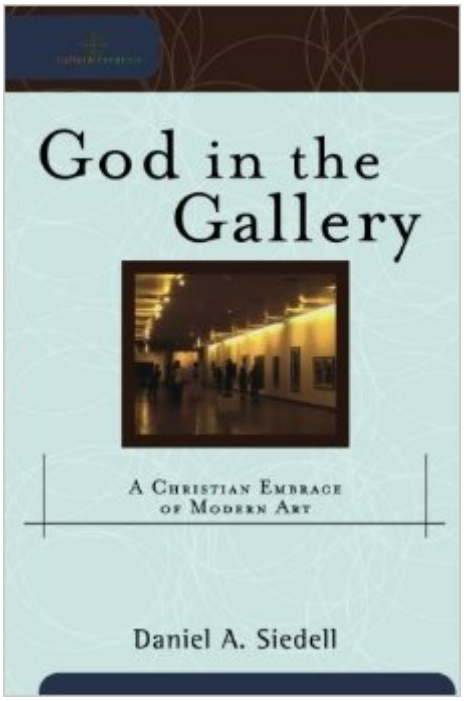
God In The Gallery: A Christian Embrace Of Modern Art (Cultural Exegesis)



Synopsis

Is contemporary art a friend or foe of Christianity? Art historian, critic, and curator Daniel Siedell, addresses this question and presents a framework for interpreting art from a Christian worldview in God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art. As such, it is an excellent companion to Francis Schaeffer’s classic Art and the Bible. Divided into three parts"Theology," "History," and "Practice"God in the Gallery demonstrates that art is in conversation with and not opposed to the Christian faith. In addition, this book is beautifully enhanced with images from such artists as Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Enrique MartÃnez Celaya, and others. Readers of this book will include professors, students, artists, and anyone interested in Christianity and culture.

Book Information

Series: Cultural Exegesis

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Baker Academic (October 1, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801031842

ISBN-13: 978-0801031847

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.5 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #257,028 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #124 inÂ Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Religious #384 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Sociology #1913 inÂ Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > History

Customer Reviews

(This review first appeared at firstthings.com)In a recent book assessing the state of evangelical scholarship, Mark Noll refers to "a boomlet in evangelical art history [that] rests squarely on the work of the Dutch Reformed scholar Hans Rookmaaker." Had Noll seen Daniel Siedell’s book God in the Gallery, he might have thought differently. Siedell is a long way from Rookmaaker, and his book--whether or not it can be called evangelical--is no boomlet. God in the Gallery is an impressive detonation in and of itself.The Christianity-and-art conversation is gridlocked. The stalled traffic includes those who are profoundly suspicious of the art world, and those who are infuriated enough by this unforgivably "conservative" suspicion that they, in turn, write contemporary artists a

theological blank check. A book capable of broaching this impasse has long needed to be written--but who would have suspected it would be this good? What makes God in the Gallery noteworthy is that it addresses another gridlock as well, that of contemporary art. The traffic in this case involves those liberated by the end of modernity to explore spiritual directions, and those committed to keeping art a staunchly secular enterprise. "The art world," insists Siedell, "is growing increasingly uncomfortable with its collective unbelief."Siedell's qualifications enable him to address both these dilemmas. He is a firmly ecclesial Lutheran with deep--one might say overriding--sympathies for the Orthodox Church. In addition, Siedell holds a Ph.D. in contemporary art (he studied with noted critic Donald Kuspit), and he is a seasoned curator with a decade of gallery experience.Simply put, God in the Gallery succeeds by dividing, that is, by clearly distinguishing the sanctuary from the salon. The author has no interest in churches aping galleries or galleries playing church. But what keeps Siedell from merely erecting a Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and gallery is his unflinching insistence that the church's aesthetic framework, grounded in the ecumenical warrant for icons, is strong enough to inform, shape, and underwrite the practice of contemporary art. "The church's aesthetics and poetics . . . is the ground of all aesthetics and poetics." And the direction of influence "goes from the church outward toward culture, not from culture to a passive, inert, irrelevant church."To buttress his argument, Siedell quotes Christoph Cardinal SchÃ¶nborn: "A Church that in her liturgy, in her very life, draws vitality from the sense of awe in facing the mystery, will provide breathing space for any art whose primary purpose is not a breathless pursuit of outward success." In order for this vision to be realized, however, "Protestant approaches are simply not expansive enough" for Siedell. Only "the `economy' of the icon can provide an important foundation on which to rethink modern and contemporary art." Byzantine insights from the eighth century are marshaled to fortify the twenty-first.All these are serious claims, and Siedell has done the work necessary to back up them up. The book offers a brief survey of modern art, an introduction to the condition of and key players in contemporary art, a summary of the academic-populist divide in art criticism, a diagnosis of the Christianity-and-art conversation, and a primer on recent theological trends. Though of course one book can't do all these completely, this one does them all surprisingly well.Most interesting in my view is Siedell's ambitious attempt to solve a major crisis in the discipline of art history--the status of the term art. For Siedell, the development of art as a Western concept is something we should accept. "Not all products of modernity are theologically and spiritually suspect." But, while Siedell accepts art's institutional reality, he does not accept the narrow range of activities the term art currently represents.Instead, Siedell borrows from the philosopher Paul Crowther and suggests defining art

