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GOOD ART, BAD RELIGION

A controversial painter explores
the despair of man without God



Lacombe artist
John Hoyt



Private religion, private hell

An award-winning Alberta artist illustrates how culture without God dies

Visitors passing through the spacious, glassy foyer of Edmonton's tallest downtown office building this fall were greeted by 24 contemporary paintings of all shapes and sizes, each a candidate for the J.B. Taylor award from the city's local Medici Art Foundation. Some viewers found one particularly unsettling, because it depicted a bound man glaring in vivid, purple rage at a departing woman. It took only a few murmurs to Manulife Place managers about "violence against women" to get the work removed until judging day, an act which provoked resentful media clucking about censorship. Sure enough, the man who painted *Freudian Self Portrait* won the Medici prize.

The controversial master of the brush is John Hoyt, 45, who teaches art at the Seventh Day Adventist college at Lacombe. He earned the Medici laurel (and \$1,500 in cash) for another entry, a powerful religious work titled *Book of the Dead*. The Medici judges said Mr. Hoyt demonstrates a sophisticated command of craft, form and colour, and they unanimously chose his work from submissions by 80 contestants.

But if *Self Portrait* disturbed anxious feminists, Mr. Hoyt's religious paintings will disturb traditional Christians a good deal more. Though technically impressive, they explore—and might be seen to embrace—the common heresies of the modern age, most notably the idea that God is merely a figment of the human mind, or perhaps an impersonal form of energy.

Mr. Hoyt lives in a modest brown bungalow with his wife and two teen sons in the central Alberta town of Lacombe and works nearby at Canadian Union College. He calls himself a Christian and attends a Seventh Day Adventist church. Thoughtful, friendly, a little shy and gently spoken,

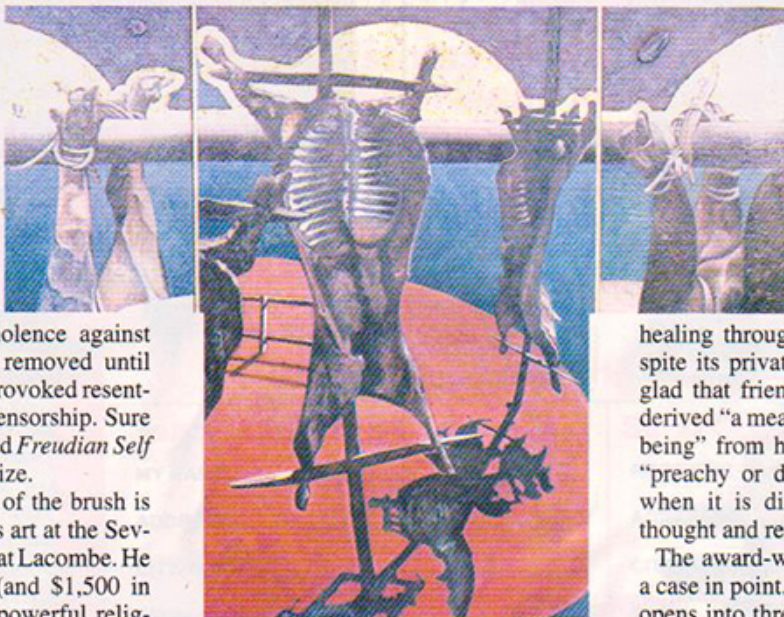
he says that until now his painting has always been a very private and personal occupation, and is of no direct significance to his work as an art instructor. He studied

standing of reality has been influenced by feminist theology, native spirituality, and the psychology of Carl Jung (1875-1961), the one-time associate of Sigmund Freud known for his interest in myth, and his belief in the occult and pantheism.

Mr. Hoyt says that the rigid, tough-minded credal dogmatism he experienced in childhood did him a great deal of spiritual damage. Painting is a "psycho-therapeutic process, an experience of healing through myth-making." Still, despite its private therapeutic purpose, he's glad that friends and acquaintances have derived "a measure of enjoyment and well-being" from his work. Art should not be "preachy or dogmatic," he muses. Even when it is disturbing, it should inspire thought and reflection.

The award-winning *Book of the Dead* is a case in point. Called a triptych because it opens into three sections, it is covered on the exterior with miniature clay skulls. On the inside, clay eyes frame an erupting volcano, from which a river of fire flows down into the earth where it encompasses several small Egyptian figures. Below the

DAVE BRUNNER



Crucifixion by Hoyt: Inspired by Bacon.

art at the University of California, and began painting in earnest while teaching in Rwanda, Africa. Now that a score or so of major works adorn his small house, he is beginning to think of offering some of them for sale in galleries.

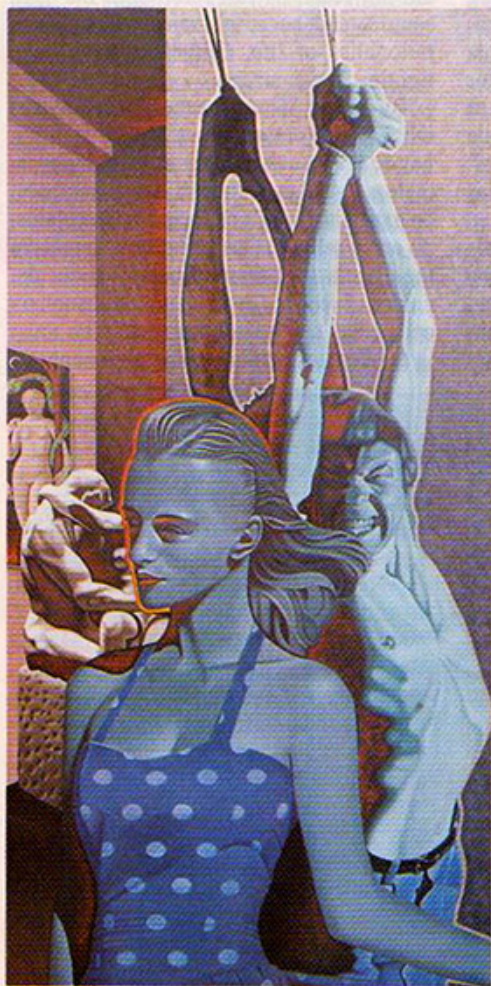
For all appearances, his work would seem a lively riot of syncretism (merging of religions), subjectivism (reduction of God to a subjective idea or feeling) and even sacrilege. Mr. Hoyt says he isn't sure whether they are or not, or whether it should matter. The images he creates have an honest significance to him; what they signify to others he cannot help.

