

GOING TO THE DOGS

SMITS RAISES QUESTIONS OF RELIGION'S ROLE IN 21ST CENTURY

"To me, a piece really 'works' if it unlocks something the viewer knew, but only at an unconscious level. And for that, you have to reveal your vulnerabilities. Also to yourself."

Maria Smits, interview with art critic Koos Tuitjer, 2009.

Commentary by
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IN OCTOBER OF 1993, I saw the famous altarpiece by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck at St. Bavon (St. Baaf's) Cathedral in Ghent. In fact, the altarpiece was the reason for my trip to Belgium. "You have a one day visa," I was told at the Benelux' consulate in

Hamburg. "You must leave no later than twenty-four hours after you cross the border." For holders of the red hammer-and-sickled passport the consequences of breaking this law was quite serious: incarceration until the Russian authorities bail you out followed by a humiliating homecoming. I gleefully nodded my acknowledgement of the rules and set off on my journey.

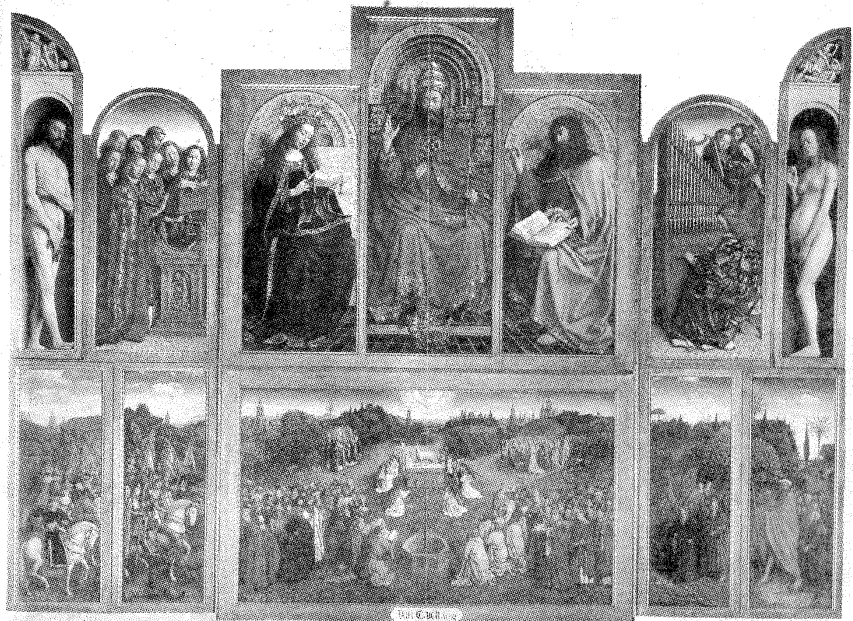
Eight hours after crossing the border I was in St. Bavon's cathedral. I had twenty minutes to take in the breathtaking beauty of the van Eyck brothers' masterpiece. Although the cathedral stays open for the evening mass, the section with van Eyck's altarpiece promptly closes at 5 p.m. to avoid the disruption of the service by art-obsessed tourists. All this journey for twenty minutes of solitary contemplation of one of the greatest art works of all times....

In December of 2008, Dutch artist Maria Smits was contemplating the same beautiful vision. "This magnificent altarpiece overwhelmed me by their [sic] clearness in meaning and form. ... The ideas of heavenly and earthly life in this polyptic altarpiece have become the framework for my own ideas about hierarchy and religion," wrote Smits in her artist statement for the exhibition "Adoration of the Mystic Dog" at Lawndale Art Center in Houston.

I believe that a truly profound response to a work of art can be best expressed in the form of another work of art, be it a painting, a poem or a musical piece. So I was thrilled by the prospect of seeing Maria Smits's interpretation of the fifteenth century art work.

