial and public high school in Gainesville.

Under the headline, "Santa Fe Faces Art Backlash, Some Say," the *Gainesville Sun* reported that on April 30, 2002, the Florida State legislature voted to give \$300,000 that SFCC expected to receive to another state college. Some county lawmakers suggested that the legislature was trying to punish the school for hosting the exhibit. (The funds were restored, largely because of the hard work of key legislators.)

**PAT PAYNE** is an artist from Gainesville, Florida. He lives with the playwright Sarah Bewley.

Mary's pregnancy. It most likely complicated it, and at least intensified it.

The pregnancy of the Virgin: a sublime, but also worrying experience. A subject, that at first glance is susceptible to stimulating artistic inspiration.

So where, in religious icons, do we see a representation of the pregnant Virgin? We go from the Annunciation to Mother and Child, from the announcement of a child to the child already being born. So where is the mother carrying this child and preparing for it to be born? Where is the woman carrying the Word made Flesh, her flesh?

What obstacles, what inhibitions, what embarrassments prevented the representation of this theme? If it involves censorship, it's surely censorship in a quasi-psychoanalytical sense: not a prohibition from expressing what we think or imagine, but inhibition of thinking or imagining.

If there was this prohibition in the past, there are reasons that might explain why. These reasons are linked most notably to the social status of women.

But how does one explain why even today, as soon as one presents to the public—as I have done—a work representing the pregnant Virgin, one is met with reactions of surprise, unease and scandal? At least, once one manages to show it, notably in a private gallery. Because, if one plans on showing this piece in an open space—a cultural center, the foyer of a theatre, a business—one runs the risk of being rejected by those in charge (not necessarily people of faith, by the way) who say they are scared of offending the "religious sentiments" of the public. As if it were a blasphemous theme...

There are also perhaps explanations that call upon the imposed, normative nature of religious iconography. These explanations still leave the following unexplained: That a religion that believes in the Word made Flesh prohibits itself from imagining and representing this flesh that welcomed the Word.

**MALAGOLI** is a Belgian artist and a professor of pictorial art. Her drawings on religious themes are regularly published by the French Catholic monthly review *Golias* and she has had exhibitions in Belgium and France.

## The Pregnant Virgin

By Malagoli



*The Pregnant Virgin*, © Malagoli, 2002. Reproduced with the permission of the artist. This piece has been refused entry into solo and group exhibitions in France and Belgium.

SINCE JESUS WAS BORN OF A WOMAN, a woman was pregnant with Jesus.

For this woman, the pregnancy must have been what it is for every woman: a world. A world of feelings and thoughts. A succession and crisscrossing of moments of glory and moments of doubt, times of courage and weariness. An experience where the feeling of being inhabited by a mystery gives way to the prosaic reality, where the physical reality of the pregnant body magnifies to a mystical elevation.

Mary's pregnancy must have been all of this. It must have been more than this, due to the Annunciation. How does one believe that the Annunciation put Mary's pregnancy above all others as a sort of "angelic" pregnancy? The son was exposed to temptation and doubt. How can one believe that his mother was spared these trials? The Annunciation did not simplify

# Postmodern Heretics: Catholicism and Art Today

By Eleanor Heartney

WHY DO ARTISTS WHO WERE RAISED AS Catholics figure so prominently in the battles of the Culture War? Are there religious roots to their tendency to create work that is perceived as blasphemous, sacrilegious or pornographic by the moral crusaders of the religious right?

A surprising majority of the controversies tied to the Culture War in the United States involves artists from Catholic backgrounds. In case after case, an artist shaped by the carnality of the Catholic tradition runs afoul of a religious or political establishment that equates that carnality with pornography or sacrilege. The controversies that erupted in recent years over the work of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Robert Gober and Chris Ofili follow a frustratingly similar course. The complex nature of their work is deliberately ignored by conservative politicians who fan public outrage to promote intolerant and anti-democratic social agendas.

These artists, whether they continue to be practicing Catholics or have a conflicted relationship to the faith of their childhood, share an incarnational imagination rooted in Catholicism's emphasis on the body. The entire drama of Christian history hinges on the moment when "the Word was made Flesh," and God became man in order to assume mankind's guilt and absolve its sins. The central events of the Christian faith—Christ's incarnation in human form, his physical death and his bodily resurrection, the Immaculate Conception and the transubstantiation of the Eucharist in the Mass—follow from this principle and focus our attention on the body's role in salvation.

