John Shorb

Lynn Aldrich might begin with garden hoses. Or she might start with a series of downspouts. Or she might take hundreds of sponges and make them into giant cloud-like sculptures. Aldrich takes the materials of our everyday lives and makes them into sculptures and wall constructions. She has shown work in numerous galleries and museums and is represented by Edward Cella in Los Angeles. In 2013, the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena held a 20-year survey exhibition titled “Lynn Aldrich: Un/Common Objects,” and the following year, she received the Guggenheim Fellowship in Creative Arts. Aldrich works out of a 1950s house at the foot of a hill in southern California, just outside of Los Angeles. I visited her studio to talk with her about her artwork and her engagement with contemporary art and religion.

How does faith come into your practice as an artist?

When I went to grad school, I knew that my work was coming out of a deep place of faith. I was in my 30s, and I was ready to grapple with the nihilism and the materialism of our culture. And sure enough, it soon came up that there’s no longer any transcendence, and there were a lot of other doors that were considered closed—you don’t go there because it’s not going to be anything of interest for today’s art audience. But this turned out to be a great grad program for me. I was continually struggling with where my faith might enter the work. I think that’s a good place to be. I don’t think we should make it any easier on ourselves—we should just jump in and expect that challenge. I want to engage what’s out there—this is the time and place in which I live. So I don’t set out to have Christian content but I set out to be grounded in my worldview as a Christian. In addition, my art is informed by many other strong interests, including one in Western art history.

I want to look out at the world and engage with the reality of what exists. I think that includes aspects of theology—a parallel, transcendent, yet also real, universe, the Incarnation, the worth of human consciousness, the purpose of history. The extravagance of creation is called natural theology, I think—that all of nature is a text revealing God. I tend to think of art as a job. It’s something that I work at and strive to do well, but it helps me just to think of it as an occupation that I happen to be trained in and that human beings have done in every age. I try not to romanticize it.

Yes, there’s the notion that everything the artist touches might have value, or that the artist acts out of a higher plane.

Definitely, there can be this aura around the artist. It’s connected to ideas about the Bohemian, someone who breaks social taboos, who lives outside the norm. And Conceptualism was a response to that—those artists wanted to bring art back down to earth after pure abstraction and introspective expressionism. That’s one reason why I like Robert Smithson a lot. I love “Monuments of Passaic” where Smithson goes out and declares the various rusty industrial ruins along the river as today’s grand monuments.

You use the word “hyperdesire” in your artist statement, calling it “a paradox at the core of religion and art practice.” What is hyperdesire?

Hyperdesire is a longing that reaches past every other longing—absolutely nothing will satisfy it but God, himself. All desire drives us forward—we would be lost without it. But, hyperdesire causes us to form religions and to make art. Religion is a word that is out of favor today—it helps to recall that it originates from the same root that gives us the word ligament. Religion was not meant to be doctrine so much as a tie back to God, a cord of connection. I come from a literary background—I love words and text and the kind of thinking that you can explore through language. I’m indebted to C.S. Lewis for my conceptual framework for desire. Why create works of art? There’s something that is longed for, a desire that reaches for fulfillment, even if the artist cannot or will...
not name it as such. I love artists—the curious, the wounded, the weird. They're longing for something insightful or amazing to come out of their production that's going to touch a viewer with meaning beyond the material of the art itself. Even today with all the discussion of career, success, and fame or for what art can give you in terms of status, there's still the kernel in there of a longing for something that is spiritually and soulfully satisfying. I think that's also why people are so attracted to museums these days—they feel the itch of that longing.

You use materials found in our daily lives, especially more suburban lives, such as garden hoses and gutters, and you alter them to create an elevated sense of the material itself and the forms. You seem to both celebrate and critique our culture of consumerism and the functions of the objects you use. What draws you to these materials?

I want to begin with what is ordinary, marginal or ubiquitous, and see if through slight manipulation or accumulation or re-presentation in a different context, a kind of revelation will occur. Over time, I've used a wide range of materials, but really I'm very selective about which ones have the potential to remain obvious while naturally bearing transcendent metaphor. You could say that is inspired by the concept of the Incarnation.

