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Good and evil

Two new exhibits explore artists' perceptions of God and Satan.

By **RICHARD CHANG**
The Orange County Register

God and Satan have been hanging around in art for centuries.

Since prehistoric man drew images of spirits and higher powers on his cave wall, representations of God and the darker forces have persisted in art through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, up to today. Over the eons of art history, they could easily be the artist's favorite, most consistent subjects.

In Orange County, two new exhibitions are exploring the ultimate manifestations of good and evil, each taking a decidedly different turn.

At Laguna Art Museum, "100 Artists See God" opens Aug. 1 and runs through Oct. 3.

At the Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, "100 Artists See Satan" opened earlier this month and continues through Sept. 19.

Both are group shows that feature well-known contemporary artists, a variety of media, and a very open-ended approach to the subject matter. Religion is a sensitive issue, after all.

GOD

Artists John Baldessari and Meg Cranston curated "100 Artists See God," a traveling show organized and circulated by Independent Curators International in New York.

The inspiration for this exhibit came in the spring of 2002, just six months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"Newspapers, magazines, the media was full of stuff about God," said Cranston, an art professor at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. "Everyone was talking about

'100 ARTISTS SEE GOD'

WHERE Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach

WHEN Aug. 1-Oct. 3

HOURS 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Sunday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

HOW MUCH \$9 general; \$7 seniors and students, free for children 12 and younger

INFORMATION (949) 494-8971 or www.lagunaartmuseum.org



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And so, Cranston and Baldessari asked artists whose work they admired to submit or create a work that somehow dealt with the concept of the Almighty.

The results, actually 110 of them, ran the spectrum of possibilities. Some pieces, like Ed Ruscha's "Miracle #67" and Simon Patterson's "Landskip" dealt with the subject head-on, depicting shafts of light beaming down from a source in the sky.

Others were a bit more ambiguous, such as Luciano Perna's "God Luck!" - a digital print of an egg with orange chicken feet against a black backdrop.

British hotshot Damien Hirst offered a cabinet filled with pharmaceuticals - perhaps a comment on man's penchant toward medication to reach a higher consciousness.

Still others seemed to have nothing to do with God - Christopher Williams' photograph of a dishwasher filled with dishes; Rita McBride's collection of tree-shaped air fresheners; Yukata Sone's acrylic painting of a cross-country skier; and pictures of animals, particularly dogs.

"There's the Buddhist idea that the divine is in everyday life," Cranston said. "The artists want to be creative in their interpretation of what God might be. Many of the artists believed that the fundamentalist thing about God is the thing to be avoided."

Ultimately, the curators and artists sought to surprise viewers and reach beyond typical representations.

SATAN

In Santa Ana, the Grand Central Art Center show is designed to be a response to Laguna's "100 Artists See God."

But the real story is that Grand Central acquired the "God" show first. Or, at least, advisory board members thought they did.

When Independent Curators International was looking for a West Coast venue for its exhibit, a tentative agreement was made with Grand Central to show the work in Santa Ana and at the Main Art Gallery on the California State University, Fullerton, campus.

But then Independent Curators decided to go with the larger, and possibly more prestigious, Laguna Art Museum.

"A lot of things that happen in the art world are arbitrary," said Greg Escalante, president of Grand Central Art Forum, the advisory board for exhibitions. "But they backed out of that deal. That was kind of uncool. We were disappointed."

As the board was considering its options, Chairman Shelley Liberto suggested the center should do Satan. The board immediately agreed.

With only six months to organize and hang the show, it was a hectic process. Like those who curated the "God" exhibit, the art center asked artists to submit work that dealt with the theme - this time an ungodly one.

The response was overwhelming. To the center's surprise, many artists wanted to create fresh work specifically for this exhibition. Quite a few artists, such as the Rev. Ethan Acres, Chris Burden and William Wegman, provided work for both Laguna and Santa Ana shows.

As with the "God" exhibit, the results varied widely, and there are actually 115 artists in the show (satanic math, organizers say).

"The way that artists perceive the devil is so different," said Andrea Harris, gallery director at Grand Central. "Every individual is different. Some people think that the devil doesn't exist. Some think the devil is man. Some pieces are humorous, some serious and thoughtful."

'100 ARTISTS SEE SATAN'

WHERE Grand Central Art Center, 125 N. Broadway, Santa Ana

OPENS Through Sept. 19

ADMISSION Free

HOURS 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday, Tuesday-Thursday; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Friday and Saturday

INFORMATION (714) 567-7233 or www.grandcentralartcenter.com

Highlights include a video by John Geary, who dressed up in a Medieval Satan outfit and appeared in prominent places in various U.S. cities; cartoon-like drawings by Mark Ryden, Shag and Extremo the Clown; and Huntington Beach-based Paul Frank's devilishly cute "Red Devil Julius."

Jim Jenkins' "A Dime a Dance" features a motor-powered devil who will shake his hips to prerecorded guitar riffs for 10 cents, three times for a quarter.

Erika Rothenberg has created a "Who Would You Kill?" book, which invites people to write names down if they were offered one free kill a year. (The book is completely filled.)

Bill Burns' "Boiler Suits for Primates" is a thought-provoking, political work comprised of a suitcase, plus all the items (soap, shampoo, toothpaste, Quran) issued to prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Diana Kunce splices a clip of Mel Gibson being interviewed by Diane Sawyer during the hubbub surrounding "The Passion of the Christ." As he pontificates about the dark side, Kunce implies that there's a little devil in Mel, too.

Some images are genuinely disturbing and freaky, like Naida Oslone's multitoed "Untitled (Feet)" and Ryan McNamara's "Help Me" video, where a young man strips in a gay club and reveals the words "Help Me" scorched onto his abdomen.

For the Grand Central Art Center, this exhibit is a marked contrast from its previous show, "Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth," which featured the multimillion-dollar artist's cozy, Christian-inspired work.

"People that loved the last show hate this show," McGee said. "People who hated the last show love this show. I think that's a good measure of success."

Organizers of both exhibits don't think there will be too much earthly competition between "God" and "Satan." In fact, the two could complement each other well - for art fans, that is.

"I think our show works well with their show," said Tyler Stallings, chief curator at Laguna Art Museum. "To me, it enhances it, because it furthers the dialogue in a way. It enhances the dialogue for both sides. For us, it's about collaborating, directly or indirectly."

And whatever audiences' beliefs might be, both institutions are hoping that visitors will come away from these provocative exhibits with strong feelings and reactions. This art is not warm and fuzzy; it's not for the meek at heart.

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