

Rheingold, a site-specific photographic installation by Roland Bierman, is on view at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, 145 West 46th Street, New York City, through July 30, 7 a.m.-7 p.m. weekdays and 10 a.m.-7 p.m. on weekends.

CULTURES

The Quiet Alchemy of the Ordinary

By Dennis Raverty

When you step into the dark, hushed, cavernous interior of the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in New York's Times Square during an ordinary weekday, the contrast with the cacophony and chaos of the city outside is palpable. The looming vaults of the magnificent gothic revival architecture, the various shrines and statues that dot the interior, each aglow with votive candles along with the lingering smell of incense, marks it as a sacred space.

In a small side chapel off the central nave are elaborately carved niches, in which seem to float large black and white photographs of a crumpled bag, a banal, throwaway item that might easily be found among the refuse in the street outside. But this image of a bit of urban debris is enshrined on a highly reflective, silvery ground, the light shifting and glimmering as you move closer, and its brilliant, shining surface transfiguring the rubbish and giving it an almost sacred quality. The photographs utilize new digital techniques and were printed on special tinplate panels to achieve these luminescent results. Unlike in a gallery, exhibiting them this way is reminiscent of how one might display the relics of an ancient martyr or a piece of the True Cross.

Adding to the mysterious and transcendent ambiance of the chapel is the fact that the photographs seem to hover in their niches with no visible means of support, lending them an uncanny, almost miraculous quality. They are dimly but dramatically lit with small spotlights, and the effect of the reflective surface in the darkened space is nothing less than radiant, bringing to mind the gold leaf in Orthodox icons and enhancing the chapel's quietly contemplative atmosphere.

An interpretation that immediately springs to mind is that this humble piece of waste has been lifted out of its customary context in the dirty clutter of the urban environment so as to indicate not only its considerable and easily overlooked visual interest, but to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, conjuring what the surrealists would have called a “gateway to the marvelous,” an almost mystical poetic apprehension of a commonplace object. In Christian terms, the photographs seem to be intended as a sort of sacramental — that is, an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible dispensation of grace.

Part of the effect of this photographic installation is that these pieces are so unlike anything else in the church, which is in almost every respect entirely conventional in all its furnishings; everything is in a late Victorian style (with the notable exception of two Art Deco statues from the 1930s at side altars). These photographs would have made a very different impression if they were displayed in a gallery or museum, or even in the parish hall.

But here, given the specifically sacred context of the chapel and displayed this way within its niches (typically reserved for statues or icons), it reveals the mystical intentions of the artist. It also startles us by its stylistic incongruity with its surroundings — almost as if they were accidentally “beamed in” from some distant futuristic planet. This incongruity is intentional. The pieces are self-consciously transgressive within the context of their setting.

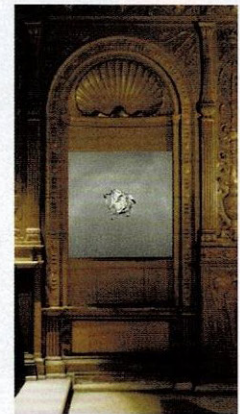
On a small table situated between the two niches in which the photographs are displayed is a short description that explains the intentions of the work, along with small reproductions and some biographical information on the artist, which the viewer can carry out. I appreciate how the text by this self-described conceptual artist is relegated to a humble place and the dazzling work is allowed to speak for itself before the viewer is aware of just what the image actually represents: in both the real-world sense of a photograph being a photograph of something, as well as what it might represent conceptually for the artist and, ultimately, how it is apprehended in the mind of the viewer.

The statement says that the photographs are images of a plastic bag sinking into a vat of used motor oil, and that the reflections on the surface of the glossy oil are of an overcast cloudy sky. Small bubbles in the oil are visible on the surface if the photographs are examined closely. A German artist living and working in London, Roland Bierman’s recent installations focus on the negative environmental effect of our dependence on fossil fuel. According to the statement, “The work can be seen as an allegory for the greed and the hunger for power leading to crime and destruction.”

The installation is titled *Rheingold*, a reference to the first of Richard Wagner’s cycle of late 19th-century Romantic operas based on Teutonic myths. In *Das Rheingold*, gold from the bottom of the Rhein River is stolen and forged into a ring, but the ring is cursed, so all who would use the magical ring must forswear love for power, and everyone who tries to possess the ring in the long course of the cycle of operas comes to a tragic fate. Finally, the ring is thrown back into the river, and it is the twilight of the era of the ancient gods — the overarching message being that all who renounce love for power are doomed. Oil is sometimes referred to as “black gold,” used in this installation as a metaphor for the immense power of the oil industry internationally, and its devastating effect of global warming.

What the statement describes as the melancholy, “dystopian beauty” of the work temporarily installed at Saint Mary’s is, in my opinion, far outstripped by the transcendent, almost “glorified” transformation of these banal objects and substances by means of the artist’s unique alchemy; an alchemy capable, through the medium of digital photography, of transforming base materials, such as lead (or plastic bags or dirty motor oil or tin plates) into higher substances, and in some senses “redeeming” them, in a process of sacramental sanctification in which the artist plays an almost priestly role.

Dr. Dennis Raverty is an associate professor of art history at New Jersey City University, specializing in art of the 19th and 20th centuries. Saint Mary the Virgin is a Living Church Partner.



Rheingold, seen in situ at St. Mary's