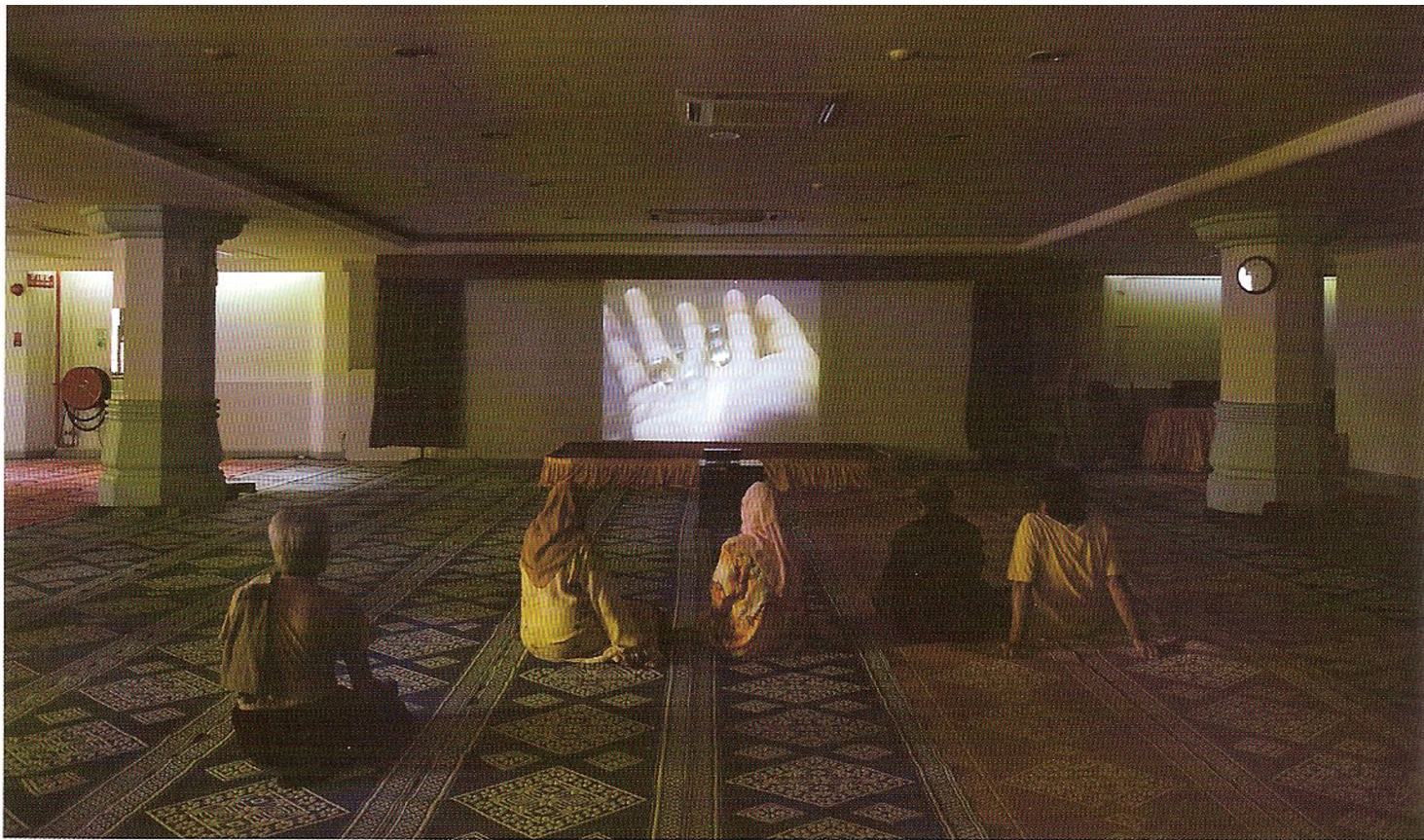


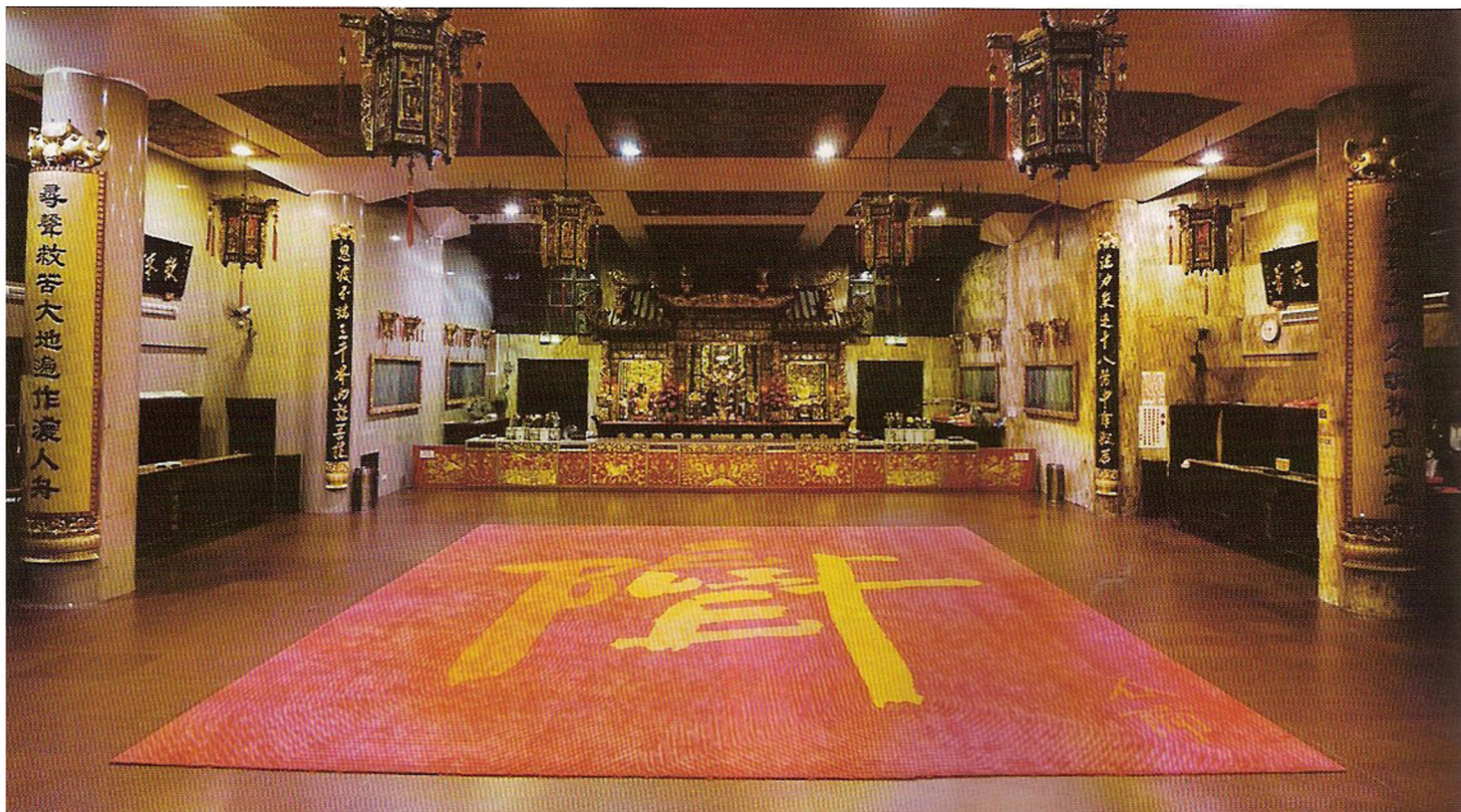
Art in America

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Jennifer Wen Ma: Alms, 2006, single-channel video in Masjid Sultan (Sultan Mosque). Photo Sherman Ong. All photos this article © National Arts Council, Singapore.

Xu Bing: Prayer Carpet, 2006, woven carpet in Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. Photo Ung Ruey Loon.



Temples of Art

A biennial with the theme of “belief” placed artworks in Buddhist and Hindu temples, Catholic churches and a mosque.

