

Emancipator of the subject

Paintings by Brad Carter

March 25, 2016

Good Friday

Emancipator of the subject

On this day Western Christians observe the crucifixion of Jesus, who is also called the Christ. The day is proclaimed good because the death of the person who was both God and man made possible the end of other things. The opening of *Emancipator of the subject* falls on this day, a fortuitous event which Brad Carter did not plan but humbly embraces.

When I met Brad Carter, his primary work was the visual translation of word to image. In this task, he was either making an abstraction concrete, or he was making a statement about the importance of image over word. In either case, the word that Brad was translating had itself first been translated, and is found in the opening verses of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John 1: 1-5, NIV

Since that time, Brad has continued his study of translation, and in *Emancipator of the subject*, Brad is again translating. This time is he is working between two languages which do not seem to share many common referents: art and religion. For the purpose of this essay, and in observance of this day, "religion" is primarily grounded in an understanding of the Christian faith and institutions, although I do think Brad's work applies more broadly to other world religions.

When I asked Brad about translation and semiotics in his work, we quickly moved beyond a conversation about signs and signifiers to discuss technology and code. Brad is less concerned with shifts in meaning and more concerned about stability. It should come as no surprise that Brad has stated outright that he is influenced heavily by the writings of Walter Benjamin. Brad's approach to language is one of mimetic representation, or non-sensuous similarity, and the space between the translation of art and religion perturbs him.

Rendered Meaningful

Brad explained to me that the main crisis which prevents the reconciliation of art and religion is the problem of the location of meaning. In contemporary art, artists make meaning, perhaps in conversation with other artists and the history of art. In religion, a believer makes an admission that meaning exists outside of the individual. Objectivity is possible in religion, but not formed or beheld primarily in the mind of individuals. In religion we rely on revelation, tradition, and an assent to a numinous other to provide meaning. Our subjectivity prevents us from knowing the real truth claims which have been offered in religion. In art, we are the ones who make whatever it is that we are making, not from revelation of the divine, but as subjects whose very subjectivity is acknowledged to be the only way that we can behold or respond to phenomena.

Art doesn't portray the world as it could be or as it should be. Its task isn't prophecy. Rather, an artwork is another view of the world as it already is.

Perhaps the space between inwardly felt and outwardly found meaning can be located through mystical approach. My own interest in the Christian mystical apprehension is an important filter in my understanding of Brad's work. The mystic can both embrace subjectivity and assent to a numinous other within and beyond reach of imagination and in the immediate physical world.

The Christian contemplative tradition is as long as the history of the faith, perhaps predating Christianity in Judaism and earlier animistic religions. The visionary revelation of St. John on the island of Patmos and lives of the Desert Fathers all developed early in the history of Christianity. The mystical impulse has contributed to Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox consciousness. Often the modern protestant is reprimanded for the ease with which he personally interprets sacred texts without the aid of priestly or scholarly mediation. However, the practice of the individual reaching directly to the divine began earlier than modernity. The medieval peasant, who did not attend mass in his own vernacular, was allowed a form of personal piety through the use of icons, stained glass windows and miracle plays. Mystics and ascetics have arisen throughout the history of Christianity, questioning the prominence of reason, hard truth claims, and doctrine by making an appeal to intuitive understanding and prophetic visions. I would argue that mysticism is also housed within the doctrine of the Church; it is found in the affirmation of the Holy Spirit, affirmed as the third member of the Triune God, and, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "has spoken through the prophets."

Sacred art, made by subjects in service of variously illustrative and worshipful ends, is by all accounts not compatible with the art of our contemporary condition. The guild system is defunct, and socialist attempts to mollify wage slavery have yet to offer a truly viable or acceptable alternative to free market capitalism. Artistic patronage no longer exists, nor is it desirable. For many, religion seems like a wrong-headed, ancient practice. When linked to an authoritarian regime, or a leadership structure that values the submission of its subjects, religion has been used as a tool of the state. Imperialism, like mysticism, is entwined in the history of Christianity.