as "common (universal) human practice of making and experiencing" whose primary goal, Siedell adds, is to "seek communion with God." The most effective example of this has been the Byzantine icon. "Nicene Christianity does not merely tolerate images in the church. It requires them." While it certainly needs to be developed further, Siedell has suggested a Copernican revolution in the artistic solar system that makes the Christian icon the governing sun. Christianity, therefore, "in all its myriad cultural and material manifestations is never absent from the modern artist."Siedell even manages to pull recent, stranger trends of contemporary art into this iconic orbit. In the shift from modern to postmodern art, Siedell sees a "transcendence in transition" from "modernity's disembodied purity to one that is sought in and through embodiment, tradition, cultural practice, and the material world." This resonates with, without being equivalent to, the Christian sacramental tradition. High is the pile of sophisticated recent books on theological aesthetics. God in the Gallery might enable such labor to actually reach where it is needed most--plunging from the ethereal heights of the seminaries deep into the streets (even the gutters) of contemporary art.The modern artist Mark Rothko (1903-1970) provides an example of how Siedell's vision plays out. Initially, the mystical ambition of Rothko's large, figureless fields of paint might be considered direct competition to Christian faith--vying for the very transcendence that religion has already achieved. Siedell neither gives in to this suspicion, nor does he offer unqualified endorsement. Instead, he secures a complex middle ground: Mark Rothko's brooding paintings "function ambivalently as icons; or rather, the content of their iconicity is underdetermined. But this does not mean that they do not participate in some way in the reality of the icon."Not all of Siedell's interpretations, however, are as successful as his take on Rothko. Siedell is uncritical of Janine Antoni's Gnaw, where the sculptor chews on massive cubes of chocolate and lard. This is similar, Antonini says, to "receiving the host from the priest in the old-fashioned way." In defense of the sculptor, Siedell claims that the complex relationship between tasting and seeing "can be expressed outside the divine liturgy only through the aesthetic complexities of art." (What about restaurants?) Siedell is celebratory of German artist Wolfgang Laib, who considers the attempt to create beauty a futile pursuit. He sees Robert Gober's headless Christ installation as an attempt for an alienated Catholic to create an alternative "sacred space." Another artist writes directly on his work that his piece is in fact a meaningless failure. While Siedell suggest we look deeper, some might wish to take the artist at his word. At some points Siedell's interpretations were convincing, at others, readers might share my sentiment: "I believe, help my unbelief." Nevertheless, Siedell "does not claim to offer the Christian explanation of these works of art," and he does not suggest--as have some--that they infiltrate the liturgy. Siedell errs on the side of charity because he aims to prompt the skeptic to take another look, and to critique the