In general, he explains, his paintings "are a product of a deep-seated neurosis which has a distinct religious tinge." To him, art provides a place "to explore private fantasies, to create times and places, gods and demons, that exist for me alone." He says his under-



The artist at work: Reasoned belief is inhibiting.

Cover
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Freudian Self Portrait by Hoyt:
Feminists found it chilling.

figures are hieroglyphics copied from the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead.

Mr. Hoyt says it explores "the extremes of existence." It has to do with "the beginnings, before we were born, even before the world existed; and the ends, death for us, and the end of the sun and the universe."

He explains that the mountains and volcanoes "represent ancient, primeval earth" which, by means of the fiery stream, is connected to the land of the dead. By way of small black figures with hearts, Mr. Hoyt attempted to convey Egyptian apocalyptic mythology where "the judgement occurs in the weighing of the heart, weighed in the balance of the feather of truth. If your heart weighs the right amount you are allowed into the land of the blessed."

The painting has a Catholic influence as well. The idea of encasing the painting in clay eyes, says Mr. Hoyt, arises from an experience of his youth. While in Europe with his parents he visited Roman Catholic churches where he saw miniature clay mouldings of body parts hanging from the

altar. The objects, called *ex votos*, "are offered in hope for healing or in thankfulness."

Underlying Mr. Hoyt's religious views are the writings of the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen and the heretical modern mystic Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest whose pantheistic teachings were condemned by the Vatican in 1988. Like most mystics, Mr. Hoyt emphasizes God's immanence, or presence within creation. Historic Christianity in all three major branches teaches that without equal emphasis upon God's eternal, infinite transcendence beyond creation, immanentism amounts to nature worship, or pantheism. "Transcendence is a limiting term for me," declares Mr. Hoyt. "I believe in a benevolent force encompassing the universe." The "internal image of God is very important to me," he adds. "I feel the kingdom of God is within."

Visitors to his house are immediately confronted with a large, striking portrait of a bare-chested man playing chess in front of a cross. The man is wearing a crown of thorns and a pair of sunglasses. For Mr. Hoyt, the painting expresses something of the "hiddenness" or "mystery" of God, and perhaps of Christian redemption as well.

In another painting, *The Garden*, Mr. Hoyt attempts to "re-interpret the simplistic, childish images of the Eve myth in modern terms." The

painting depicts Eve from the waist down in a mini-skirt and high heels walking through Eden, with an uninterested serpent coiled innocuously nearby. Clothing Eve in a modern dress, says Mr. Hoyt, suggests that the "myth" of the Fall (the pivotal Christian belief that all humans are inherently sinful and in need of God's redemption) should be re-interpreted.

His 1990 work, *Crucifixion*, poses an even greater challenge. On the cross Mr. Hoyt has crucified the carcass of a gutted pig, but with twine rather than nails. He denies the painting was intended to be sacrilegious; rather, it was to

continue "the imagery of binding" which is present in some of his other works.

But because he subscribes to no particular theological framework, the possibility of sacrilege is, in a sense, a foreign one to Mr. Hoyt. He notes that the idea of a meat slab tied to a stake comes from 17th century philosopher-artist Francis Bacon, a man he admires.

Good art, says Mr. Hoyt, should thoughtfully disturb and inspire the viewer; it should cause a person to think and feel. It is a skill Mr. Hoyt seems to have perfected. When his *Freudian Self Portrait* was pulled from display at Manulife Place he admits that he felt some satisfaction, though he flatly rejects that it could reasonably be seen to condone violence.

Freudian Self Portrait, he explains, is simply an observation of human relationships and the two sides of love. In the foreground, he explores the "trapped" or "powerless" aspect of love, while the warmer side is depicted by a statue in the background of two figures embracing. He notes that the painting was "clearly supported on the one hand by people who know something about art," while it generated controversy among people who are less familiar with art or "are interpreting it in terms of their own personal insecurities."

Mr. Hoyt, notwithstanding his stated intention to disturb, takes a dim view of "art" that seeks to denigrate, ridicule and destroy cultural norms and rational meaning entirely. For example, in January the Vancouver lesbian "performance art" troupe Kiss and Tell appeared at the Banff Centre for the Arts to display films of themselves masturbating. Such gruesome works display more ignorance than talent. "There is a line between something that's just plain offensive and something that thoughtfully pushes the limits," proposes Mr. Hoyt.

Films of women masturbating and the famous American exhibit of a crucifix in a jar of urine are both examples of

cultural nihilism, says Harry Groenewold, professor of history at The King's University College in Edmonton. He questions whether such obscene displays—"where the artist goes out of his way to insult and anger his audi-



The Garden by Hoyt:
An unnecessary guilt trip.