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Groundwork for Future Study

Amanda Beardsley and Mason Allred, eds. *Latter-day Saint Art: A Critical Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 664 pp. Hardcover, \$49.99. ISBN: 9780197632505.

Reviewed by Rachel Meibos Helps

According to Oxford University Press, *Latter-day Saint Art: A Critical Reader* is “the first comprehensive critical examination of Mormon art.” This grand claim stakes out the territory that the book purports to cover: It presents itself as the first of its kind, a sweeping and generous exploration of art and Mormonism, incorporating the perspectives of the major scholars in the field and published by the top academic press in the world. The publisher’s claim also gives us three important criteria for potential reviewers to use in evaluating the work. All one must do is ask, and attempt to answer, the three questions implied by the marketing blurb: Is it the first? Is it comprehensive? And is it critical?

The first question is perhaps the easiest to answer. This is not the first book to discuss the visual arts and Mormonism. There are multiple books that have examined Mormon visual art, but the existing academic books have been from a historical or curatorial standpoint. One example of this approach is *The Mormon Graphic Image* (1983) by Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, which uses political cartoons from historical periodicals to show how American popular perception of

Mormons changed over time. Nathan Rees, a contributor to *Latter-day Saint Art*, also wrote *Mormon Visual Culture and the American West* (2021), a book focused on early Mormon art. Rees uses Mormon art as cultural studies material to show how historical Mormon attitudes were demonstrated in their art. Many of the articles in *Latter-day Saint Art* follow the pattern of using visual art as evidence or to illustrate ideas about Mormon history and culture. So, while *Latter-day Saint Art* is certainly one of the first books to cover the Mormon art tradition, it is by no means the first.

What about comprehensive? Despite the publisher's claim, the editors of the volume are conscious of the scope of Mormon art and make no claims to comprehensiveness. They limit this collection to discussing visual art with Mormon themes. And while no collection can be comprehensive, most collections of this nature at least attempt to give readers a historical overview. This book lacks an overview chapter on Mormon art, making it difficult to get a big picture of how it has progressed over time. And while the articles provide important analysis, research, and context surrounding key works in LDS art history, they often lack connections to other artworks and movements within and without the LDS tradition. For example, Menachem Wecker's chapter on the Art and Belief movement describes the exhibit establishing the movement at the Salt Lake City Public Library in 1966. *Dialogue* itself was founded this same year. The Mormon History Association was also established around this time. Members themselves were establishing independent institutions to examine more niche aspects of their faith. Situating the Art and Belief movement alongside these other contemporaneous developments could have improved readers' understanding of it.

That said, the twenty-two chapters represent an impressive array of topics and approaches to Mormon art, with a thoroughness of research appropriate for academic publication. They are divided into six themes. The first section, focused on art as theology, attempts to answer the

question, “Just what does Mormon theology do with art?” Terryl Givens starts off with the argument that two distinctive parts of Restoration thought inform visual arts: “a conflation of the sacred and the banal” and “a perpetual tension between exile and Eden, or between gathering and integration” (19). This chapter would be more helpful if Givens explained how these two concerns constitute an “aesthetic” rather than a set of common themes. Colleen McDannell’s chapter sees the Edenic imagery as more stable in institutional art and explores how the LDS Church’s recent focus on original art for temples shows that they value art as something that transports patrons to an “ideal, perfected world” (73) that focuses on realist art depicting nature, scripture narratives, and contemporary worshippers. Randy Astle’s chapter on Mormon identity in documentaries shows how Mormons assert “a subjective self-portrait” (80) that is a kind of personal agency. No overarching style dominates Mormon documentaries, but their styles are a mosaic of diversity, much like members.

The second section, on image-making, focuses on how art has been used to shape the image of the Mormon people. Ashlee Whitaker Evans shows several examples of image-making in early Mormon art, including Brigham Young’s commission of a portrait of himself for the celestial room in the Nauvoo temple. The earliest examples show Mormons portraying themselves as respectable members of the learned upper class. Images from the mid-nineteenth century show a more nuanced identity, which includes agricultural labor, immigration, and poverty. Artwork like C. C. A. Christensen’s panorama, on the other hand, depicts the martyrdom and other key events in early church history, and shows a desire to solidify a communal history. Nathan Rees’s chapter on the appearances of Mormons in print contrasts anti-Mormon images with images made by Mormons for themselves. The anti-Mormon image *Greeting the Favorite* (1876) by Stanley Fox is unusual among anti-Mormon art, showing a respectable Victorian home. The subtle detail of the husband kissing his favorite wife without removing his topcoat

reveals, for Rees, a sinister licentiousness. Jennifer Reeder summarizes existing research on women's folk art, especially quilts and hair art, and deftly analyzes how it shows the relationships between women as mediated by their religion. In the last chapter in this section, Heather Belnap traces the short history of women artists who pursued international art study—many of whom did not have Mormonism as a major theme of their work. These women viewed their artistic ambitions as congruent with and expanding their faith.

