Aaron Rosen


*Art and Religion of the 21st Century* looks broadly at artists’ use of religious and spiritual ideas. Aaron Rosen, Lecturer in Sacred Traditions and the Arts at Kings College London, selected examples of contemporary art from all over the world made by artists of diverse national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The book is organized thematically taking such topics as Genesis, the sublime, cross-cultural motifs, and ritual, as lenses through which artworks can be interpreted. The strength of the book comes from the breadth of examples that include installation, performance, public art, video, and more traditional artistic mediums such as sculpture and photography. While reading the book, I had the distinct impression that I was reading a catalog that would accompany the world’s largest exhibition of art magically forgoing the limitations of time and space. For example, Paul Cummins and Tom Piper’s dramatic *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, the unmistakable field of ceramic poppies that spilled forth from the walls of the Tower of London to honor fallen World War I soldiers, would appear just a short walk from Michael Arad and Peter Walker’s minimal voids, *Reflecting Absence: National 11 September Memorial*, in New York City. Given the breadth of the subject—how artists use, express, interrogate, or critique religion in art—there are few alternatives. Rosen aims to cover a lot of ground and does so at a fast pace.

Not too surprising, the book opens with controversy. “Despite this rich history of mutual engagement, however,” Rosen writes, “religion and modern art continue to be typecast as mortal enemies. Misperceptions are particularly rampant when it comes to contemporary art. To judge simply by the headlines, it would seem that art and religion are headed for an apocalyptic showdown.” A quick litany of artworks that support that claim is then provided including *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano in which the artist photographed a small figurine immersed in urine, and *La Nona Ora (The Ninth Hour)* by Maurizio Cattelan, a lifelike and life-sized sculpture of Pope John Paul II having been struck by a meteorite. These examples support a view held by some that artists are always critical of, indeed actively antagonistic toward, religion.

Starting out with a splash is an effective strategy to pull in the reader, and yet Rosen is interested to show that art and religion are not always enemies. As he writes, “The notion of contemporary artists as godless marauders on a quest to offend is compelling stuff. Scintillating as it may be, however, it tells only a small part of the story. Contemporary art is far more than just...
The sublime, a topic well trodden by art historian Robert Rosenblum, plays a large role in Rosen's book. It occupies an entire chapter, but also informs other themes such as the divine, memory, and loss. Rosen gives a brief history of the term mentioning its use by Longinus in the classical period and then picks up Edmund Burke's reference in 1757 when he describes “terror” as the “common stock of everything that is sublime.” From there, Rosen advances to the nineteenth century with J. M. W. Turner’s seascapes and finally ends with Immanuel Kant’s definition of a “dynamic” sublime. “Kant cites a host of natural examples that stimulate the dynamical sublime, such as stormy seas, cliffs, mountains, and lightning, in addition to man-made marvels such as the Egyptian pyramids and St. Peter’s Basilica.” Rosen then relates the sublime to various contemporary artworks and writes, “It is precisely this triumph of reason that Angus Massey seems to celebrate in Contemplating the Sublime (2011). Yet there are also hints of the Kantian sublime in Olafur Eliasson’s and Leandro Erlich’s mirrored creations.”

This observation is an example of how Rosen often introduces works of art. From the text the reader is invited to turn to the images that are accompanied by additional descriptions. One image shows Leandro Erlich’s work, a building façade lying on the ground. Over the façade the artist placed a gigantic mirror at a forty-five degree angle. Viewers can sit or lie on the prone building to look up at the mirror and see themselves climbing the walls like a spider, sitting precariously on window ledges, and performing other amusing tricks. The artist says, “I think illusion here acts as a trigger, seducing the viewer to participate in the experience while questioning their understanding of reality.” Seduction is not quite the same thing as horror, if indeed this work is sublime, yet the experience the viewer has is quite curious. Closer to Rosen’s historical outline of the sublime is Olafur Eliasson’s “The Weather Project” (2003–2004) in which lighting, a large orb, and haze machines created the effect of a blazing sunset on the inside of the Tate in London. This work does the unthinkable; it contains nature. Often Rosen introduces his ideas well but then glosses over the connection between the theme and specific examples. The reader must complete the task and forge the relationship between Rosen’s analysis and what is shown in the pictures.

Rosen’s writing is strongest when he speaks to specific religious or cultural questions. Introducing a conceptual sculpture he write, “While there is no shortage of works that treat the Second Coming—often drawing upon the apocalyptic imagery of the Book of Revelation—one of the most profound is David Shrigley’s beguilingly simple sculpture, The Bell (2007). Alongside an