

"What's Good About Bad Art? Art Criticism, Theology and Christian Devotion " by Deborah Sokolove

**03/30/2003 by Deborah Sokolove at
the Washington Theological Union:
What's Good About Bad Art? Art
Criticism, Theology and Christian
Devotion**

Away sermon given at

[The McCarthy Lecture on Theology and the Arts](#) at the
Washington Theological Union

March 30, 2003

by Deborah Sokolove

What's Good About Bad Art?

Art Criticism, Theology and Christian Devotion

When I was in art school in the early 1980s, I had to take a number of courses in art history. One of those classes was centered on the contemporary Los Angeles art scene, and toward

the end of the semester, we went on a field trip to a local gallery. As we walked through an exhibition of paintings and drawings, much of the work seemed incomprehensible to me. Filled with what looked like random markings and childish renditions of people and animals, the works seemed to have no sense of design or craft, or even much thought. These were not Abstract Expressionist works by the big names of the mid-20th century, but rather by some new, hot LA artist. After all, I not only was familiar with the work of the New York School, but really felt a kind of kinship with the swooping lines of Jackson Pollack and the bold gestures of Franz Kline. It was even clear to me that Willem de Kooning's paintings of ravaged and ravaging women were good art, even if I didn't like what he seemed to be saying.

But the works we were looking at weren't like that. Intended to be representational and narrative, they looked as though the artist's drawing skills had not gone much beyond those of the average third grader. Clearly, however, somebody thought highly enough of this artist to display these works in a prestigious gallery. I just couldn't figure out why. And it doesn't say much for the instructor that I didn't get an answer when I naively asked, "What's good about bad art?" Instead, everybody just laughed.

I tell this story because that question continued to stick with me, long after I got over the embarrassment of not understanding a work of which others thought highly. Now, more than twenty years later, I still don't know what was good about that work, and don't even remember the artist's name. Maybe it was just a case of someone with a really good agent. Or, maybe not. Eventually, I learned enough about both art and myself to know that there is good art that I don't care for, and bad art that speaks to me. It's the second part of that

sentence that I think about a lot. What is it about some bad art that touches my soul and opens my heart? What is good about bad art?

Before we can answer that question, we need to define what “good” and “bad” mean when we are talking about art. Somewhere along the journey from the cave paintings of Alta Mira in northern Spain to the post-Modernist questioning inherent in Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself dressed up as just about everybody, and John Baldassari’s “This Not That,” certain artworks were declared to be “good” and others “bad.” In some circles, what some might call bad art is considered to be not art at all. But what some deride as sentimental, shallow, slick, decorative, or simply not living up to its aspirations, others revere as beautiful, inspirational, and even profound. Artworks that are dismissed by art schools, galleries, museums, and critics may be held in high esteem by those with a rich spiritual and devotional life.

There a number of parameters by which artists, and the critical apparatus that support them, define good art. In virtually every art school or university art department, first year students are required to take courses in two- and three-dimensional design. These courses break down visual material into the elements and principles of design: line, shape, form, rhythm, harmony, balance, color, and so forth. Beginning artists learn to see that, for instance, sharp angles convey more tension than do smooth, wavy lines; that reds and oranges seem to have more energy than blues and violets; and that it is possible to balance a large, purple square with a small, red dot if the square and the dot are in the right relationship to one another and to the edges of the page, and if the purple and the red are just right.

In addition to understanding how to use the elements and principles of design, artists must master their craft. If they are painters, they must learn how to draw a reasonable likeness; how to stretch and prepare canvas; how to mix paint; and how to make the hand do what the eye and the imagination see. If they are sculptors, they may need to learn to build maquettes out of plaster or wood; how to weld steel; or how to cast and finish bronze. Potters and weavers and musicians and dancers and actors and poets have other skills, other demands on hand and eye and ear and voice. In every medium, artists work with the potentials and the limitations of their materials, their tools, and their own bodies. The skill with which they do this work, the level of their craft, is part of what we admire when we call something "good art."