Not surprisingly then, from the early Christian era on, Catholicism's incarnational consciousness has manifested itself in devotional literature and art which uses metaphors of bodily pleasure and pain to bring the believer closer to a loving relationship with God. For contemporary American artists from Catholic backgrounds, the incarnational consciousness manifests itself in forms that are remarkably consistent. Whether or not they use overtly Christian symbolism, and whether or not they vocally embrace or reject the official teachings of the Catholic church, the artists mentioned above all create work which focuses in some way on the physical body, its fluids, its processes and its sexual behaviors.

However, such concerns tend to clash with a political and social culture that was shaped by English Protestantism and is

now deeply influenced by fundamentalist thinking. The Catholic embrace of carnality is far removed from the Protestant and especially fundamentalist emphasis on the chasm between body and soul, and the perception of bodily pleasure and desires as impediments to salvation. This distrust of the carnal is everywhere visible, revealing itself in controversies over public displays of nudity, manifesting itself in calls to protect people from themselves by banning obscenity from the mass media and the internet and, of course, in the continuing attack on carnally-oriented artists.

Ironically, artists from Catholic backgrounds often find themselves demonized for work that is only an exaggeration of images found in traditional Catholic art and literature. By looking at their work through a Catholic lens, we can begin to establish links between past and present that force a reconsideration of the old canard that religion and avant garde art are by definition adversaries. Instead, their cases reveal the profound and ongoing influence of Catholicism on contemporary American art.

**ELEANOR HEARTNEY** is an art critic, working on a book titled *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*.

## Trembling Before G-d

By Sandi Simcha DuBowski

*TREMBLING BEFORE G-D* IS AN UNPRECEDENTED feature documentary that shatters assumptions about faith, sexuality and religious fundamentalism. Built around intimately-told personal stories of Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who are gay or lesbian, the film portrays a group of people who face a profound dilemma—how to reconcile their passionate love of Judaism and the Divine with the drastic biblical prohibitions that forbid

homosexuality. As the film unfolds, we meet a range of complex individuals—some hidden, some out—from the world's first openly gay Orthodox rabbi to closeted, married Hasidic gays and lesbians to those abandoned by religious families to Orthodox lesbian high-school sweethearts. Many have been tragically rejected and their pain is raw, yet with irony, humor and resilience, they love, care, struggle and debate with a thousands-

year-old tradition. Ultimately, they are forced to question how they can pursue truth and faith in their lives.

When I first told people about the film, they laughed. Isn't Orthodox and gay an oxymoron? Do those people exist? Then...why would they want to be part of a group of people that hates them?

We have had widely divergent experiences in the Orthodox world as we toured from Israel to Poland, Brazil to the UK, Los Angeles to Brooklyn. But it is Baltimore, Maryland, with the highest percentage of ultra-Orthodox Jews of any Jewish community in the US that has been particularly hot. It is no surprise that Orthodox Jews and Evangelical Christians protested *Trembling Before G-d* when we opened at the Charles Theater. (We always do interfaith work wherever we go!) They cited the Agudath Israel, the ultra-Orthodox organization, for their attack, "Dissembling Before G-d," which criticizes the film because it does not treat homosexuality as a mental sickness that can be cured. One of the city's leading rabbis, who is in the film, spoke out against the movie and many rabbis forbade their congregants from attending.

Yet, a scattering of Baltimore Orthodox married couples attended to send a message: "we came in support of you and they on the street do not represent us." One year later, we returned to Baltimore with one of the city's modern Orthodox synagogues, Congregation Beth Tfiloh, screening the film, one of 15 Orthodox synagogues worldwide that has now invited the film to screen. The local Jewish paper interviewed Rabbi Jonathan Aryeh Seidemann who said, "I'm certainly appalled, anguished and aghast that Beth Tfiloh is showing this."

