

ARTS

THE ARTS IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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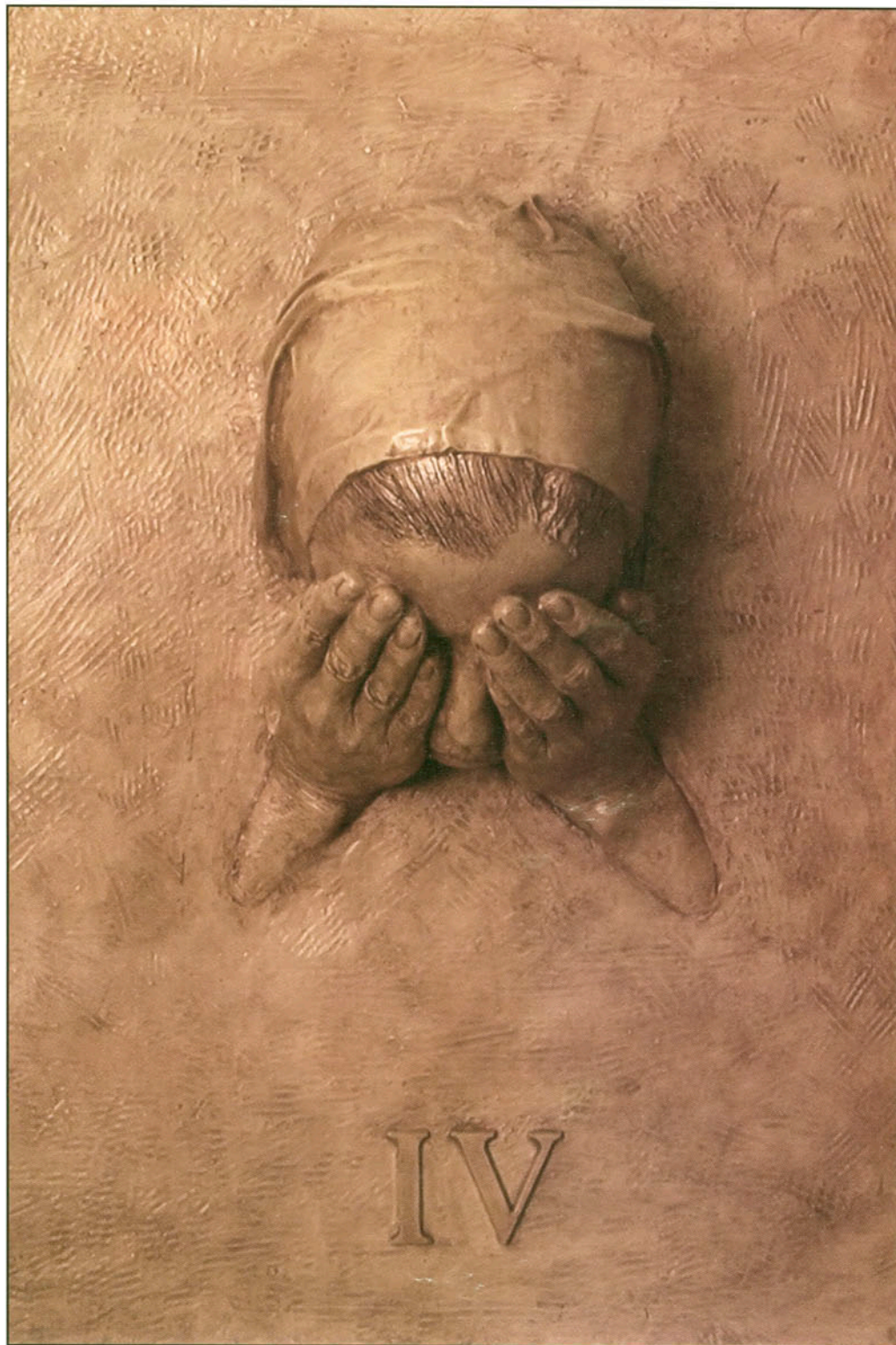
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Virginia Maksymowicz,
Panel IV, 2005. See the article
on pages 24–30.

Reimagining Religious Art

by Virginia Maksymowicz

Virginia Maksymowicz is a sculptor currently living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received a B.A. in Fine Arts from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, and an M.F.A. in Visual Arts from the University of California, San Diego. She has exhibited her work at galleries throughout the United States and abroad.