But design and craft are not sufficient, and perhaps not even necessary, when we are talking about art. There are other dimensions to art, ones that are much more difficult to define. These have to do with originality, intention, with integrity, with meaning, and with soul. It is these things—much more than matters of design or craft—that ultimately define whether an artwork is considered "good" or "bad." To get a sense of that, consider the drawings of small children. It is not the high level of craft or the sophisticated sense of design that we admire, but rather the spontaneity, the directness, the freedom of color and movement that reminds us of a time when we were not afraid to paint or draw. Children's paintings have a lot of soul, but not a lot of craft or design.

These matters of soul, or artistic integrity, or intentionality, or meaning in art were the primary concern of

the Modernist movement, which began in the late 19th or early 20th century, depending on which historian one is reading. This concern continues into our current, post-Modern, era. In art schools, university art departments, museums, galleries, arts journals, and the social elite that supports them, art is critiqued primarily on its ability to provide a satisfactory aesthetic experience. While design and craft are generally important factors of this aesthetic experience, the primary factor is a sense that the artwork has revealed some important, new knowledge. The purpose of art, for those who are trained in this way of looking and talking about art, is to provide a certain intensity of feeling, as though one had come face to face with God, and that the artist has done it in a way that is new, fresh, original.

In 1977, an organization called Christians in the Visual Arts was founded by a few artists who found themselves isolated in a Christian world that didn't understand art, and a secular art world that didn't understand Christianity. These artists, trained in the Modernist aesthetic, believed that they could make art that provided a deep, valid, esthetic experience which at the same time would function as a statement of their own faith. The ensuing twenty-odd years has seen an astonishing rise in the number of such artists, those who want to make a
n explicit link between their faith and their work, and still maintain credibility and integrity in the secular art world. While the secular art world has largely—but not entirely—ignored their efforts, artists like those who founded CIVA have made their presence known in the institutional church. The theological seminaries of many Christian persuasions have added arts programs to their curricula; provided exhibition space in their facilities; and begun to engage the arts in a variety of ways. In a theological publishing world in which only five or six titles addressed

the arts or aesthetics in the fifty years from 1940 to 1990, the following twelve years have seen one or two books every year with the words “art” or “beauty” coupled with the words “theology,” “God,” or “Christian” in the title—and this is not counting books on liturgy or spirituality and art, of which there are also many.

As far as I can tell from my reading, most of these writers understand that art is concerned with meaning, and that this meaning can somehow lead people into a deeper encounter with God. Unfortunately, however, many of them get misled by the word “aesthetics” into thinking that art is also about beauty, and the discussion of meaning becomes sidetracked. The titles alone—*Toward a Theology of Beauty* (John Navone, 1996); *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (Richard Viladesau, 2000); *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* (Richard Harris, 1993); *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Alejandro Garcia Rivera, 1999)—reveal their belief that artworks, as instances of the beautiful, participate in the beauty of God.

I find myself somewhat bemused by this line of thinking so late in the discussion. More than twenty years ago, Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote in his theological reflection, *Art and Action*,

Popular belief has it that a good work of art is a beautiful one—that, as philosophers put it, a necessary and sufficient condition of a work’s being aesthetically excellent is its being beautiful. . . . A thing’s beauty seems to be an aesthetic merit in it. . . . [in the Western tradition a] beautiful object was taken to be one whose parts fit together consonantly or harmoniously, which has a certain brightness

or brilliance about it, which has a certain integrity or perfection to it, and which is pleasant to contemplate. Certainly this remains vague. But is it then true that the works of Telemann, being more beautiful than those of late Beethoven, are therefore also aesthetically better? . . . Bartok's Fifth Quartet is aesthetically magnificent but not beautiful. Beauty is most emphatically not the necessary and sufficient condition of aesthetic excellence. . . . [A]lthough a concern with beauty lives on in the public generally, it has virtually disappeared from the thought of artists, critics, and aestheticians.