Even when presented with the possibilities that a young Orthodox person struggling with homosexuality may consider suicide, Rabbi Seidemann said he could not advocate tolerance." Rabbi Chaitovsky, the synagogue's rabbi asked, "What other venue should it be shown in than one that is boundaried by Torah and Torah sensibilities? To show it in a movie theater is not the same." He

introduced the program and hosted a post-screening discussion, did not have any easy answers to Leviticus and tried to reconcile his compassion for the suffering of the people in the film with the stark clarity he felt in Leviticus. His position was like that of Rabbi Asher Lopatin in Chicago who wrote a letter to his Orthodox synagogue: "The most moving part of *Trembling Before G-d* was realizing that the characters were on a holy journey to bring Torah into their lives, in the best way they could. We were shown how difficult it is for them. Never again can we make a sweeping statement about people's lives: we must love them as Jews, love the spark of God inherent in everyone, and first and foremost respect their private struggles, which we can never understand. As an Orthodox rabbi who wants to help everyone bring halacha [Jewish law] into their lives, I learned from this film humility and sensitivity, which themselves are crucial to making any halachic decision."

I made this film because I have to believe that every community is capable of change. To not believe that is to demonize and dehumanize a community. I began the film with the biblical prohibition from Leviticus: "A man lies with

another man in the way of lying with a woman—it is an abomination. The two of them shall be put to death—their blood is on them." This is the verse which every Orthodox Jew, every rabbi, every priest and minister can quote and say this is the answer, black and white, no discussion, case closed. But I end the film with a blessing, "G-d is knower of secrets." The film arcs from answer to question, from prohibition to blessing, through the mystery of the divine and the mystery of sexuality that gets revealed by the human story of the lives of gay and lesbian faithful, committed Jews who struggle with the biblical verse every day of their lives. I want Orthodox Jews to look at Leviticus and not see homosexuality in the abstract, but to see the faces of David, Malka, Mark, Michelle. Most religious people have never had a name or face to attach to this issue. I want religious leaders to believe that the case is not closed.

**SANDI SIMCHA DUBOWSKI** is the director of *Trembling Before G-d*. He is a filmmaker and writer based in New York. The film has been the recipient of multiple awards including the Teddy Award for Best Documentary at the Berlin Film Festival and the Mayor's Prize for the Jewish Experience at the Jerusalem Film Festival. For more information, visit [www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com](http://www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com).

## In the Face of All

By Cynthia Karalla

THE SASSI, MATERA, IN SOUTHERN Italy, summer 2001. I was invited to do a solo exhibition and, while still not sure of what work I would show, I found myself entering a church. This, surprisingly, after many years of trying to wash off the holy water that stained my subconscious. I was born a Catholic without choice like one that inherited some title of worth. But here I was, back within the walls of the doctrine and all around me were the saints, mesmeriz-

ing saints. Real hair, clothing, jewelry, everything to make them look alive. Sensationalism, right out of a Vincent Price "House of Wax" film. They were installed in ornate glass coffins, far above the human eye. I needed to shoot them, to penetrate the surface to find their spirit. I quickly moved a chair and stood on it to raise myself to their level. But that was not enough. So I placed my camera over my head and tried to find the right angle. I was shooting blindly.



The gallery was at once pleased and shocked. As in all small towns, the word of my work soon spread. Nasty rumors always go fast, distorting a distant objectivity. The story of the saints was becoming similar to a monkey wrench being thrown into the chain of a bicycle. The exhibition was canceled. My gut felt the Catholic guilt: "I am always fucking up." But through all this commotion, a sweet surprise rose. People working for the church wanted more. The doors to the holy building were closing to the praying masses so that I could open the glass encasements, stand on the altar, anything at all to get that shot. One man even asked me if I would agree to shoot two of his saints for prayer cards.

The largest gallery in the south of Italy showed interest in the work. Within

two hours, the curator had an art historian over. Arrangements were made for me to enter a top security place, with my camera, a driver at my disposal, plus a few assistants. A restoration place for all saints in need of cosmetic surgery, thousands upon thousands of them, a mall. Instantly, the Monty Python film, *The Life of Brian*, came to my mind: "Ah good, crucifixions to the right, Marys to the left, Pietas down the center." Every saint was now below my eye level. Crowds so dense that if you lost sight of one, you could hardly find it again. I was there every day shooting, so familiar with the place that I soon knew each saint's schedule—some were only outpatients, others on an extended holiday.

When I work on projects I somehow don't sleep through the night, my

schedule is erratic, I am driven like a junkie's addiction, I'm wired. My last day of shooting was September 11, 2001. One last morning of work and then I needed to catch up on some sleep. The phone rang quite a while before I even heard. A call from New York City—the second plane had just hit the tower. Some weeks later, after it all sunk in, I realized that my martyr saints would not have their day any time soon. As one curator told me, "Now we need *Happy Days*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *I Love Lucy*."

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