"Adoration of the Mystic Lamb," completed in 1432, was inspired by the passage in the Book of Revelation in which the Lamb is a metaphor for the risen Christ. St. John the Baptist describes countless worshippers who are crying out, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12.) The repeated invocation of Christ as the Lamb of God became part of the Mass since the seventh century.³

The altarpiece's central panel almost literally follows this description. In the middle of the verdant



Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *ADORATION OF THE MYSTIC LAMB*, 1432

meadow, elevated on the altar, is the serene and majestic Lamb. The worshippers, arranged in neat groups and as immobile as the clusters of trees in the distance, gaze in quiet adoration at the blood flowing from the Lamb's neck into the chalice. The scene is surreal and dreamlike.

The thing I remember most about the altarpiece is the shimmering light emanating from the bright colors and dazzling contrasts of red, green and gold. Heaven and earth are united in a harmonious, albeit strictly hierarchical, universe. Each of the characters occupies a specific place. Christ the King, Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist in the upper tier of panels benevolently preside over the earthly realm — worshippers, knights, pilgrims and judges — in the lower tier.

This solemn mood is interrupted by the startling nude images of Adam and Eve on two side panels. Painted almost life-size and with unabashed truthfulness, they look like two naked people ready to step off the panel. To increase this amazing *trompe-l'oeil* effect, Adam's right foot is painted hovering over the edge of the niche. Even a modern viewer, who is no novice to nudity in art, may feel ill at ease looking at Eve's bloated belly or Adam's huge hand covering his genitalia. Imagine how these figures affected the fifteenth-century Flemish who had never seen nude images before and associated nudity irrevocably with sin and eternal damnation!

Lawndale Art Center was quiet on the Saturday afternoon and, like many years earlier in in St. Bavon's, I was again contemplating the altarpiece, this time the one created by a twenty-first-century artist. Maria Smits studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in The

Hague and it was in that city that she had maintained her studio before coming to the United States. Smits and the van Eyck brothers share the same place of origin, the Netherlands, although in time they are separated by almost six hundred years. Bloody social upheavals and a relentless scrutiny of the critical mind shattered the idea of a harmonious hierarchy between heaven and earth. What do we believe in today?

"In 'The Adoration of the Mystic Dog' I question the importance of the role of Christian religion in our contemporary culture, questioning the hierarchy of men and God," says Smits. Her work is built on polarities which she identifies at the beginning of her Statement: dog=god, white=black, shadow=light, night=day.

Unlike the van Eycks's altarpiece, Smits work is black and white. The artist kept the proportions and shape of the original, except for the panels representing Adam and Eve, which are significantly larger. Painted on paper in charcoal and oil bar, the work gives an impression of the images drawn and then erased. This is an altarpiece of shadows, in which the niches once filled with bright and detailed images are now void. It is up to the viewer to provide the vision and the meaning.

Some images, although still maintaining an abstract form, step off the painted surface and become tangible. The central image of Smits's altarpiece is the sculpture of the Madonna made of plastic, rubber, and Styrofoam. Weighing under 0.03 ounces, this fragile figure symbolizes the non-materialistic spirit. It is placed under a

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'How in a world gilt with love May I thank you above this human cadence'

Studio to host open show inspired by poem

THE ART STUDIO, INC. is offering artists an opportunity to participate in a group show in October. Artists are invited to produce a piece inspired by the lines:

**How in a world gilt with love
May I thank you above this human cadence**

This will also be the title of the show.

"For several years we have played with the idea of a group show where all the work is inspired by a common theme or idea," tenant Andy Coughlan said. "The schedule worked such that we could finally do it, with enough lead time for people to produce the work."

Elizabeth French, TASI assistant director, said

the lines are by long-time Studio member George Wentz, a well-known artist and poet, who died last year.

"George submitted poems to the ISSUE consistently since it was first published," French said. "It seemed appropriate to use something he wrote."

Artists are asked to commit to entry by June 1, with the work to be delivered to The Art Studio by Sept. 1. There is no cost to enter the show, but entrants are expected to be members of The Art Studio. Memberships begin at \$35 per year. Memberships should be purchased by June.