Wolterstorff used examples from music, but the substance of his idea is translatable into any medium.

I have come to think that one of the problems with much of this theological talk about art is a confusion among terms. A lot of what might be called "art theory" among the theologians is disconnected from any given work of art. When art is discussed philosophically, or when the role of art is discussed in a relatively abstract way, the assumption is made that aesthetics is the proper category of that discussion. In the field of aesthetics, beauty is often treated as a theological category, one of the so-called "transcendentals," of which the other two are truth and goodness. These three are seen as attributes of God, and the highest form of beauty is defined as God's own self. Any created thing, therefore, may participate in God's beauty, but can only possess at best a pale reflection of it. And to the extent that artworks are presumed to be aesthetic objects, they are presumed to participate not only in beauty and truth, but also in goodness. That is, if art is both beautiful and truthful, then it must in some way also be good. And, if it is good, then it must be good for us.

The theologians stand in a long tradition of such thought. Since antiquity, writers have often made the assumption that art is supposed to be beautiful. Beautiful art, many have argued, is both good and truthful, by its very nature. And because of its presumed beauty, truth, and goodness, art has often been accorded a status very nearly divine. When, as in the last hundred years or so, it became recognized that some artworks could not be described as beautiful according to any established canon of beauty, one of two things happened. Either the work was declared "not art," on the grounds that it wasn't beautiful; or, the work was recognized as truthful, in some sense, and therefore to be counted as beautiful even when, in more conventional terms, it might be thought of as ugly.

But, as Wolterstorff points out, if art was once about beauty, it hasn't been for a very long time. What happened to art in the last hundred years is that artists in the Modernist and post-Modernist tradition have not generally been concerned with making things beautiful. Rather, they have been concerned primarily with meaning. In the early years of the 20th century, groups of artists issued manifestos in which they wrote much more about what their work should mean than what it should look like. In her Faculty Lecture at Wesley Theological Seminary earlier this month, dancer and theologian Judith Rock suggested that an artwork is a vehicle, or—to use her word—a "contraption" for conveying meaning and for breaking into mystery. While she spoke eloquently and movingly about the relationship between art and theology, "beauty" was not part of her vocabulary that day. Beauty was equally absent from the conversation when I was in art school. I was taught to understand art as visual philosophy—a way of stating in visual terms what I understood about the nature of the world.

Another confusion of terms has to do with the word "aesthetics" itself. Aesthetics is not exactly a matter of beauty, as such, although many think it is. I have several times heard it pointed out that the Greek root of the word "aesthetics" has to do with being able to feel. Its opposite, an "anesthetic" puts us to sleep—it makes us unable to feel anything. Works of aesthetic value are intended to make us feel something, to experience something. That "something" does not necessarily have anything to do with beauty, unless we bend the definition of beauty almost to the breaking point.

If beauty is not the proper category for discerning the aesthetic merit, or "goodness" of a piece of art, what is? For many, the answer is that a good work of art serves the purpose of aesthetic contemplation. This is the "art for art's sake" position—a work of art has no purpose beyond its own existence, and need conveys particular meaning beyond a certain sense of rightness which has been defined as the aesthetic experience. According to this line of thinking, a work may be considered to have great aesthetic merit even, or perhaps especially, when the content is antithetic to the values of the viewer.

As an artist, curator, and sometime theologian, I would argue that art—regardless what some artists may say—is primarily a form of communication. An artwork may be beautiful, truthful, and/or good, but may also be ugly, false, and/or even evil. Despite those who would claim that art is an absolute good regardless of its content, as Christians we cannot, ought not, divorce content from our aesthetic valuations. Art is a language, and, as such, may say many things. Of course, because the very nature of art is to speak non-discursively, one can only say in a somewhat metaphorical way that art has a vocabulary, syntax, or grammar. One cannot

parse artworks in the same way that one can figure out the meaning and structure of an English sentence. Nevertheless, it is in the nature of artworks to be expressive, to convey a feeling, an emotion, an idea, or some combination of these, even if it is not possible to put a name to what that feeling, emotion, or idea might be.

