Contemporary Art and Religion: Review of a Lecture by James Elkins

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“I have tried to show why committed engaged ambitious, informed art does not mix with dedicated, serious, thoughtful, heartfelt religion. Whenever the two meet one wrecks the other.”

“We’re not here for conflict,” John Franklin announced placidly from the podium as he peered over his spectacles at the audience, “but for conversation.” Respect, curiosity, and excitement were in the air as the evening’s conversation commenced.

Last night Imago hosted a guest lecture by James Elkins, art historian, critic and professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on his work related to the striking absence of religion in the contemporary art world. The problem is three-fold, according to Elkins: (1) religion is absent from contemporary art except when the object of criticism, (2) religion is absent from recent art historical and critical literature, and (3) religion is absent from the pedagogy of studio art. If an you want to make it as a contemporary artist in the art world, Elkins wryly recommended, only make art that is ambiguously critical of Western religion (the more ambiguous the better), if you decide to allude to religion at all. Religious artists (particularly those who subscribe to well-known world religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), as a result, either are unable to express their religious convictions in their art or are marginalized in the art world as sell-outs.

The contemporary art world has become so closed off to Western religion, said Elkins, and any art that “comes out” as being motivated by religious belief or as containing religious content easily gets dismissed by the art world or sidelined. While some artists experience some success within the Christian community, they are not recognized as authentic artists by the larger contemporary art world. The bottom line is that artists who want to use religious symbols, liturgy, or ideas in their art without being overtly critical of them or artists who openly profess their religious beliefs are just not often welcome in the contemporary art scene.

Elkins suggested that contemporary art can be enriched by a change in attitude toward religion, and vice versa. If only “religionists” (religious believers) could be invited to the secular conferences, maybe there could be enrichment on both sides. The only way to deal with this impasse, says Elkins, is for secular institutions to act first: “But for any of these things to happen, secular institutions have to lose some of their phobia of religion.” Unfortunately, it’s a difficult task. How do we get art and religion into conversation and still avoid the possibility that they might damage each other?

In response to Elkins’ lecture, John Franklin, executive director of Imago, explored questions of what makes art religious and what it means to be a Christian artist who is committed to making authentic and innovative works. According to Franklin, religious art is understood to be religious because of either the artist’s intention, the content of the work, the setting in which it is displayed, or the viewer’s response to it. Using this vocabulary, it’s helpful to explore which of these criteria might be problematic for artists trying to be innovative and authentic and which (if
any) might be points of contact between religion and the art world. Franklin’s response uncovered some of the tensions at play for Christian artists and ended on a hopeful note. “Is there a sea change happening? Are we on the threshold of a new time?”

Last night’s conversation opened up a whole range of important questions that need asking on both sides. Among these is the question of accessibility and authenticity: how does an artist make art that is authentic but still accessible to a specific religious community? One of the problems with religious art, for the contemporary art world, is that it’s too accessible; it’s so tailored to a certain community that an artist isn’t given the proper creative freedom. Elkins pointed to recent examples of art commissioned for religious use, showing that they lagged behind in the art world because of the limitations placed on them by accessibility and the pressure to avoid being offensive.

Is it possible for an artist to make art that is accessible enough to a religious community for public or liturgical appreciation without selling the artist’s authentic creativity short? To what extent and for what purpose should Christian communities use art in their community liturgical practices? These questions are live ones in our religious communities, affecting the way we think about our places of worship, our music, and the symbols around which we form our communities.

I’d like to thank James Elkins, John Franklin and Imago for hosting this important event and for contributing to the opening up of a much needed conversation between contemporary art and religion.