

Art Review: 'Rescuing God' installation

Artist's work removes man's interpretations from religious text

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Ms. Aylon's "Self-Portrait: The Unmentionable."

Following the 1960s relaxation of social codes, people found that if they disagreed with something they could just throw it out, whether a political party, spouse or traditional religion.

Helene Aylon has a different approach.

The prominent ecofeminist, now entering her ninth decade, was brought up in an Orthodox Jewish home. There were things about her faith that rubbed her the wrong way, that hurt and that seemed irreconcilable with her emerging feminism.

After considerable thought, Ms. Aylon came to the realization that it was not God's voice that was exclusionary, misogynistic, militaristic -- but man's interpretation over time of that voice.

She saved the religion. But she challenged the patriarchy that she believes sullies it.

The work that both carried out and represents that save -- simultaneously action and metaphor -- is at The Andy Warhol Museum through Sunday, part of a 2011 exhibition

series in which contemporary artists explore texts of the world's great religions. "The Word of God: Helene Aylon's The Liberation of G-d and The Unmentionable," like the artist herself, has soft insistence fueled by a fire within. But the exhibition's more significant achievement is to reacquaint visitors with Ms. Aylon and is best understood within the context of her life's work.

That, the artist said, may be roughly divided into three categories by decade: The 1970s were about the body; the 1980s, the Earth; and the 1990s, God. The "three landscapes of feminist thought" in her work are, correspondingly, "bio-logical, eco-logical and theo-logical."

By the '70s, "it was time to leave New York," Ms. Aylon said, "and I went as far as I could go." She landed in California, teaching at San Francisco State University and discovering nearby Berkeley. "I felt everything was happening there."

She began a series titled "The Breakings" incorporating sacs that when "midwived" by several participants broke in a manner resembling the release of amniotic fluid at birth. What began as feminist commentary on control over women's bodies became a potent symbol that morphed across political issues.

In 1981, numbers of women carried Ms. Aylon's sand-filled sacs in San Francisco in support of Friends of the Earth environmental activism. Later that year, Jewish and Arab women in the Middle East came together to carry stone-filled sacs in peaceful coexistence. Many more joined Ms. Aylon to fill sacs with dirt dug near American S.A.C. (Strategic Air Command) bases, which were delivered to the United Nations in New York.

"Current: two sacs en route," a video, followed sacs filled with seed as they made their way, in 1985, down a Japanese river to the shores of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A decade later, it was screened on the SONY Jumbotron in Times Square.

While in Japan, Ms. Aylon asked A-bomb survivors to write their dreams or nightmares on pillowcases and exchange with her.

"Maybe you'll sleep on my dream and I'll sleep on your dream. Maybe we will dream together," she said during the making of the work, "Post---Script."

In 1990, Ms. Aylon began the multi-year work "The G-D Project." Her goal was to turn a feminist eye on the Torah and associated teachings. Her inspiration was the work she'd completed the previous decade.

"I feel like I rescued the earth from the patriarchy which was just ruining it. That's how I came to the idea of rescuing God."

The most commanding -- some would say controversial -- work of this project is the

installation "The Liberation of G-D," comprising multiple volumes of the Five Books of Moses that form the Torah, the Judaic sacred text.

Ms. Aylon has gone through them, page by page, patiently, exactly, using a pink magic marker to cross out passages that she feels were inserted by a misdirected male hierarchy. The words she questions are vengeful, deceptive, cruel: Do they belong in a holy book?

"Did God say it to Moses, or is it a patriarchal projection?" she asked.

To either side of the altered books, videos record Ms. Aylon's hand guiding the marker, at times in slow rhythm, at times agitatedly. The scratch of the marker, crinkle of parchment, add to the room's sensory surround, a quality evocative of ritual. High overhead, in three small windows, are the letters G and D centered by a glowing pink dash, Ms. Aylon's signature mark. The site-specific "My Eternal Light: The Illuminated Dash" calls to mind the terrestrial celestial properties of stained glass in this chapelesque space originally intended for Andy Warhol's "Last Supper."

Ten digital prints from the 2010 "Self-Portrait: The Unmentionable" series are of Ms. Aylon with text projected upon her face including the holiest name for G-d, so sacred that Observant Jews do not write or pronounce it. The four Hebrew letters of the name, Ms. Aylon said, translate to "past, was; present, is; and future, will be. I realized this is eternity. God is eternity, whatever that is."

There is more to this exhibition, to experience and to consider. To understand it more deeply, one will have to research the artist, and perhaps Judaism.

It is disappointing that we don't see more of Ms. Aylon, and it's to The Warhol's credit that she was included in The Word of God. In this age of diversity and pluralism, she appears to be most supported by Jewish institutions ("The Liberation of G-D" is on loan from The Jewish Museum in New York City). Yet, is not wisdom a universal quest?

Certainly she is worthy of a critical look by a major institution in the form of a retrospective exhibition. Her body of work supports this, as does the promise of discovery from an artist who, speaking of one of her artworks, cryptically declared "I'm seeing myself in the land as a future foremother."

Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. today through Sunday and until 10 p.m. Friday. Admission is \$15, seniors \$9, children/students \$8, Friday 5-10 p.m. half-price. Information: 412-237-8300 or www.warhol.org.

Alex Kuthy auction

An auction of 25 abstract paintings by the late Ohio artist Alex Kuthy will be held