When looked at in this way, the questions "is it art?" and "is this art good or bad?" are easier to answer. When understood as a mode of communication, an artwork may be judged as successful or unsuccessful; truthful or dishonest; shallow or profound. A work may be technically excellent, but convey nothing of interest. Conversely, an artist may have deep, interesting, and truthful insights into the human condition or the nature of the divine, but not possess the technical skill to communicate them to other people. An artwork may be visually beautiful, enticing the eye to linger and explore its details, relationships, forms, and colors, but may be essentially dishonest about the nature of the universe. In this analysis, a great many things may be "art," however deficient they may be to serve as objects for aesthetic contemplation or to break open the mystery of the world. Those that are lacking in one way or another, then, may be called "bad art."

Those who believe that the purpose of art is to break open the mystery, to excite in the viewer a profound, aesthetic experience, may use as examples any number of artists or artistic approaches. Such discussion is equally at home with examples from the High Renaissance, Impressionism and post-Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and late 20th century Conceptualism. In general, however, it tends to ignore, or to dismiss, the popular arts, folk art, or what might be called "functional art." Anything that does not serve the purpose of

breaking open the mystery is treated as either bad art or not-art. However, as Wolterstorff points out, there are many purposes for art, and breaking open the mystery is only one such purpose. He reminds us

There is no purpose which art serves, nor any which it is intended to serve. Art plays and is meant to play an enormous diversity of roles in human life. Works of art are instruments by which we perform such diverse actions as praising our great men and expressing our grief, evoking emotion and communicating knowledge. Works of art are objects of such actions as contemplation for the sake of delight. Works of art are accompaniments for such actions as hoeing cotton and rocking infants. Works of art are background for such actions as eating meals and walking through airports.

Work songs and lullabies may, like works of made for art's sake alone, be judged good or bad. However, the criterion in this case is whether they serve the purpose of helping to get the cotton harvest in or putting the baby to sleep. They may also be beautiful, profound, or even fitting for aesthetic contemplation, but that is probably not most useful criterion by which to judge them. The question to ask in regards to what is sometimes termed "functional art"—as for that art intended for aesthetic contemplation—is, "How well does it do the task for which it is intended?" In the visual realm, there are things that I might, wearing my curator hat, judge as "bad art," art that is deficient in one or more of the ways described earlier, but which does serve important social or religious functions. I find myself wondering what is good about this kind of "bad art," and whether it serves its functions well.

Prayer cards, plaster saints, and a sweetly uplifting rendering of Noah's Ark are certainly not good art according

to Modernist and Post-Modernist standards, but their persistence in religious communities requires a more rigorous examination than a cursory dismissal as bad art or non-art. Where do such things fit in a theological aesthetic of goodness, truth and beauty? How can they serve the purpose of religious contemplation when they are so patently unfit for aesthetic contemplation? And why are so many of us drawn to them, often against our better artistic and theological judgment?

Cultural critics David Morgan and Colleen McDannel are two authors who have examined the function of religious artifacts in the lives of American Christians. In *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, McDannel shows how both Protestants and Roman Catholics invest sacramental meaning in a variety of objects and pictures that, according to the criteria of the secular art world, might be considered bad art or perhaps even non-art. Describing as “domestic shrines” the arrangements of objects in two Farm Service Administration photographs, she writes

In the Protestant home of an Iowan farm family (1936), a collection of family photographs and musical instruments is assembled below a scriptural motto. The biblical injunction . . . is placed next to a young Christ—a detail from Heinrich Hoffman’s *Christ in the Temple*. In the second photograph (1943) an old woman from Peñasco, New Mexico sits underneath a display of family photographs and religious objects. As with the farm family’s shrine, pictures of her ancestors are placed next to that of Christ and the saints. . . . Earthly kin and heavenly kin are brought into intimate association with one another.