In 1984, she was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in sculpture, and over the years her artwork has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *New York Newsday*, *The New Art Examiner*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She is associate professor of art at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

1. James Elkins, "Failure in Twentieth-Century Painting" (unpublished manuscript), revised September 2001, 17 (chap. 3), <http://jameselkins.com/Texts/failureirony.pdf>.

2. Ana Finel Honigman, in a review of this work, wrote, "After feminism's gains, the frustrations and limitations that women and men confront are increasingly similar, but the expectations press more heavily on women. Maksymowicz's white plaster boxes could signify gender neutral job hassles, relationship trivialities, intellectual struggles, or life exhaustion. But because the bodies are female, they also represent the crush of toxic beauty standards, shifting gender definitions, political inequality, or the scrutiny

In an unpublished manuscript, *Failure in Twentieth-Century Painting*, James Elkins observes that

the word 'religion' is a toxin in serious talk about art. . . . Anything religious in twentieth-century painting is either (a) immured in the notion that art is a set of tools that can be used to capture religion in a picture, (b) committed to the hope that painting is a magical vehicle that can reimagine religion for a new age, or (c) sworn to silence about religion, precisely because it is so committed to keeping faith with history and painting.¹

While the artworks Elkins discusses are two-dimensional, I can only assume that his notions apply to other forms of contemporary art as well. As a professional sculptor and as an active Roman Catholic, I am especially taken with Elkins' third assertion that, in order to be included in the mainstream of critical dialogue, it might be better to downplay any hint of religious inclinations. He's absolutely right. Art that is considered "religious" and art that is considered "secular" inhabit very different spheres of the art world, ones that seldom overlap. However, I would argue that what could be considered "religious art" encompasses more than Elkins imagines.

In 2005, at the College Art Association's annual conference, I took part in a panel entitled *American Art, American Religion and American Society*. It was co-chaired by Eleanor Heartney, a critic for *Art in America* and author of *Postmodern Heretics: the Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, and Dr. Dorothy Joiner, professor of art history at LaGrange College. I was just in the process of completing a major commission from St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for a series of fourteen sculptural reliefs representing the Stations of the Cross. Although I do not normally do "church art," it had seemed clear to me that this commission would allow me to work much the same as I do in my "secular art."

How is *Station XI* different from Andy Warhol's *Electric Chair*? The cross was a method of state-sponsored execution in Roman times, the electric chair in ours. Violence is violence whether it is on the scale of Abu Ghraib or on the scale of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Consider Copper Greene's *iRaq*, or Alex Grey's *Nuclear Crucifixion*. Death is death; the passion of the Christ is reenacted every day and most of us never notice, as is suggested by Duane Michals' *Christ in New York*.

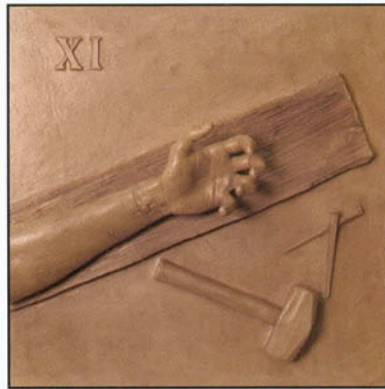
My artwork usually takes the form of mixed-media installation and often deals with social and political concerns from a feminist perspective. Although the imagery itself is not what most people would call "religious," the cultural critique that it makes about human dignity is absolutely grounded in my Church's teachings.²

However, the thought of "coming out" as a Catholic among my colleagues at a College Art conference was, to be honest, plain scary. It meant bringing the "secular" and the "religious" into the same arena, an arena where the assumption