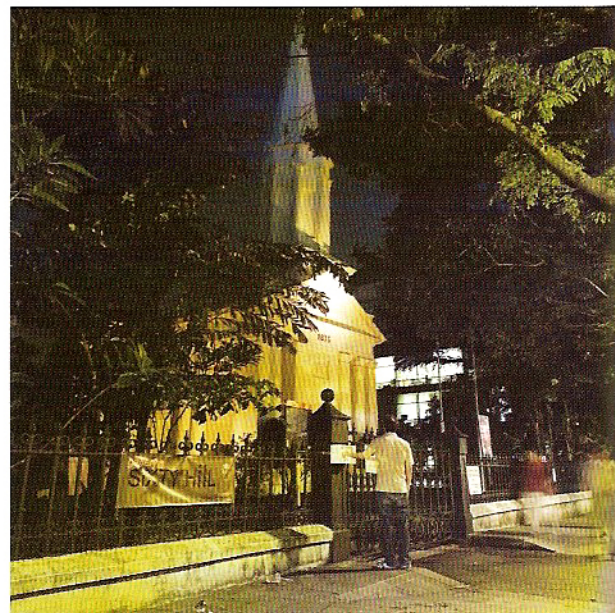
BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Modernism, at least in the version that took root in the West in the postwar era, virtually eliminated religion’s once-powerful role as artistic inspiration. However, recent events, from the so-called clash of civilizations to globalism’s embrace of once-marginalized traditions and cultures, have brought issues of faith and spirituality back into play. Both in the U.S.—where the culture wars began in earnest when opponents of the National Endowment for the Arts raised the specter of the goddess artist as prime exemplar of the decadence of secular culture—and internationally, contemporary art and religion have been circling each other of late. Artists are seeking ways to address religion’s increasingly prominent role in our social and political debates, while religious institutions are trying to come to terms with contemporary culture. “Belief,” as the inaugural Singapore Biennale was titled, addressed these crosscurrents with the incorporation of a set of religious sites as exhibition venues. In them, some of the ways that artists today are attempting to open up a once-proscribed subject were on display.

The notion of bringing contemporary art to church is not exactly new. Similar interventions of art into active houses of worship have been undertaken at places like St. John the Divine and St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery in New York, in various religious sites in Charleston, S.C., during the annual Spoleto festival, and in the Chapelle St. Louis de la Pitié Salpêtrière in Paris.¹ However, given the diversity of religions practiced in Singapore, it was an inspired decision. What became clear is that religious traditions have a variety of relationships to art. The Buddhist and Hindu temples were already so richly endowed with paintings and statuary that additional art seemed almost redundant. In the Catholic churches (oddly, there were no Protestant venues), art was given prominent play without clashing with the more restrained presentation of traditional religious artworks and artifacts. In the mosque and synagogue, iconoclastic traditions demanded an ornamental and abstract approach to contemporary art.

Two Catholic churches were included as venues. The Church of Saints Peter and Paul, the home of Singapore’s Chinese Catholic community, contains some dramatic stained glass windows, but paint peeling from the ceiling suggests that it has seen better days. The placement of the Biennale artworks drew attention to different aspects of the church architecture. Black-and-white photographs by Hiroshi Sugimoto depicting abstracted flames were interspersed between the windows above the pews and were somewhat lost within the cavernous interior. More effective was the work of Spanish artist Cristina Lucas, who located her video, *My Struggle* (2004), in an adjacent meeting room where congregants gather at tables and chairs. The video, placed between two wooden statues, recalled Christian Jankowski’s 2001 video *The Holy Artwork* (not included in the Biennale). Lucas presents an actor portraying an itinerant preacher on the streets of New York, who entertains the mostly indifferent passersby with a passionate sermon extolling the practice of art as an act of faith. His message about art’s spiritual dimensions seems alien to most contemporary practice.

Indian sculptor Alwar Balasubramaniam’s contribution was set outside the entrance to the Adoration room, a small off-building devoted to worship of the Eucharist. Though it contained no commissioned art, the interior of this building provided one of the most moving demonstrations of genuine faith to be encountered in the Biennale.



Ashok Sukumaran: *Everything Is Contestable*, 2006, electrical installation at the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator. Photo Ung Ruey Loon.

Cut off from both the bustle of the street and the carnival atmosphere of the exhibition proper, this pristine chapel provided a sacred space in which worshipers knelt and extended their hands as if frozen in a state of suspended animation before an elaborate gilded tabernacle containing the Eucharistic host. Balasubramaniam’s *Emerging Angels* consisted of two white cubes set on a pair of plinths flanking the door. Composed of what was described as “evaporating compound,” they were meant to slowly reveal the forms of angels sculpted by the artist, something not yet evident on opening weekend.