Both shrines are informal, eclectic, homemade, and use

repetition to emphasize importance and inclusion. Both shrines speak to the social and cultural aspirations of the family, even through their individual styles differ. Domestic shrines, both Protestant and Catholic, condense the religious and social values of the family. The objects and images are not the flotsam of consumer culture but significant pieces of a meaningful whole.

These domestic shrines are not intended to be art, and McDannel does not claim that they are. However, elements of the shrines are explicitly intended as art and are understood as art by the families whose devotional lives center around them. In a chapter called "Christian Kitsch and the Rhetoric of Bad Taste," McDannel discusses the kind of pictures, statues, and similar art objects that might be found in any Christian book store or bodega, and are often included in domestic shrines. Plaster statuettes of Our Lady of Guadalupe; paintings of children with big, sad eyes; pictures of Jesus with eyes that follow wherever you go; light-up reindeer for Christmas; prayer cards and candles and nature scenes with Christian slogans—all these are dismissed by the more aesthetically sophisticated as, simply, "kitsch." While this term is hard to define, it is almost always used as a pejorative. Kitsch has been called "bad art," "not art," or even "anti-art." It is not original, not profound, generally not even beautiful—although it might be pretty. For those who use this term, it is low-class art, or a substitute for art, or, at best, a poor imitation of the real thing. Paul Tillich writes [The] German word Kitsch [means] a special kind of a beautifying, sentimental naturalism, as it appears in disastrous quantities in ecclesiastical magazines and inside church buildings. The word Kitsch points not to poor art, based on the incompetence of the painter, but on a particular form of deteriorized idealism. . . [or]"beautifying naturalism". . . The necessary fight against

the predominance of such art in the churches during the last hundred years leads me to the frequent use of the word Kitsch . . .

Other writers are even more dismissive of religious kitsch, suggesting that—unlike real art, which is uplifting and inspiring—kitsch leads inevitably to corruption and evil. Kitsch, it would seem, is the embodiment of bad theology. But, perhaps, religious kitsch functions differently than the way that such writers suppose.

In Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images, David Morgan considers the role of Sallman's Head of Christ and other popular images of Jesus in forming religious consciousness. In a section called "Toward an Aesthetic of Popular Religious Art," he suggests that where aesthetic contemplation may be understood as a kind of disinterested appreciation, devotional images are seen by those who contemplate them "as a promise, a restless sign, a harbinger of that which awaits." He continues

Many devout viewers say that Warner Sallman's Head of Christ pictures the man they will behold in paradise, on the other side of death. The man pictured is not Jesus himself, others say, but for now the image will do to remind believers of him, to call to mind his promise of a second coming and life hereafter.

According to Morgan, such images do, in fact, give certain viewers, at least, a sense of being face to face with God. If they do not do so for the sophisticated viewer who prefers a more refined sort of art, it does not follow that they fail to do so for everyone. For many, the familiar images so readily dismissed as religious kitsch serve to strengthen their faith and to remind them of God's enduring love.

If religious kitsch does not serve the purpose of aesthetic contemplation, neither does it serve another function which the secular art world values: that of challenging the observer. For at least the last hundred years, one of the stated objectives of the artistic avant garde is to épater le bourgeoisie, to shock the middle class. When Marcel Duchamp placed an ordinary urinal upside down on a gallery wall in 1919 and titled it Fountain, he began a tradition which is still alive and well in art schools and galleries everywhere. I remember all, too well my art school classmates trying hard to shock the faculty with paintings featuring frankly sexual themes, radical social statements, and violently ugly imagery. The faculty, of course, was unshockable, having done the same kinds of things when they were students.