Black and White and Gray

Mysticism seems to have some appeal to those who do not occupy positions of leadership within authoritarian systems, either states or religious institutions. A mystic does not need to be highly educated or of a defined social status to gain spiritual authority. The allure of Christianity to first century Roman women, or the “Desert Mothers” is an interesting example of spiritual and social mobility. As I understand their history, these women, many of whom had come from backgrounds and were groomed to be wives and mothers of important men, were often hosts of nascent house churches. Some were married, and some never married. Several left their prescribed roles as Roman wives, mothers, and daughters to pursue the ascetic and religious life. One could argue that these women gained a form of power that was not possible for them through other means, through which they circumvented the barriers which would have kept them in their place. Mysticism has allowed women and others lacking prominence to claim understanding of God or spirituality outside of the scholastic life or their place in society; some have been condemned as heretics and some have been granted sainthood. Some of the female mystics who have made a lasting impact include Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich.

In the 20th century, Anglo-Catholic modernist Evelyn Underhill, who is also known for her scholarship on the topic, wrote extensively about mysticism. In her small book, *Practical Mysticism*, written for the lay person at the outset of the second world war, Evelyn Underhill writes: “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.”

Underhill sees the crisis of her era reconciled through spiritual means, through meditation and, above all, mystery. The problem with modern man is that we are not alive to this sense of mystery:

“Because mystery is horrible to us, we have agreed for the most part to live in a world of labels; to make of them the current coin of experience, and ignore their merely symbolic character, the infinite gradation of values which they misrepresent.”

Wise but not critical

A more recent trend in American evangelicalism is the re-entry of visual (and other) art into worship and theology. Prominent evangelical seminaries now include an arts track in their programs. As a person with some evangelical baggage, I partially welcome this trend. I have been told that visual art is at best unnecessary and at worst detrimental to human flourishing. However, I find the contemporary evangelical “theologies of art” to be problematic on at least one level: the theologians are determining for artists why they should be making art, and what art should and should not accomplish. If art is made in service to the church, is it really art, or is it religion?

In the same way, is art made for the state really art, or is it propaganda? I quote Leon Trotsky’s “Art and Politics in our Epoch,” published in 1938. In this letter, Trotsky decried the art of the Soviet Social Realists, whose work was message driven and developed to elevate the ideals and leadership of the Soviet Union. Trotsky writes: “Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but by its very orders, cannot tolerate them. Artistic creation has its laws -- even when it serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy, and a spirit of conformity.”

The altar knows it exists in eternity. The artwork knows it exists in time.

In the course of our dialogue about this show, Brad shared with me a quote from the Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*: “History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies -- progress, science, rights -- against which the Imam has set his face. History is a deviation from the Path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound.”

Writing in the late 1980s in reference to the immigrant experience in Britain and distance between religion and materialism, Rushdie received a fatwa of death, resulting in police protection, for his words. The punishment of a sort-of exile fit the crime of demonstrating the emptiness found at the juncture of Western imperialism and religious fundamentalism.

The alienation presented by modernism, viewed most popularly in the works of 19th century Parisian painters, is a reflection of their epoch. This sense of alienation has arguably increased in the 21st century. The precariousness and commodification of labor, a problem which arose during the industrial revolution, is still present even in the most “free” contemporary laborers. The rise of freelancers, independent contractors, and low wage earners pushed into part-time status demonstrates the value of abstract labor time over the total lifestyle and talent of the worker. Is it so difficult to imagine the easels of plein aire painters in 19th century Paris transformed into the MacBook Pros of social media coordinators in 21st century Chicago?

Brad Carter often begins his paintings with the screen; he claims twitter as his sketchbook. His solidly constructed, square canvases at once belie and highlight their origins. The stretched canvases, gessoed white, are so obviously opening a conversation about the relevance, and perhaps atemporality, of painting qua painting. These pieces feature hand-painted white backgrounds and dark text, spaced near the top of the painting and left-aligned. The format intentionally refers to the social media platforms and software programs in which Brad sketches his thumbnails, with Helvetica as a default, universal font. I hesitate to specify the color of the text, although my first read is that it is black. I’m concerned that in at least one piece, “Black and white and gray” my eye cannot be sure of the exact gradations.

Emancipator of the subject

The word “subject” is art word; the subject is that which has been painted by the artist, apprehended by the viewer. The subject of a work differs from its content in that it is seemingly abstracted from form or execution. The subject is only a starting point. In text-based paintings, the subject is that idea or image which is being conveyed through language and its uses.

Humans are also subjects, and subjectivity the way in which we as individuals apprehend phenomena. Finally, subjects are the oppressed, those who do not determine their own labor, their own meaning.

On Good Friday, Christians observe the rupture of meaning, both as a numinous Other (God) and as a subjective recipient (man). The space between light and dark is rendered; the curtain is torn and the world is dark.

- Laura Wetter