The other Catholic venue, St. Joseph’s Church, is more elaborate and better maintained, full of polychrome statues in niches and a dramatic display of stained glass. This building is an early 20th-century replacement of the first Catholic church in Singapore. Here two related works were installed. In the church vestibule, Korean artist Shim Il Kim placed one of his “pressed line video drawings,” in which a video image of hands being washed has been transposed into a highly abstracted pattern of moving lines. Hands reappear in Jennifer Wen Ma’s *Alms*. Set in the nave, it is a looped video, projected on a screen, of an outstretched hand that opens to reveal a group of marbles. With each opening of the hand, the marbles mysteriously multiply and then just as mysteriously diminish until the hand is empty.



Partial view of Alwar Balasubramaniam’s *Emerging Angels*, 2006, two “evaporating compound” cubes installed at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul.

Recent events, from the “clash of civilizations” to globalism’s embrace of once-marginalized traditions and cultures, have brought missing issues of faith and spirituality into play.

A swirling camera holds the hand steady in the center of the screen as the backgrounds change, offering glimpses of sky, interiors and city streets. Accompanying the video is an audio track reproducing vocal and instrumental sounds from Judaism, Catholicism and Islam. This work appeared as well in the mosque and synagogue with subtle remixes of the sound track to make it site-specific, and it thus underscored the exhibition’s message of ecumenism.

The most exotic venues, at least for Western viewers, were the Sri Krishnan Temple, which is Hindu, and the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, dedicated to the worship of the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Guanyin. These two buildings are located side by side.

Inside the Sri Krishnan Temple, an elaborate array of painted statues narrates the life of Krishna with an embrace of color and detail that leaves no room for esthetic competition. In this case, the contemporary artwork was situated outside the temple proper. Yayoi Kusama’s *Ladder to Heaven* appeared in the temple tower in a black-painted room reachable by an elevator. This was perhaps the most breathtaking work in the entire Biennale. Kusama placed round mirrors on the ceiling and floor of the room, linked by a neon ladder in constantly changing colors that becomes an infinite chain, linking heaven and earth. (The piece was shown recently at Robert Miller Gallery in New York.)



Tsai Charwei: Lotus Mantra, 2006, mixed-medium installation at Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple.



Federico Herrero: Painting, 2006, wall painting installation at Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple.

From the window of this room one looked down on the main roof of the temple, which had been painted by Indian artist N.S. Harsha with *Cosmic Orphans*, a mural of stylized sleeping figures of various Hindu castes lying peacefully on the roof under the watchful eyes of the polychrome deities affixed to the tower above.

The Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple resembles an open market as much as it does a house of worship, as people purchase joss paper and offerings, arrange food before the altar and gather on a carpet to shake fortune sticks and pray. The architecture is as busy as the worshippers, full of writhing figures and fantastical creatures painted in garish colors. The Biennale’s art pieces were chosen to mesh with this setting. Federico Herrero was allowed to paint colorful abstract patterns on the tiled columns outside the temple, echoing the vivid colors and exuberant atmosphere within. Taiwanese artist Tsai Charwei inscribed an entire Buddhist sutra in tiny Chinese characters on the broad leaves of a lotus plant set between Herrero’s columns.

To the side of the temple, a jittery video by Hiroshi Sugimoto showed a portion of 1,001 sculptures of the Bodhisattva Kannon in a 13th-century Buddhist temple in Japan. A fourth work, by Xu Bing, was also



N.S. Harsha: Cosmic Orphans, 2006, painting installation at Sri Krishnan Temple.

slated for the interior but was not in place at the time of the opening. Xu had designed a replacement for the plain red carpet on which worshippers kneel. His carpet was inscribed with a Buddhist sutra rendered in his invented “New English Calligraphy,” which spells out words in English arranged so that they resemble Chinese ideograms. However, when presented with the carpet, the congregation refused to step on the sacred words. Xu created another carpet with the word “belief” in the same New English Calligraphy, which was installed later.