Also, everything I make tends to be related to phenomena in the natural world—flora and fauna, light and water, the experience of nature and the wonder of the created cosmos. But I want to reference this through what is artificial, the overwhelming production of stuff we humans produce that is crowding out the wildness of our world. And I know that while I am critiquing this situation, I am immersed in its conflicts—this is my time to be alive on the planet. I know that the Christ I follow cares very much about social issues and justice. However, I spend my time making work that ends up primarily in the hands of the 1%. As an artist, you're more often than not creating luxury goods for the upper class. At least, art will usually be cared for by those who have the leisure to seek it out and think about it. A huge dilemma, always in the back of my mind.

But Jesus also hung out with wealthy people, went to dinner parties, supplied the best wine at lavish weddings. He was at ease around every class of people and recognized that you could have riches but still experience poverty of the spirit.

Yet some of your work ends up in public . . .

Yes, of course there are works out in the public such as the art I did at a Metro Station in Los Angeles or the fountain I made at a shopping center. In this case, I explored the plaza in Pasadena where they invited me to make a work. It turned out this was the location of the Salvation Army at the turn of the century—a bronze plaque described the history. So I decided to make a fountain based on the wonderful old hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” which I imagined the Salvation Army band playing at the site. Actually, this public art received a favorable review in the LA Times where the writer went to the trouble to look up the lyrics and put them in his review.

And then in “Pools and Windows for the City of God” you use gold leaf.

Yes, that piece began with cutting out pages from a big coffee table book of designs for swimming pools in southern California. I used gold leaf paint to cover everything that wasn’t a swimming pool or a window, so each page sort of invented itself as an abstraction if I followed my rule. Then I arranged them into a grid of water and light forms. I used gold leaf again on Audubon’s book, the Birds of America where I covered everything in his prints except the birds’ wings. Kind of like illuminated manuscript painting in reverse.

When I look at your work, I see a kind of commentary on our environmental situation.

There’s definitely an ecological concern in the work. Sometimes the environmental urgency comes through more obviously like in the coral reef pieces, which are made out of cleaning implements. I’m trying to say, let’s clean up our oceans! These pieces also celebrate the microcosm that is a coral reef, God’s amazing extravagance, the gift of biodiversity. I want to bring an appreciation of that into my work. Also, there are quite a few pieces that connect to fresh water, which we now regard as an endangered resource. However, these works began with the contemplation of the biblical statements that regard Christ as the Water of Life. That is an incredibly simple yet complex and layered metaphor.
As a sculptor, I deal directly with physicality—volume, weight, real presence in real time and space. I’m aware of how a given material resists when I’m trying to control and shape it. Materials seem to have their own will and energy! Again, Incarnation is what releases this physicality from its willfulness and mortality. Christian faith puts forth a unique hope that not just souls, but creation itself will one day be redeemed. As Flannery O’Connor has said—this is our “respect for mystery.”

Meanwhile, back in our contemporary life, I feel like we must use our God given abilities as good stewards of all we have received. Our situation must be thought through. We live in a culture that’s full of options, full of choices and products and consumer goods. It’s that kind of overwhelming amount of stuff and technology, which at times seems to just magically appear, that has replaced the “bounty of nature.” Walk down the halls of Home Depot—you’re walking around with an avalanche of choices and products and consumer goods. It’s that kind of overwhelming amount of stuff and technology, which at times seems to just magically appear, that has replaced the “bounty of nature.”

So I make art, longing to bring a gift to the world, yet knowing that my art form pretty much adds additional stuff to the pile, a paradox I finally accepted after reading Hans Rookmaaker’s Art Needs No Justification. I am both a product of and a participant in the 21st-century, so my art will be involved with its realities. Good art does not offer didactic solutions, but rather helps increase our powers of observation and imagination, which can eventually lead us toward practical problem solving. And also toward faith in the transcendent purposes of a loving and good God, the highest Being ever conceived of.

