

Fall 2022

Specimens and Reflections - Introductory Panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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Specimens and Reflections

Photography: Claudia Esslinger, Professor of Art, Kenyon College

Poetry: Royal Rhodes '68, Donald L. Rogan Professor of Religious Studies, Kenyon College (Emeritus)

Walking into the hushed and soaring spaces of Italy's churches stirred surprising emotional responses in me. My memories of previous visits muted in comparison to the sustained opportunities provided by living in Rome for 89 days as director of Kenyon College's Rome program in the fall of 2019. No longer did I feel the urgency of a tourist gathering a limited number of experiences. No longer did the effort expended to reach a destination overshadow the scintillating, airy vaults. I could walk to the Pantheon, I could sit through the resonant music of a Mass. I could return to observe ever more detail.

The intent of the architects, artists and patrons to inspire awe and reverence was always palpable, despite the variety of eras and styles of churches I visited. It was clear that the elevated domes were meant to encourage parishioners to think about a heavenly afterlife, and the vast floor plans provided a communal gathering place on earth. The opulent materials and exquisite detail are evidence of competing ecclesiastical patronage. With over 900 churches in Rome, there were times when I nearly became numb from overstimulation. There were times when I entered a church past a simple façade only to find my own breath catch in awe. There were times where I sat in stillness in a pew, wondering about the journey of my own faith, how it had ebbed and changed.

The panoramas here are jumbled forms that flatten the three-dimensional spaces into puzzles of perception. Rather than combining horizontal segments of a landscape into an expansive whole, these fragments reach in many directions in a three-dimensional interior, causing more distortion than a traditional panorama. The overall shape of the compositions reminds me of natural history specimens where discovered artifacts twist and curl into place. Indeed, these are cultural, historical specimens that reveal detailed curiosities and purpose when examined closely. Together they weave a story of wonder experienced during my extended stay.

~ Claudia Esslinger



Poetry, like all art, presses against borderlines, the too familiar, beauty too neatly packaged. It should reimagine things, take risks, and at its best instill a radical reorientation that makes us co-creators of the world through the word. Poetry is a half-open door, inviting us into an unknown. That is what I found in crafting these poems, about the defamiliarized panoramas of church interiors I thought I knew from my studies in the Classics and Western Christian history.

How do we interpret the weight of meaning presented in multiple visions of the sacred, what moderns might term as the powerful, constructed over millennia? And yet, this vision is embodied in the ordinary. Even the angels and demons that should terrify are depicted as if mirroring our own human bodies. Through language poets have hunted the holy, and tried to domesticate what they think is knowable, but what may never be known, attempting to make visible the invisible. And somehow for me, walking into these often vast spaces, I sensed the mystery of the sacred, outside my grasp. What we are always failing to understand, this mystery rewards with absence, distance, and a greater silence. And yet here is still a presence.

This joint project let me be drawn into these visual compositions that contort, reshape, and realign borders, perspectives, colorization, coffered domes, entablatures, the theatrical undulations of concave and convex walls. I see that incarnated in these poems, some reflecting the shapes of the visual images. I think of my words as light-refracting tesserae that compose mosaics covering an inner world, at once eternally static and endlessly in motion. The content of the poems reflects an underlying questioning, and is an expression of what I call "faithful doubt."

These sites have seen the rise and decline of empires, war, civil strife, fire, plague, the neglect of the poor, the rejection of the "Other," from behind gilded and bejeweled enclosures. But I see there is something deeper here in the generous lives of saints, martyrs, and the servants of humanity, secular and religious, who lived, resisted, and died in service to the world. Theirs is the story of release from the prisons of wealth and power, asking us to look for a way to transform our existence into living fire.

~ Royal W. Rhodes