The third section, on the politics of space, focuses on photography and architecture. The large spaces captured by architecture and photography demonstrate the artist's assumptions about the world, like who is worthy of documenting and who belongs in the space. Josh Edward Probert's excellent chapter on Latter-day Saint temple architecture examines the tension between luxury and utilitarianism. Temples, he claims, are designed to be "nice but not too nice" (238). He also warns Latter-day Saints about putting too much emphasis on architectural trends. "In using the visual discourses of material refinement and stylish design as a metaphor for godhood," he suggests, "Latter-day Saints have tethered the metaphorical effectiveness of the temple to changing notions of taste" (247). The two chapters on historical photographs by Mary Campbell and Rebecca Janzen focus on the cultural information present in a photo of Brigham Young's "Big Ten" daughters and in twentieth-century Mexican congregations, respectively. The final chapter, by James Swenson, examines trends in landscape photography in Mormon spaces. Swenson notes the absence of Native Americans, and the way LDS settlers made the landscape visibly distinct. In one example, he contrasts two photos of the Manti temple in a masterful analysis that shows a stark difference between two conceptions of temple space. In J. George Midgley's photo, a cowboy herds sheep in the foreground, with the temple silhouetted and enrobed in mist in the midground. Ansel Adams's photo shows the Manti temple centered, in full sun, with crisp and stately details.

The fourth section of the book focuses on institutions that influenced Mormon art. This section starts with a chapter by Linda Jones Gibbs on the Paris Art Mission—five Mormon artists sent to Paris’s Academie Julian to study art. It summarizes her previous work on this subject and, disappointingly, does not cite some of the more recent scholarship on the Paris Art Mission, but does draw plentifully from original correspondence. Glen Nelson wrote two chapters for this section. The first details the LDS artists who took part in the Art Students League of New York and the history of the league. Students formed the league after the National Academy of Design students lost their library access and life drawing sessions. The league emphasized figure drawing and had models available every weekday. Their instructors were very diverse. Famous LDS artists like Mahonri Young and Minerva Teichert joined the league and learned from their instructors. Nelson also wrote on University of Utah art professor George Dibble, whose modernist paintings were not always accepted by Utah’s conservative populace (even though modernism was out of style in the larger art world by the midcentury). Nelson advances an argument that LDS culture never really got over the cultural argument about modernism: “LDS reliance on Realism in its publications and workshop spaces,” he claims, “came gradually to be an evolving manifesto of its own” (399). Menachem Wecker’s chapter in this section traces the history of the Mormon Art and Belief movement in the 1960s and ’70s. Wecker expresses some dismay that the movement was unknown outside of the Mormon art scene and brings a legitimizing outsider perspective to the collection, along with an impressive amount of journalistic research.

Both of the chapters on historical photographs from the section on the politics of space and the bulk of the information in the section on institutions focus on historical information, with the art from these serving as a nice demonstration that the involved artists were influential and significant. This is unsurprising. Since Mormon history has dominated Mormon studies for a long time, it makes sense that much

of its scholarship would be Mormon history via Mormon art rather than a critical examination of artistry. As Jennifer Champoux noted in a 2021 presentation, scholarly treatments of LDS art often “focus on the subject matter . . . , rather than talking about the paintings themselves.”¹ She encouraged an approach that focuses more on the art itself, which is also exemplified in this volume, especially in the section on identity.

The fifth section focuses on art and identity, with chapters covering race, body politics, and feminism. W. Paul Reeve uses Mormon art to illustrate how early artists showed Latter-day Saints and Book of Mormon Nephites as white and respectable. He contrasts this art with contemporary art to show a kind of racial reclamation. Reeve contrasts Friberg’s painting of Alma baptizing people with Jorge Cocco’s of the same story. Friberg’s people are white and occupy a jungle paradise, while Cocco’s are Indigenous people in a desert landscape. Carlyle Constantino’s chapter, “Native Americans, Mormonism, and Art,” gives an overview of LDS art both depicting and by Native Americans, ending with selections from an interview with Santa Clara Pueblo Tewa artist Kwani Povi Winder. Mason Allred’s chapter focuses on the tension between carnal pleasure and body positivity in LDS theology. He examines three independent international films: *Love Is War* (1970), directed by Ragnar Lasse-Henriksen, *The Dead, The Devil, and the Flesh* (1974) directed by Jose Maria Oliveira, and *Weighed but Found Wanting* (1974), directed by Lino Brocka. Allred examines other LDS films to show the ambivalent relationship Latter-day Saints have to media in general and finds that dance is a middle ground where Mormons can appreciate their bodies without over-sexualizing them. Amanda K. Beardsley’s chapter, “Latter-day Saint Feminism and Art,” encapsulates diverse approaches of Mormon feminists by analyzing several examples

