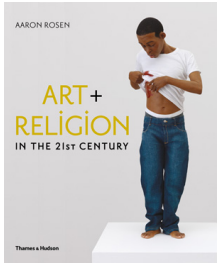
Art and Religion in the 21st Century, by Aaron Rosen



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On first receiving a copy of Aaron Rosen's *Art and Religion in the 21st Century*, my first impression was that it looked more like a coffee-table book than a scholarly tome. From its smooth, hard cover and arresting cover art to the thick glossy pages crammed with countless colour images, this book is a pleasure to look at *and* touch.

And yet, this book demands more than our visual or tactile appreciation—it deserves to be read too, Rosen offering a clear and thoughtful guide through the subject of religion in modern art. He begins with the premise that, "when you enter the world of art, you are, like it or not, entering the realm of religion" (7). And this is no less true, he argues, of modern art, despite contemporary artists' reputations as "godless marauders on a quest to offend" (10). Modern art has the capacity to raise difficult yet genuine questions about religion, often more effectively than were these questions to be asked directly in theological conversation. As Rosen demonstrates throughout this book,

there is a "tremendous potential for reciprocity" (17) between modern art and religion, which invites audiences to consider the "religious" as a serious subject for discussion and critique, rather than as a source of ridicule.

Rosen has organized the book around five key themes, through which he suggests contemporary art raises questions for and about religion. These themes are: people of the image, wonder, cultural identities, ritual, and indwelling. Threaded through these five areas are other layers of engagement, including race, class, gender, and sexuality, which Rosen argues are crucial to understanding the production and reception of contemporary art. Keen to avoid pigeonholing these works as a particular "type" of religious art (e.g., Jewish, Christian, Hindu, etc.), he looks instead for thematic connections across multiple traditions, which he then explores using a range of methodological approaches. This accentuates one of Rosen's goals for the book—to showcase the "sheer multiplicity" of ways in which contemporary art and artists can engage with religion *and* can likewise encourage audiences of their work to join in this engagement, regardless of their religious backgrounds (22–23).

The first theme Rosen addresses is "People of the image," a word play on the common term "people of the book," which claims a common identity between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. This section (like the others) is further divided into two chapters, which consider artists' engagement with the themes of creation and Christology. Adopting a theological perspective, Rosen first explores the way that creation myths are both retold and deconstructed by contemporary artists. He raises the issue that many of these artists (wittingly or not) echo some common theological questions around creation—its order, purpose, capacity for chaos, and, of course, the identity of a Creator. The art work thus becomes a visual form of theological (and often scriptural) interpretation, with which viewers are invited to engage.

In the second chapter, Rosen turns his attention to images of Jesus in contemporary art, considering the ways artists have questioned, reconfigured, and critiqued Christian religion through their representation of iconic traditions, such as the Last Supper, the Pietà, and the crucifixion. He also illustrates artists' attempts to subvert the traditionally white, male Christian perspective that has dominated depictions of Jesus in art, by portraying this iconic figure through various lenses of race and political ideology. Jesus can be depicted as a Samoan man, an Israeli soldier, even Michael Jackson; he may be dipped in urine, or sculpted from either chocolate, an animal carcass, or the incense ash gathered from Buddhist temples. Rosen's choice of images

raises an important point—that images of Jesus in contemporary art cease to be "the cultural property of any one region or religion." Instead, they are appropriated to comment upon wider issues, such as public trauma, racism, neoliberalism, and the failure of the Church to address issues of social justice. Rosen does not dwell on this point in depth, which is a pity, given its centrality in tracing the reception history of cultural and religious texts across space and time.

In the second section of the book, Rosen shifts (sideways) from theology to philosophy to consider the "sublime" in contemporary art. Tracing the development of philosophical notions of the sublime, he offers us a series of art works that grant audiences an unnerving glimpse of something that lies outside their everyday experience, be it upwards towards the divine, or downwards, into the abyss of human fragility. Like earlier artists such as J. M. W. Turner, contemporary creators of the sublime often tap into the awesomeness of terrestrial landscapes and the constant clashes and intersections between the natural and human domains. By doing so, these artists raise searching questions about the place of humanity within cosmic creation—the tensions, interconnections, and responsibilities that continuously unfold within this fraught relationship.