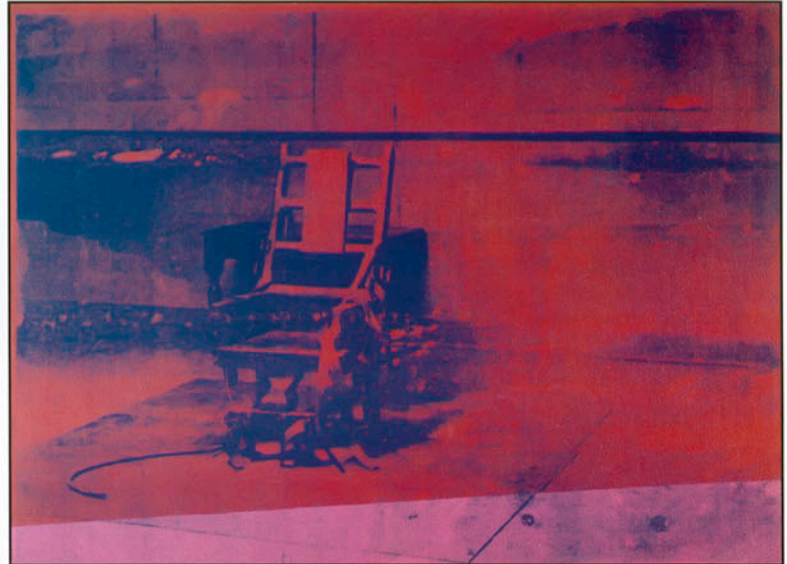
is that there is no common ground. For example, although most of the time the political views of the secular Left and the Church do not involve significant conflicts, they can be in direct opposition. Among my activist *secular* friends, I feel awkward admitting that I have been in antiabortion, as well as antinuclear, antiapartheid and antiwar exhibits. As well, it is uncomfortable working within an institution that does not live up to its teaching, one that is reeling from sexual abuse lawsuits and that refuses to admit women to its priesthood or to accept fully its gay and lesbian believers. On the other hand, although my activist *religious* friends are socially progressive, they are often artistically regressive. My kind of artwork is virtually unknown in such circles, where "socially conscious art" ended with Diego Rivera and Ben Shahn and where "religious" art means something colorful with which to decorate the church. (Elkins refers to the prize-winning painting in the *National Catholic Reporter's* "Jesus 2000" competition as nearly "fine art, except that it's a bit simple and nearly one hundred years behind the times."³) I draw suspicion from both sides. I've climbed over fences at nuclear weapons facilities with Pax Christi and I've marched on Washington with ANSWER.

So the questions I pose are: Can a postmodernist artist maintain a dialogue between the two spheres without losing credibility in either? What is the essential nature of "religious" artwork? Must it depict sacred imagery or contain biblical references? Will it unavoidably always seem "one hundred years behind the times"? These are some of the areas into which James Elkins does not venture.

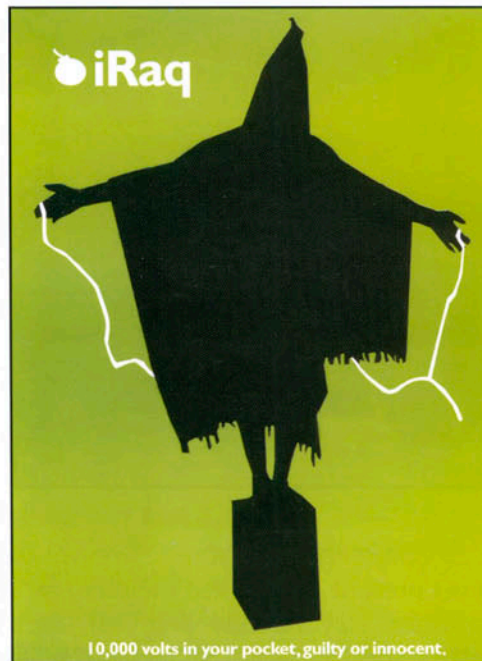
More often than not the religious base of my work, although drawn from Jesus' teaching of social justice, seems incomprehensible to those in the Catholic Church who



Virginia Maksymowicz, *Stations of the Cross*, panel XI, 2005, Hydrocal FGR 95 finished with acrylic and polyurethane, 24" x 24" x 8", commission for St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, photo by Blaise Tobia.



Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, from the Disasters series, 1967. Acrylic, serigraph, 137.2 x 185.3 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo credit: Philippe Migeat. CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. © 2007 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / ARS, New York.