I
n Art as Spiritual Perception: Essays in Honor of E. John Walford, editor James Romaine has assembled a range of essays that explore Walford’s conviction that art is “a consummation of a process of perception by which invisible and inherent content is made manifest” (23). A foreword by Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaker gives a short intellectual biography, and the introduction by Romaine describes Walford’s “content-oriented” method in art history. Chapter 1, by Linda Munkland Fuchs, uses Walford’s interest in relief carving as the jumping-off point for an examination of Bassus’s sarcophagus, which is an exceptionally elaborate piece of fourth-century Christian funerary art. Chapter 2, by Rachel Hostetter Smith, argues that the full significance of Chartres Cathedral “can only be grasped from the vantage point of belief that interprets experience as a means of spiritual transformation” (72). Chapter 3, by Matthew Sweet Vanderpoel, claims that the illustration Januarya by the Limbourg brothers subtly portrays a view of the place of nobility in society, and in so doing conveys an understanding of how God has ordered the world. In Chapter 4, Matthew Milliner draws from the Brancaccio Chapel in Florence to challenge art history to continue in a direction of “religiously enriched scholarship” (106). In chapter 5, Henry Luttikhuizen uses Walford’s conviction that “a painted landscape . . . is never a pure copy of nature and therefore can never be rendered value free” (109) to argue that such art conveys ubiquitous signs of divine providence and even the “presence of a gracious God” (120). Chapter 6, by William Dymeness, examines the ways in which the viewer of Holbein’s work can perceive the “spiritual content” of art, which was one of Walford’s chief concerns. In chapter 7, Rachel-Anne Johnson aims for “the reconciliation of the secular and spiritual understandings of ‘Hunters in the Snow’” by examining the way in which the painting would have been received by its local audience. Chapter 8, by Jan Laurens Siesling, claims that Suermondt’s Odalphe exemplifies a “spiritual patriotism reflective of the age,” in which iconoclastic concerns met with the need for a visual element of faith. In chapter 9, Calvin Beerndt analyzes Walford’s Great Themes in Art to assess Watteau’s work. The next chapter, by Kai Magnusen, explores Friederich’s then-novel emphasis on “common landscape features in a work of art specifically intended for a religious purpose” (186). Magnusen claims that such an emphasis conveys “that not only does the created world reflect the glory of God, but the natural world can be used to convey profound religious truths” (191). In chapter 11, Anne Roberts argues that Constable’s 1828 painting represents a turning point in the history of English landscape painting, going so far as to say that Constable “almost single-handedly revolutionized English ideas on what constitutes a beautiful landscape” (205). In Chapter 12, editor James Romaine argues that van Gogh’s Sower exhibits motifs that reveal the artist’s view of his own work, and he even claims “if any painting might be called a portrait of Vincent’s conception of a Christ-imitating artist, Sower with Setting Sun visually manifests the artistic endeavor as a creative act of faith” (222). In chapter 13, Graham Birtwistle examines Walford’s treatment of Mondrian’s painting, especially Walford’s view that Pheasants-Apple Tree represents a key stage in the evolution of Mondrian’s art toward more abstract works. In chapter 14, Linda Stratford, uses hermeneutical principles advanced in Walford’s Great Themes in Art to argue that Pollack’s Autumn Rhythm “may be seen as an allegorical representation of spiritual rebirth, and indeed, resurrection” (239). In chapter 15, James Watkins, explores disputes in the academic reception of Beuys’s performance art. An afterword by Joel Sheesley offers a portrait of Walford’s career as a professor of art history at Wheaton College. The volume is beautifully illustrated with sixteen color plates. Romaine’s efforts will be valuable to those wish to understand better the scholarship” (106). In chapter 5, Henry Luttikhuizen uses Walford’s conviction that “a painted landscape ... is never a pure copy of nature and therefore can never be rendered value free” (109) to argue that such art conveys ubiquitous signs of divine providence and even the “presence of a gracious God” (120). 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