
Creating Space

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The Cathedral Times
August 5, 2007

I was moving through the last rooms pretty quickly. It was the end of a long day of touring San Francisco, and we were in the de Young museum in Golden Gate Park. Sally and Peter were already waiting patiently for me outside of the museum store, ready to catch the bus back to Russian Hill where we were staying. I had gotten caught up in the Oceanic Art collection—trying to locate on a map where some of the ceremonial masks had been found and how the rituals of various tribes related to each other. This is the kind of thing that happens when you let lawyers become priests!

I tried to pick up the pace as I walked through the exhibitions of more modern pieces by making mental notes of things I would think about later. I, for example, made a note to think more one day about an exhibit by a feminist artist who took what she described as traditional power poses of men—think Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, or George Washington crossing the Delaware—and superimposed on them sexualized female images. I wondered if this is really the message we want to send to our daughters about what kind of power they have and how they should exercise it.

But, then I saw something I couldn't pass by so quickly. I walked into one of those surreal displays of bright colors energetically applied to large canvases. And, yes, I confess that as I passed one or two of the pieces, I did think that perhaps "I could have done that!" On the far wall, though, a large installation caught my eye. It was a large cube formed by irregular shaped pieces of blackened wood that were suspended from the ceiling. Each piece hung by a separate wire at a different height and at a different depth. The outline of the cube was clearly discernible, yet the pieces of wood were spaced so that you could easily see through the cube as well.

As I approached the installation, I noticed a plaque on the wall that described the piece. It was titled "Anti-Mass," and the pieces of wood were from an African-American church in the South that had been torched by a white supremacist group during that spree of church burnings several years ago. The description suggested that the viewer stand in front of the piece for a minute or two and simply absorb it.

So, I backed up and took another look. As I stood there I began to imagine the church that had been housed by those now blackened pieces of wood. I could hear the singing and preaching that had animated that body. I could see the smiles and the tears that had punctuated its life. And, I could feel the anguish that must have accompanied the destruction of its home.

I realized, as I stood there, that I couldn't tell if the pieces were falling from the ceiling, or rising from the ground, or just hanging there in place. They appeared to be doing all of those things at the same time. And this, for me, was the most revealing part of the installation.

The sense that the pieces were falling reflected the horror of what happened—and perhaps even some guilt arising out of a feeling of complicity in the fact that the church was so vulnerable to begin with. It's hard to escape the presence of evil in the world. The sense that the pieces were rising, however, reminded me of the Christian hope that I, and presumably, the church that was victimized, hold so dear. We believe that God is active in the world and that, over time, creativity will triumph over evil.

But, it was the sense that the pieces were just hanging there in place that struck me the most. That's how life feels to me so much of the time. I can see the bad and I have faith in the good, but things just don't seem to be moving. They just seem to be hanging there and I want to push them along.

Maybe our calling is to do just what this artist has done. Maybe our calling is not to push things along as much as it is to create some space in which God can work[™] and to recognize and nurture the life that begins to appear there. We can't ignore the evil in the world and we can't seem to defeat it all by ourselves. We, however, can reveal it for what it is and allow the Spirit to do its work.

And, sometimes, maybe that's what God really needs!

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