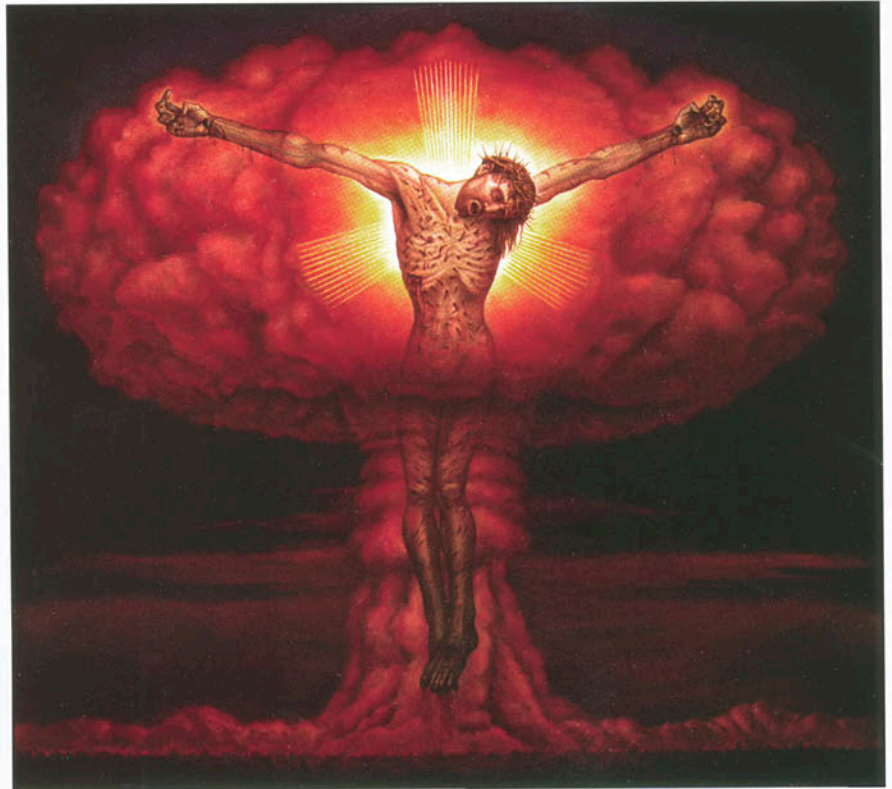


Copper Greene (an anonymous group of artists based in New York City), *iRaq*, 2004, offset poster, photo by Blaise Tobia.

society still focuses specifically on women." (Washington, DC: International Sculpture Center; *Sculpture Magazine*, vol. 22, no.2 (March, 2003).

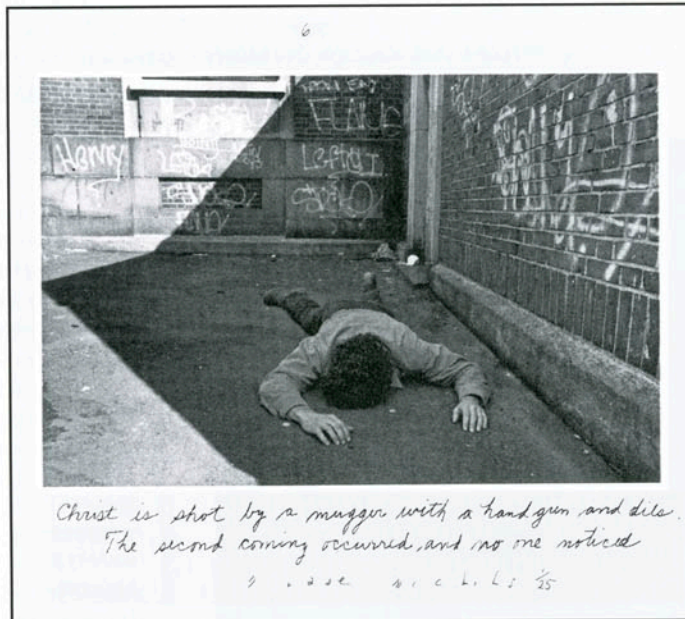
3. *Ibid.*, 13

Alex Grey, *Nuclear Crucifixion*, 1980, oil on linen, 9.5 x 10.5 ft., photo courtesy of Alex and Allyson Grey. The painting *Nuclear Crucifixion* can be seen at the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors (CoSM), co-founded by the artist, Alex Grey and his wife and partner, Allyson Grey. The mission of the Chapel is to awaken higher potential through art and to inspire the global community by building sacred architecture as an enduring symbol of universal spirit. CoSM exists as a sanctuary for contemplation and renewal in the midst of busy New York City. The Sacred Mirrors, exhibited at CoSM, are a series of paintings depicting the self in body, mind and spirit; they include a range of spiritual archetypes such as Jesus and Buddha. The Sacred Mirrors encourage us to see ourselves as reflections of the divine. For more information go to www.cosm.org.



