

The Great Awakening of the LDS-Mormon Art Scene

Chase Westfall. *Great Awakening: Vision and Synthesis in Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art*. New York: Center for Latter-day Saint Arts, 2021. Exhibition catalog. 133 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780578917917.

Reviewed by Heather Belnap

The summer of 2021 brought a greatly anticipated event to the LDS-Mormon art community: the opening of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts's gallery in Manhattan. Its inaugural exhibition, *Great Awakening: Vision and Synthesis in Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art*, was organized by Chase Westfall and made possible by a generous donation from Allyson and Daniel Chard, who wanted to honor Center cofounders Richard Bushman and Glen Nelson. Justly hailed in the show's documentation as "visionaries in the arts," these two remarkable people have done more for the advancement of the LDS-Mormon art scene since the Center's founding in 2016 than any other individuals or institutions have for decades. This exhibition and its accompanying catalog are a fitting tribute to Bushman and Nelson—and is aptly named, for we are indeed amid an unparalleled cultural flourishing in the LDS-Mormon art world.

Occasioned by the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision, a key religious event in the Western world that took place during the Second Great Awakening, this exhibition brought together artists who identify as Latter-day Saints and/or Mormons and whose work engages with the themes of vision, synthesis, and renewal. Curator and catalog author Chase Westfall argues that just as the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a "harmonizing project aimed at producing a more unified field of knowledge and

action . . . [and] a compounding and infinitely extensible program of redemption, encompassing center and margin alike,” so too are the aims of its adherents. Thus, Westfall maintains, “the lived project of the gospel (i.e. discipleship) will be revealed in the disciple’s true art just as it is in their authentic behavior” (23). And so he pursues how this quest for reconciliation and renewal undergird the art of eleven contemporary LDS-Mormon artists, including Georgina Bringas, Jared Lindsay Clark, Maddison Colvin, Daniel Everett, Jonathan Frioux and Armando Castro Hernández, Ron Linn, Jason Metcalf, Rachel Thom-ander, Darlene Young, and an unrecorded Guna artist. Wide-ranging in terms of aesthetics, cultural contexts, philosophical frameworks, professional positionalities, and media, the artists and artworks featured in the Center Gallery’s *Great Awakening* exhibition and accompanying catalog attest to the claim that the visual arts not only provide a critical site in the production and articulation of LDS-Mormon beliefs, values, and aspirations but also for the exploration and discussion of issues, challenges, and opportunities confronting the Church and its communities in the present day.

The challenges to translating the power of artworks in all their material, spatial, and spectatorial dimensions to the written page are many, as Westfall readily concedes. Words and printed images can only provide intimations or approximations of how visual representations or material objects are experienced by viewers in person. This is particularly true when the audience of an exhibition is as disparate as that of the Center, which has long been mindful of the need to make its events and productions cogent and compelling to those who can only experience them through perusing its exceptionally good website or attractive catalogs. To be sure, Westfall’s *Great Awakening* exhibition and its accompanying texts are successful in contributing to the sponsoring organization’s ambitious goals, which are “to display and perform art by Latter-day Saints in New York City and elsewhere; to publish scholarship and criticism about our art to reach a wider public;

and to establish a comprehensive archive of Latter-day Saint arts, 1830 to the present” (11).

The author and the Center Gallery are intent upon showing viewer-readers, Church members and nonmembers alike, that our contemporary artists are smart and sophisticated professionals whose works cannot be dismissed as provincial and driven primarily by extra-aesthetic issues. Westfall does a masterful job of weaving key aesthetic and philosophical traditions in the Western world to Mormon artistic and theological tenets. What is perhaps less successful is the lack of a more comprehensive overview of how this art relates to our own unique histories (art and otherwise) and contemporary realities as LDS-Mormons. Yes, Daniel Everett’s gorgeous sky paintings can be placed within the lineage of European and American Romantic artists (Constable, Turner, Turrell), but I’m willing to bet that most LDS-Mormon viewers see its connections to the cloudscape of Harry Anderson’s oft-reproduced *Second Coming* rather than in the art of these venerated masters. And while connections between the art and the LDS Church are acknowledged (e.g., Georgina Bringas’s striking 2018 installation *La vibración del tiempo* or Jared Lindsay Clark’s 2010 whimsical *Learning to Fly Prayer Circle*), the author and/or the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts ultimately shy away from exploring how such works invoke pressing issues within our faith communities vis-à-vis ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

In the closing pages of this catalog, Westfall states that this exhibition is meant to encourage growth. He writes: “While, by design, it will challenge audiences (including the frequently alluded to LDS audience) who may find its forms, content, and aesthetic strategies unfamiliar, that challenge is intended within the spirit of fellowship. It is an invitation to open your eyes and consider something new” (126). While one might wonder if the catalog’s cerebral discourse might be a bit overwhelming to the lay reader, there is nothing wrong with trying to raise the level of discourse. And there is no doubt about it: LDS-Mormon

folk are by and large sorely lacking in visual literacy. As a culture, we have long harbored suspicion about the place of images and objects in our individual and collective devotional practices, spaces, and histories, preferring the written and spoken word and viewing these as more authoritative or meaningful modes of communicating the spiritual and communing with the divine. Artwork displayed in contemporary LDS meetinghouses and temples, as well as visual material used in Church publications and instructional materials, is largely representational and stylistically banal. While the Church now sponsors an International Art Competition encouraging more global approaches to LDS art, it remains reticent to embrace works that are aesthetically challenging or to view art as a viable space to engage with the complexities of history, theology, and spirituality.

Chase Westfall and the Center are to be commended for this intelligent, thought-provoking, and faith-inspiring exhibition and for encouraging increased valuation of the visual arts in the LDS Church and among its peoples. This exhibition and its accompanying catalog of contemporary LDS-Mormon art not only demonstrates that our faith communities have produced artists worthy of attention but that we need to put greater effort into knowing our LDS-Mormon art history and developing our visual art tradition. Sadly, the Church did not renew its lease of the Center Gallery's space, and so it will be incumbent upon this organization and others in the LDS-Mormon art community to find creative means to ensure the continuance of this great artistic awakening.

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