"We want the contributors to have plenty of time to really think about what they want to do, how the words resonate with them," French said. "But we

also need to plan ahead so we can work out the space. That's why we are asking for artists to commit in June."

In order to have a consistent theme, 2-dimensional work should not exceed 24x30 inches. Sculptures should not exceed 30 inches in any direction. Limit one piece per person.

"This is really an exciting project," Coughlan said. "Art is such a subjective thing and I expect a really diverse body of work, one that will illustrate the wide variety of styles and interpretations that are possible."

The lines were selected to afford the widest possible interpretations.

For more information, call 409-838-5393.

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glass cover, looking like a saintly relic displayed in a precious reliquary.

This ethereal image is confronted with a gigantic sculpture titled *Dog* which is positioned in the center of the gallery facing the altarpiece. The creature looks more like a mythological chimera, a hybrid that defies identification, than a dog. Although made of the same lightweight materials, it looks heavy and, strangely for an abstract piece, anatomically detailed. One critic compared Smits's sculptures to "anatomical figures which were an essential tool for classical artists and medical practitioners: the figures that exposed the anatomy of muscle beneath the skin."

If *Dog* equals God in Smits's symbolic system, the twenty-first century God must be the god of recycling.

The canine imagery permeates Smits's work. Since God/*Dog* created man in his image, there is no surprise that Adam and Eve are portrayed with canine heads and paws. Their figures loom large on each side of the altarpiece, to emphasize "the importance and influence of humans is our world." The lineage of the various breeds of the dog family tree is superimposed over the paintings of the panels, the circles simultaneously looking like the planets in the solar system.

While *The Altarpiece* acts mostly as a "tabula rasa" waiting to be filled with the viewer's own thoughts, another work in the exhibition titled, "The Adoration of the Mystic Dog," offers an insight into the artist's mind. Comprised of sixty smaller panels and arranged in tiers, it is the artist's vision of the world developed in reference to the van Eyck brothers' harmo-

nious hierarchy portrayed in their 1432 altarpiece. The dichotomy of heaven and earth is still present, although the upper tier panels originally occupied by Christ, Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist are empty. Floating beneath them is planet Earth represented by the continents which are identified only by name. The earthy life is shown as a series of panels containing fragments of barely recognizable objects, such as dog's limbs morphing into the arms of Adam and Eve or an outline of a dead dog. "Going to the Dogs" reads an inscription on one of the panels. "Think" reads another one.

Nothing is fixed and immutable in Smits's interpretation of van Eyck's altarpiece, she engages the viewer in a constant exploration and re-thinking of the medieval masterpiece as well as the world around us. As she expressed in an interview, "My ultimate dream is that my work sparks something off in people—that they recognize something in it. But it's also a way for me to try to grasp the essence of what intrigues me, By making work you discover things you hadn't been aware of."

¹The Benelux is an economic union in Western Europe that comprises three neighboring countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

²Maria Smits, Statement for the exhibition "Adoration of the Mystic Dog," Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Nov. 19, 20010-Jan. 16, 2011.

³Susan Benofy, *Adoremus Bulletin*, Online Edition - Vol. VIII, No. 9: December 2002 - January 2003

⁴The van Eycks' altarpiece is considered to be the earliest example of nudity in Flemish art.

⁵Maria Smits, Statement, "J. Bolten-Rempt, Bare Existence exhibition catalogue, 2009.

⁶Maria Smits, Statement for the exhibition "Adoration of the Mystic Dog," Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Nov. 19, 2010 - Jan. 16, 2011.

⁷Koos Tuijter, interview with Maria Smith in: *Bare Existence*, exhibition catalogue, 2009.



Maria Smits, *THE MYSTIC DOG*, 2010. Polystyrene, foam rubber and plastic binders
Courtesy of the Artist