institutionally are most involved with visual art. In the 1980s, I took part in an annual Artists' Day held by the Diocese of Brooklyn. This daylong retreat was described in the pre-event publicity as an opportunity for *all* types of artists, not just liturgical ones, to come together to pray and share their concerns. We

Duane Michals, *Christ in New York*, #6, "Christ is Shot by a Mugger with a Handgun and Dies. The Second Coming had Occurred and No One Noticed," 1982, gelatin silver print, courtesy of Duane Michals.



were invited to bring our portfolios. Not surprisingly, when the slides were shown that morning, there was a preponderance of crucifixes and madonnas, with the occasional Ad Reinhardt- or Mark Rothko-style meditative piece thrown in. When I projected *The Bottom Line*, there was a mixture of gasps and applause. I tried to explain that the installation was created while I was unemployed in Detroit and that it addressed the dignity of human labor and how the current economic system in our country conspires to undermine it. Although these very concerns have been expounded time and again in papal encyclicals (*Rerum Novarum* goes all the way back to Pope Leo in 1891) and the publications of the

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (such as *Economic Justice for All* in 1986), most present did not see the piece as "religious." When I received my invitation to Artists' Day the following year, there was an addendum to the portfolio instructions that said "Slides of *religious* work only!"

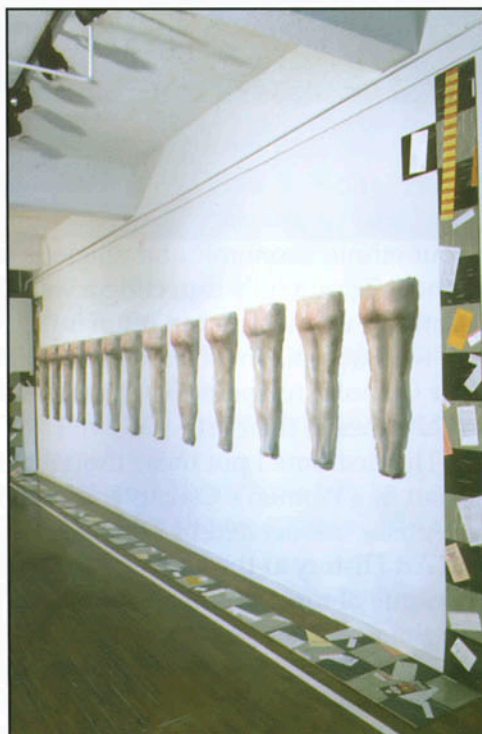
To further confound the organizers of this same "Artists' Day," the Catholic chaplain at Pratt Institute, where the retreat was held, had invited me to participate in an afternoon panel with a number of professionals in the field of church design. Ostensibly there to react to and comment upon a variety of issues put forth in an arts document published by the diocese ten years earlier, the discussion quickly confined itself to a debate on what constituted "good" and "bad" church art. Given the slides I had shown earlier, I was unavoidably cast into the role of devil's advocate, defending the postmodernist and the "secular" against the holy and sacred. I, personally, didn't see much of a difference.

At Villanova University a few years after the Pratt event, I experienced a similar split between the sacred and the profane. The conference, *Imaging Christ: Religion, Art and Politics*, sounded right up my alley. I signed up to attend the keynote session. While the opening speaker was articulate and theologically informed, her knowledge of art history pretty much ended with Mark Rothko. Much of the accompanying panel's commentary and discussion with the audience centered around how to repair the abysmal rift between artists and the Catholic Church (no one mentioned politics). I suggested that a fine start would have been to have invited some artists to participate in the conference: there were no artists scheduled for any of the panels and, at least on opening night, no other artists in the audience besides my husband and myself! When I went on to describe the vast amount of fine, *understandable* (there had been considerable lament that all contemporary art was "abstract" and hence indecipherable) artwork being produced, I could tell that such art was virtually unknown, and perhaps of little interest, to any of the conferees. I couldn't help but get the feeling that, for those present, "imaging Christ" meant painting pictures of a 2,000-year-old Aramaean with long hair and a beard. I think that it means making images that convey the heart of the Gospel's message of social justice and offer a prophetic standpoint for cultural critique.

Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk and writer who died in 1968, saw no conflict between religion, art, and politics. In fact, he conjectured that there is a



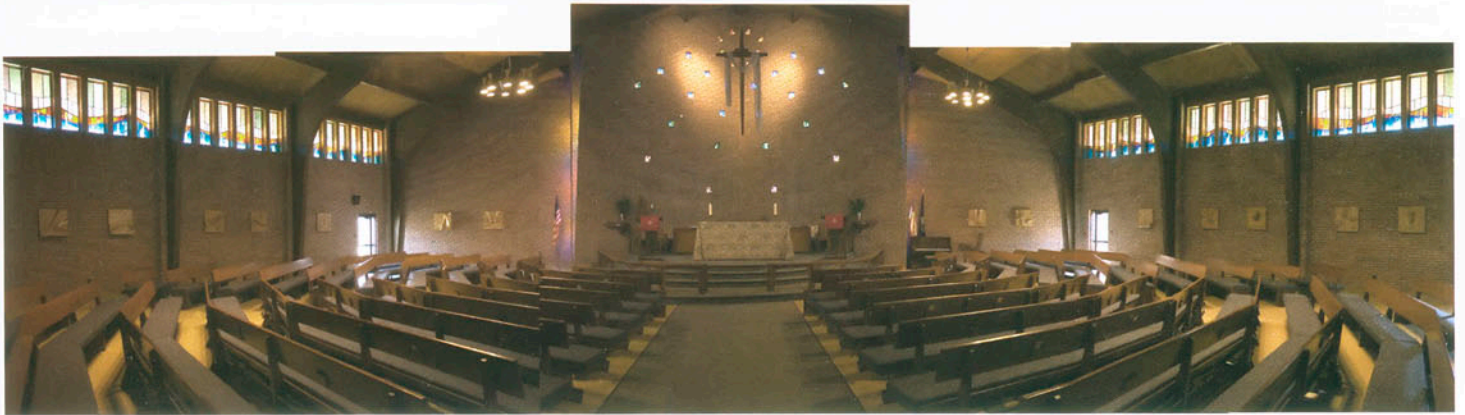
Virginia Maksymowicz, *The Physical Boundaries of This World*, 2002, Hydrocal FGR 95, wood, acrylic paint, installation at the Ceres Project Room of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York, New York, photo by Blaise Tobia.



Virginia Makymowicz, *The Bottom Line*, 1984, handmade paper, acrylic paint, mixed-media, installation at Artcite Gallery, Windsor, Ontario, photo by Blaise Tobia.

certain similarity between monks and artists in that they both have a vocation to speak on behalf of the oppressed.

More often than might be recognized, a Catholic upbringing contributes to forms of art that are grounded in issues of social justice. Michael Moore and Martin Scorsese, for example, attended seminary and considered becoming Catholic priests before turning to filmmaking; both credit the Church for the formation of their political values. Moore even admits to having gone to Mass on the morning of the Academy Awards a few years ago, when he won the Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*. He caused quite a stir with his remarks on stage, but as he wrote on his website: "And, as I walked up to the stage, I was still thinking about the lessons that morning at Mass. About how silence, when you observe wrongs being committed, is the same as committing those wrongs yourself. And so I followed my conscience and my heart."⁴ Can Moore's films, then, be considered "religious"? Or is it only Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* that fits the category?



Virginia Maksymowicz, *Stations of the Cross*, 2005, Hydrocal FGR 95 finished with acrylic and polyurethane, each panel 24" square, installation view, St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, photo by Blaise Tobia.

A number of years ago at a Women's Caucus for Art workshop in New York, those of us in attendance were asked to break up into groups according to our ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds. I signed up for the "Raised Catholic" group fully expecting a well-deserved gripe session about the damage a Catholic upbringing can often inflict. On the contrary, although I was the only one who was still involved with the Church, many of the women present cited their Catholic, religious experience as the inspiration for their concern with social issues in their art.

The first time I put these thoughts together in a public forum was in 1991, as part of a Women's Caucus conference panel called "Religion as Re-Source for Artists," moderated by Deborah Haynes, professor and former chair of Art and Art History at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Interestingly, when a colleague of mine found out that I was going to be on the panel, she remarked, "Virginia, isn't this stretching things a bit? You've got to be kidding!"

But just a quick survey of the published statements of the U.S. Catholic Bishops over the last forty years convinces me that I'm not "stretching things." They include:

- a plea for peace in Vietnam as early as 1966
- in 1983, a condemnation of the nuclear arms race, which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender and which robs the poor and vulnerable

4. <http://www.michaelmoore.com/mustread/articles/index.php?article=content/20030327-latimes>.