1. Jennifer Champoux, “Envisioning Wilderness: Symbolic Forests in CCA Christensen’s Paintings,” paper presented at the annual Mormon History Association conference, June 11, 2021.

of their work. She connects Valerie Atkisson's mobile *Hanging Family History* to Giovanna Zapperi's theories of feminist time and its critique of the gender-based perception of genealogy inherent in genealogical trees. In making this connection, Beardsley aims to show "discursive roots in feminism *and* the LDS faith" (515) in the artworks. Beardsley does not just find feminism in LDS works, but she also finds LDS ideas in non-LDS feminist works, as with Amy Jorgensen's *Body Archive*, where she describes her artwork as a "visual testimony" (526) to her bodily identity.

The final section is on exhibition and display. Laura Paulsen Howe, the current art curator at the Church History Museum, wrote on the history of the Church History Museum's International Art Competition. Howe shows successful examples of non-Western LDS art that were part of the competition and gives examples of three figurative artists who found a market in LDS art after participating in the competition. She argues that the competition is not promoting colonialism, because it features all kinds of art from international artists. Analisa Sato writes on the BYU Department of Art in the twenty-first century, which has moved toward contemporary trends of performance and abstract art. Using two examples of student senior exhibits, Sato demonstrates how the deeper message of the art is uniquely situated to speak to an LDS audience. Sato writes extremely positively of the department: "The specificity of [BYU] entails responsibility to examine challenging subjects, but it also allows students to broach religious content that could be harder to read or even unwelcome elsewhere" (590). The final chapter is "Toward a Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art" by Chase Westfall. Westfall is also optimistic about contemporary LDS art, stating that it is becoming more diverse. He uses examples that show how artists are engaging with their religion in ways other than the representational art that has so long dominated the LDS art world. In explaining the lack of unifying aesthetic for LDS art, Westfall

writes, “A revelatory art must constantly be seeking the language of its times” (620).

So, what about the final question from the volume’s marketing materials: Is it critical? Well, it depends on your definition of “critical.” The book succeeds at showing the diversity of LDS art and approaches to it, and it covers artwork most would consider part of the canon of Mormon art (if there is one). It also critically discusses topics that are of interest to scholars today: how depictions of race have changed in LDS art over time, how temple art has shifted to represent an increasingly global population, the influence of art instruction on LDS fine art, the preferences of LDS patrons for representational art, and how an artist’s sense of their audience shifts the emphasis of their art. This work is foundational for future studies of LDS art. Previously, most academic research on visual art in the LDS tradition has been published in journals like the *Journal of Mormon History* or *BYU Studies*. A collection of essays published by Oxford University Press demonstrates that LDS art has importance outside of the sometimes-insular world of Mormon studies.

One sense of “critical” the volume does not succeed in is that it presents LDS art almost exclusively in faith-building contexts, with criticisms largely confined to historical problems that the Church is interested in addressing. Beardsley’s chapter, for example, included discussion of artwork that protests racism in the Church. She summarized the works she discussed as placing the Church in a “critical yet constructive light” (515). Constantino’s chapter on Native American art seems overly optimistic about the power of representation in art to heal. She acknowledged that the Indian Student Placement program sponsored by the LDS Church was criticized for trying to assimilate Native American children into white culture and the LDS Church. Then she presented the LDS Church’s International Art Competition as “one way Native American artists can be seen and heard in the Latter-day Saint community” (478), where representation is the first step toward

empowerment and healing from the “traumatic history” (476) between the two communities. But if institutional healing is indeed part of the LDS Church’s goals, acknowledging its own role in wrongdoing ought to be part of that, as should the art that criticizes, prods, and sometimes infuriates the institution and its most dedicated defenders. This, too, is one of the important ways that art functions in a community.

In the introduction to “Toward a Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art,” Chase Westfall analyzed the works included in the Center for Latter-day Saint Art’s 2017 exhibition *Immediate Present*. He acknowledged the difficulties for LDS art in lacking legacy and patronage. He wrote, “There was a tendency toward formality and politeness in the demeanor of the works, which assumed a generally passive and deferential disposition toward their audiences and subject matter” (595). I would argue that this collection suffers from the same problem. It is a little too polite. However, there is a lot of angry and impolite Mormon art out there. Could the Center for Latter-day Saint Art have a vested interest in presenting only art criticism that is “critical yet constructive”? Then again, if it isn’t constructive, is it really “Latter-day Saint” art?

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