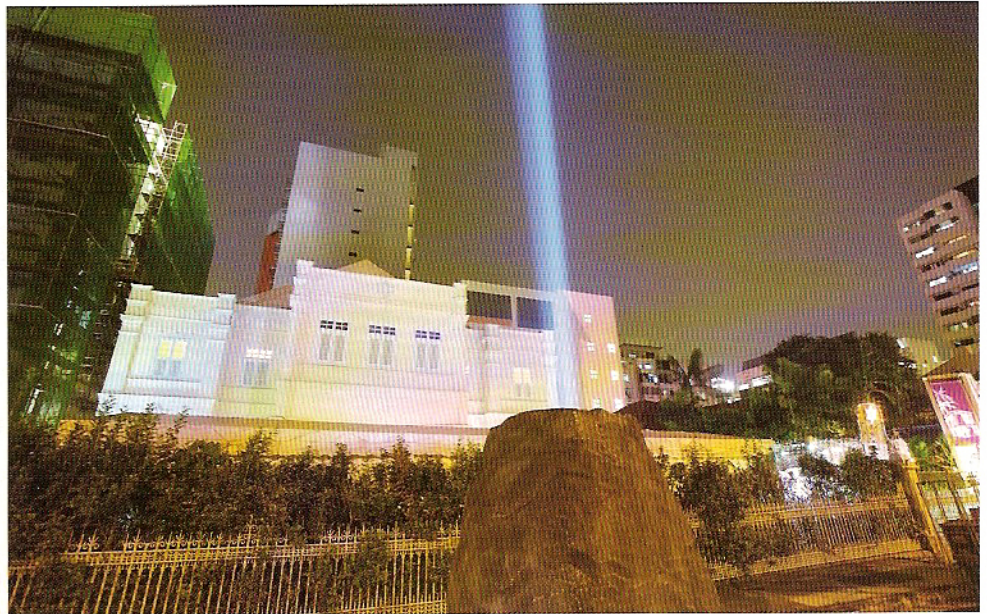
Not too far away is the Masjid Sultan (Sultan Mosque), which was created for the British-installed Sultan of Singapore in the early 19th century. The mosque’s architecture includes onion-shaped domes and minarets adapted from the Taj Mahal as well as Moorish and Turkish models. While the mosque itself was off limits to the exhibition, Biennale artworks were installed in a rather stark annex, whose roof offers a view of the main building’s spectacular roofline. Abstract works here included a somewhat unsatisfying geometric drawing based on a mathematical system of triangles by Ebtisam Abdul Asis from Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and another of Jennifer Wen Ma’s *Alms* video.

The best interventions at the mosque were by Pakistani artist Imran Quershi, who nestled within an interior stairwell a video of a pool filled with stones and reflecting the mosque’s star-and-crescent emblem. On the roof, he painted a delicate filigree leaf pattern apparently spilling out of the drainpipes, offering a poetic melding of ornament and architecture, along with tondos of the same pattern on the surface of the flat roof, which could be walked on.

Facing these religious-site works, one often had the sense that their real purpose was to underscore the varieties of spiritual belief by luring visitors into venues they might otherwise not experience.

The Biennale also included a couple of light works at religious sites that were visible only at certain hours of the night. A searchlight by Jaume Plensa embedded in a large stone in front of the Maghain Aboth Synagogue emitted a nocturnal column of light, and a random light show programmed by Ashok Sukumaran periodically flooded the exterior of the Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator.

Encountering these religious-site works, one often had the sense that their real purpose was to underscore the varieties of spiritual belief by luring visitors into venues they might otherwise not experience. The works themselves varied in effectiveness, in part, one suspects, because curators and participants were treading lightly so as not to offend congregants of these various religious institutions. This holding back, and



Jaume Plensa: Even Shetia (Foundation Stone), 2006, stone sculpture and searchlight, at Maghain Aboth Synagogue. Photo Darren Soh.

the carnivalesque atmosphere attaching itself to the international biennial format in general, suggest that, while art festivals of this sort are hardly the ideal setting for a thoughtful consideration of serious subjects, exceptional artists may still use them to raise issues that deserve attention. □

1. This was also a feature of a traveling exhibition titled "Thresholds," which I curated in 2003 for the South Carolina Arts Commission and whose opening presentation in Charleston included artworks placed in seven churches, one synagogue and two funeral homes.

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