Virginia Maksymowicz,
Stations of the Cross, panel
I, 2005, Hydrocal FGR 95
finished with acrylic and
polyurethane, 24"x24"x 8".
Commission for
St. Thomas Episcopal
Church, Lancaster,
Pennsylvania, photo by
the artist.

- in 1986, a warning against the evil of unbridled capitalism, where profits are sought at the expense of worker and human rights
- arguments that economic justice for the poor is "a moral imperative of the highest priority" and that housing is a human right
- condemnations of apartheid in South Africa and Rhodesia
- support for the protection of family farms and for the recognition of undocumented workers
- statements deploring racism and advocating for an employee's right to a fair and just workplace
- strong opposition to the Gulf War (1991), the economic sanctions against Iraq (1998), "preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq" and the utilization of cluster bombs (2002)

If artists address these issues in our work, are we making religious art?
Obviously, I think we are.

The *Stations of the Cross* was my first commission for a religious institution. The Episcopal community of St. Thomas presented me with only a few

restrictions: the fourteen station panels had to be of a size and weight to allow them to be hung and rehung with relative ease. (They display the *Stations* only during Lent and they sometimes shuffle the order.) By placing their trust in me as an artist and as a Christian, the parishioners gave me the opportunity to cross some of the boundaries that Elkins and I describe. There was no need to alter my usual sculptural approach of casting directly from life.⁵ Each 24"-square panel framed life-sized segments of the human body.

For both aesthetic and conceptual reasons, I felt it imperative to work with a variety of models—a total of eleven—culled from a wide range of ages and ethnicities. I wanted the narrative of Christ's passion and death to be represented in a way that is tensioned between the "specific" and the "universal." The process of life casting captures nearly every detail of the body from which a mold is made, resulting in images that are highly specific and true to each individual model. But the mixture of models and the anonymity implied by the fragmented figures push the imagery toward representation of the human community in a universal sense.

This tension also enables interpretations to change over time and resonate with each new instance of human cruelty. Mary's anguish at encountering her tortured son in Station IV could be the anguish of the mother of a U.S. soldier, of an Iraqi child, of an infant in Darfur, of an inner-city teenager. . . . As I write these words, my office radio is reporting news of a shooting at a suburban Philadelphia school during which a sixteen-year-old boy took his own life. Rev. Bill Eberle, the pastor of St. Thomas, remarked that the *Stations* serve as an ever-present reminder of "how poorly we human beings continue to treat each other."

James Elkins quotes David Morgan, a professor of humanities and art history at Valparaiso University, as proposing that it "is time to abandon the élitist notion that devotional images should be kept separate from fine art." Elkins continues: "Yet I wonder if the division isn't deeper than viewers' religious affinities or aristocratic assumptions: I wonder if it doesn't reach into the structure of art criticism itself."⁶

I'm learning that the division reaches as well into the structure of both the commercial and nonprofit gallery system. While I normally encounter few problems finding venues to exhibit my artwork, it has been much more difficult finding quality spaces that will consider the *Stations*. (I made a second set of casts so that I might show them in other contexts.)

It should not be overlooked, however, that there have been notable attempts to bridge these divisions in both criticism and exhibition. The aforementioned writers Eleanor Heartney and Deborah Haynes have attempted to mend the separation. For three years during the early 1990s, photographer Blaise Tobia and I co-authored "Art and Society" for *The Witness*, a monthly magazine produced by the Episcopal Church Publishing Company. The column featured what might be called "secular artists" who nonetheless were committed to the same social concerns as were the believing readers. Bill Viola and Robert Gober have succeeded in bringing religious imagery into the secular sphere (with both having received glowing reviews in the *National Catholic Reporter*). Stephen de Staebler adapted his secular work to the religious sphere by creating the sanctuary for Holy Spirit Chapel at the University of California, Berkeley. Manhattan churches like St. John the Divine and St. Peter's at the Citicorp Center have tried to present religious imagery that's not "behind the times."

So it might be that the "secular" and the "religious" are not necessarily doomed to be unremitting antagonists in a postmodern artworld, that is if both sides can see their way toward moving beyond surface appearances and begin to consider the core values that bind us together.

5. For an overview of how I approach the human figure, see my article "Fragments and Repetition: Extending the Narrative of Sculptural Installation," *Interpreting Ceramics*, Issue 8, <http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue008/articles/15.htm>.

6. *Ibid.*, 11–12.