While many such works are meant to shock simply to be shocking, others, like Picasso's Guernica, are meant to communicate the shock that the artist has first felt in his or her own being, reeling from terrible events in a world filled with hatred, anger, and war. Such works are hard to live with, even when, like Guernica, they are deeply profound statements by an artist in full control of his craft. Such shrill and compelling laments echo those of the biblical prophets, but, despite their truth—or perhaps because of it—they do not often allow us to remember that hope and faith are also part of the truth of the world in which we find ourselves.

What religious kitsch does for many is precisely that—it functions as an icon of hope. Most of us, even the comfortable middle class, know by now that the world is a hard and dangerous place. We don't really need artists to remind us about the awfulness of war or terrorism or oppression when it

is on our televisions and in our newspapers every day. Our popular entertainments, filled with blood and violence and filthy language, are more shocking than any painting or sculpture than I've seen in a very long time. If anyone who goes to museums and galleries is shocked by what they see, it is probably because—despite a century of artists for whom beauty is a non-issue—they still expect art to be beautiful. They want the museum to be a respite from the ugliness of the world around them, and are disappointed when the ugliness follows them inside. What religious kitsch does, then, is offer people the comfort and respite that good, contemporary art often denies them. Ethereal portraits of Jesus or the saints contain visual codes—rays of light, soft colors and shapes, beatific facial expressions—that convey safety, consolation, and the illusion of perfect happiness. Good art is often difficult to understand. It is multivalent, offering not a single, immutable truth, but a variety of interpretations, some of them mutually contradictory even when simultaneously true. Kitsch is easy. It offers simple answers, unambiguously. Sometimes, like this image called *The Absolute Crosses*, it even comes with instructions, just in case we miss the message. Those of us who are trained to look for complexity in our art have learned to disdain the easy answers of works like *The Absolute Crosses*, with its unambiguous message that we must crucify our sinful desires and follow Jesus. But some of us, in our heart of hearts, yearn for the kind of certainty that it represents, even though our restless minds insist on wrestling with hard questions. I know that any number of good, committed, contemporary artists—people who should know better—keep collections of these tokens of Christian devotion. As some of them wrestle with the tension between what they know and their affection for some of the clichés of religious art, they transmute the visual language of kitsch into a different kind of meaning. I'd like to show you some of what I mean.

Robert Peppers is a middle-aged, African American artist who teaches at a university in Ohio. Recently, I heard him tell a story about a colleague who was teaching a summer art course for teenagers at the Penland School of Crafts, in North Carolina. As a way to open conversation with the students, the instructor asked them each to draw their favorite cartoon character. Most of the young people drew such familiar characters as Tweety Bird, Donald Duck, or some superhero. But two boys, both Latino, drew cartoon-like images of Jesus. Peppers was struck by this story, and wondered what it was about the relationship between Hispanic culture and faith that caused these two boys to respond as they did. Some time later, as he himself was working with issues of culture and faith, Peppers made the installation which he calls *The Last Altar Call*. The piece consists of a 3 large, shaped panels on which are painted a huge cloud roiling against a too-blue sky, anchored by a dark, brick wall. The wall merges with another shaped canvas spread out on the floor in front of it like a lake, or a baptismal pool, filled with red flowers and ringed with a dark, gravelly pathway. Unfurling from the center of the brick wall, two rectangular areas seem to float beneath the surface of the painted pool like a pair of red carpets. The V-shaped space between them becomes a pathway that is both water and sky, leading the viewer to an altar table on which rests a carved, wooden pair of hands in the gesture of prayer. Above and behind the hands, framed as if in a surrealist monstrosity, floats a tiny image of the crucified Christ. A skilled illusionist trained in classical painting techniques and thoroughly

educated in the artistic canon of the Christian West, Peppers seamlessly merges paint, low relief, and actual, physical objects, such as a praying hands sculpture that might have been ordered from a religious supply catalog. He says of this piece that he wanted the viewer to feel that Jesus gets smaller and smaller the closer you get. This moment is the last chance at salvation, the last opportunity to approach before everything is consumed into the chaos of creation. And

yet, however close one comes, one cannot grasp the divine. For Peppers, the tiny, crucified Jesus in his painting is analogous to the cartoon-character Jesus of his colleague's young students, a figure both intimately familiar and unutterably remote and unapproachable.