Moving on to section three, Rosen turns his attention to issues of cultural identity, asking how experiences of marginalization and otherness have been expressed within contemporary postcolonial art. The art works he chooses spotlight the experiences of the subaltern "Other" and the violence, segregation, and displacement perpetrated against the Other within the arena of colonial privilege. In some of these works, indigenous iconography is woven together with western art forms and objects, offering a startling reminder of imperial authority and the erosion of indigenous culture. Rosen also traces the ways that contemporary artists have used religious iconography to critique the more official discourses surrounding wider global conflicts and violence. From the language of exclusion voiced in sacred scripture to the contested spaces of religious landscapes, artists engage with religious conflict and extremism, using as their "muse" phenomena such as the separation wall between Israeli and Palestinian territories and the visceral reality of blood that is shed in the name of faith. This is a sobering chapter, but one that expresses all the more clearly the power of modern art to name and shame the rhetoric of violence that is seeped into the warp and woof of religious tradition.

Rosen's penultimate section turns to another form of religious expression—ritual. Borrowing from sociological and anthropological discourses, he con-

siders the ways that modern art can depict *and* enact ritual. Often, these art works are deeply embodied, the artist either performing a ritual themselves or drawing attention to the presence of other active bodies within ritual. The rituals they uncover may be explicitly connected to religious tradition, or instead, ritualize an everyday mundane act, thereby imbuing it with a sense of the sacred. These artworks invite their audiences to think deeply about the significance of rituals, particularly their power to inscribe collective identity. They may also break away from expected meanings of ritual to offer new, and often critical, reflections on religion and contemporary culture. Rosen gives particular attention to rituals and monuments of remembrance in this section, noting the ways that modern art can produce "counter-monuments" (183) that are intended to provoke, as well as console. Instead of *filling* an absence, these counter-monuments make that absence more palpable: rows of unoccupied chairs, discarded shoes on a riverbank, the empty ground where two towers once stood—all reminding people of a terrible loss and inviting them to remember that loss and to grieve.

In the final section of this book, Rosen adopts a phenomenological approach to consider the theme of "indwelling" in contemporary art. Focusing first on embodiment, he walks us through a series of art works that reflect the significance of the body within religious faith. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, Rosen considers notions of the body as forever in tactile contact with the world and with the bodies of others we encounter. From rapturous facial expressions, to bodies touching in community, to the religious garments and veils that mask bodies from our view, the art in this chapter attests to the human form as a conduit through which the sacred can be expressed, experienced, and, at times, contested. These images also raise questions about the sexuality, gender, and colour of bodies, inviting audiences to destabilize traditional socio-religious norms of what a body "ought" to look like. Rosen continues this focus on the indwelling of the sacred in the second chapter of this section, where he moves from embodiment to sacred space. He notes that the functions of the art gallery and religious sanctuary are often conflated, both treated as sacred spaces *and* secular repositories for art. A trip to the Louvre may, for some, be akin to a holy pilgrimage; a tour of St Paul's Cathedral can be savoured as an encounter with stunning art and architecture. In a sense, a space inhabited by art (be it a gallery or religious sanctuary) has the potential to engage audiences in contemplation of both the sacred and the secular at once, inviting them to note how they reflect onto each other. As Rosen observes in his closing dis-

cussion, art and religion provide powerful ways of looking at each other and at the world—and perhaps they also give their audiences the opportunity to look a little more closely at themselves too.

As I said at the beginning of this review, Rosen's *Art and Religion in the 21st Century* is a beautiful book and one that engrossed me as I read and looked. Its multiplicity of colour images and the accompanying discussions testify to the many ways in which religious themes and experiences (however we may define these) have been received and reconfigured in contemporary art. Moving away from more explicit religious iconography, Rosen encourages his readers to search out the sacred in art forms which, at first glance, may appear to have little to do with religion. But through his discussions of religious iconography, the sublime, culture, ritual, and indwelling, he demonstrates that the sacred in art is never far from our gaze. My one frustration with the book was that there was little in the way of detailed or prolonged discussion of these themes, or of the art works under consideration. It left me wanting more. But this is perhaps the value of this volume—to inspire *further* study of this important topic in reception history. Rosen offers an invaluable starting point, not the final word.

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