This piece, like much of Peppers' work, is a reflection of the artist's struggle to understand the place of faith in his life. Raised as a church-going Baptist, he began to question Christianity while in college. Like many Americans of his generation, he could not reconcile what he heard in the church with what he saw in the world. Now, in middle age, the questions continue to haunt him. This painting, which incorporates the visual language—and even some of the objects—of the religious kitsch familiar to him from childhood, is one moment in his lifelong conversation with God.

Ginger Geyer is a Texas artist who brings a sense of compassionate irony to the clichés of Christian life. In works like *Zippedy-Do-Dah Bible (II)* (RSVP Edition); *Fighting Fire with Fire*, with its juxtaposed images of the Greek god of fire, Hephaestus, at his smith and Grunewald's image of the risen Christ on opposite sides of a life-sized fire hydrant; and *Faith and Reason Sleeping Together*, which pairs Mantegna's "Agony in the Garden" with Goya's "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," onto an old, rolled-up sleeping bag, she asks us to consider the relationship between objects from ordinary life and copies of famous artworks that may have been challenging in their day, but now serve merely as placeholders called "great art." Not content coming up with titles that are often groan-inducing puns, and poking gentle, affectionate fun at both the simpler faith of her youth and the icons of art history, Geyer takes her artistic high-wire

act a little farther by making these life-size, trompe l'oeil works in the demanding medium of glazed porcelain. Geyer, like Peppers, was trained in classical painting techniques and is steeped in the history of Western art. As can be seen in her work, she has the marvelous knack of being able to see the humor in virtually every situation, while simultaneously seeing the spiritual connections. Thus, she can join a homely, well-used welcome mat with a Coptic image of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and call it *The Welcome Mat is Out*; or place a copy of Giotto's painting of Pentecost, from the Arena Chapel in Padua, inside a house-painter's pan, and call it *Holy Roller*.

On the surface, Geyer's work is not terribly different from a t-shirt with a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or this poster of Jesus promising that "Your mail is in divine hands." The difference, in part, is that she is aware of the humor, in a way that the purveyors of religious kitsch and their customers are not. She keeps an ironic distance, not allowing herself to be seduced by the easy answers and superficial prettiness of so much religious art. By putting icons of Western art—most of them depicting Christian subjects—into unexpected places, she causes us to see them, and our own use of clichés, in new ways.

I began by asking "What is good about bad art?" and find that the further question is "bad or good by what standard?" From the standard of the Modernist and post-Modernist art criticism, religious kitsch is most certainly bad art. Its worst fault is its inherent dishonesty, its distortion of both human and theological complexity into sweet smiles, candy-colored rainbows, and fiftieth-generation replicas of once-original insights. But even for many otherwise sophisticated artists and art lovers, there is a certain allure that is composed partly of memory, partly of yearning, and partly of

the comfort of easy answers that such artwork delivers. Precisely because it is so much a part of so many people's religious and devotional lives, the visual focus of so many people's prayers and dreams, it has acquired in our culture a certain resonance, a certain depth, that it doesn't have when looked at in purely aesthetic terms. The bad art known as religious kitsch is not a substitute for good art, but rather a kind of comfort food for the heavy-hearted. In too great a quantity, or as an exclusive diet, it will probably make us sick. But used judiciously, and in juxtaposition with more demanding and rigorous fare, it can sometimes be a talisman that helps us remember the joy of innocence and of hope restored. That's not so bad, in these troubled times.

References Cited

McDannell, Colleen. 1995. *Material Christianity: Religion and popular culture in America*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Morgan, David. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tillich, Paul. 1987. *On Art and Architecture*. New York: Crossroad.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1980. *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.