way Siedell carries out his vision is not to dismiss the vision itself.Still, at times Siedell is burdened by unhelpful terminology pulled straight from the paradigms he has done so much to overcome. He refers to the "neoconservative captivity" of art criticism, and is sharply critical of New Criterion editor Hilton Kramer's conservative political agenda. Indeed, politics can affect art and art criticism for the worse. But Siedell breathes not a word of criticism for the leftist agenda that--it takes willful effort not to see--has overtaken so much contemporary art and art criticism. Because it is this agenda that Kramer is attempting to counter, one would have at least hoped for "a pox on both your houses" from Siedell. (His reference, albeit in a footnote, to "Christian anarchism" without critical distance is unsettling). Like it or not, a healthy art world may depend on a stable free world. There is a reason that Enrique MartÃnez Celaya, the Cuban-born artist whom Siedell lionizes, is flourishing here and not in, say, Cuba.It is tempting to suggest that Siedell expends so much charity to the art world that he has little left for his Christian colleagues. Though he is never belittling or rude, Siedell hits his co-religionists hard. Gregory Wolfe, editor of the religion and art journal Image, is criticized for not differentiating clearly enough between the institutional framework of the church and the world of art. Cutting edge innovation does not belong in the liturgy, where recognition by the faithful is essential. On the other hand, Siedell is frustrated with those who have tried to establish an alternative, Christian art world through a network of Christian college art departments and organizations. Siedell berates what we might call this Hauerwasian model of Christian art enclaves. He prefers instead what could fairly be called a more Neuhausian engagement of Christians in art's public square.The model for Siedell's art criticism is no one less than the apostle Paul at Athens (Acts 17). Art can function as an "altar to an unknown God," and the Christian art critic can say, with Paul, "that which you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). There is indeed a remarkable parallel between first-century Athenian pagans and the twenty-first-century art world, and Siedell could have perhaps taken it further. Both Athenians and art enthusiasts, for example, "spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). But there is also, of course, a great divide between then and now. The Athenians knew nothing of Christianity. Contemporary artists do, and remind us of that fact by intentionally mixing Christian imagery, often with deliberate offense, into their work. The point is important because Paul makes much of it. "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Siedell might avoid this criticism by suggesting that the contemporary artists' alienation from traditional Christianity by either injury or ignorance functions as a second naivetÃ©.But Paul's vision goes further. The altar to an unknown God was not the only altar in Athens. In fact, we read that this was only one in a city packed with idols which "greatly distressed" the apostle (Acts 17:16).

Engagement with contemporary art sometimes leads to this conclusion, which is equally Pauline. Noting that art has failed as a rival religion does not necessarily indicate "neoconservative captivity" (and if it does, then count Nietzsche a neocon). Is it necessarily philistine to point out the unfortunate condition of contemporary art? Take for example, the abortion art catastrophe at Yale, or Banks Violette's recent show at the Whitney that meditates on Satanic ritual murders, or Damian Hirst's sadistic stations of the cross. Sadly, there is only more evidence today to support the reformed art historian Hans Rookmaaker's 1970 thesis, "Modern Art and the Death of a Culture." (A thesis, it is important to note, that Rookmaker complemented with daringly positive reviews of countless avant-garde exhibitions as well.)Still, as Siedell explains, the art world is extremely complex, and wholesale dismissals are entirely unwarranted. Many of the artists Siedell has worked with are also frustrated with the art world, and Siedell's iconic vision is a needed strategy for that world's renewal. Christians who consider contemporary art an unpleasant mystery will find this book an effective primer to genuine engagement. God in the Gallery infuses the Protestant art historical tradition with the broader insights of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and it appropriately segregates liturgical and contemporary art, with the former underwriting the latter. "The church is not a religious sphere separated from the realities of the world but reveals the world's true meaning and significance." Siedell's vision of contemporary art inspired by the Christian icon is a compelling one. At least for now, it is a reality in Orthodox cultures much more than our own.

As the name suggests, SiedellÃ¢Â Â™s focus is visual art in general, and modern art in particular. This is a helpful book for those who have trouble understanding modern art, and especially for those who wonder if there is any point in a Christian engaging modern art. Siedell is knowledgeable (he has worked as a curator) and gracious. This book is part of BakerÃ¢Â Â™s Cultural Exegesis series, which means that it is more on the scholarly side. The average reader will struggle a bit, but I would still recommend this book for those wanting to understand modern art. For my brief review on this book and most of the books out there on Christianity and the arts, see: theologyforreallife.com/artsbooks

This book changed my life and outlook on faith. Before I read God in the Gallery I despised Contemporary Art, because I was a "literalist." I wanted every black and white and despised any art that claimed to be art outside of what Siedell refers to a "linguistified" art. I was obsessed with Art as communicating and not an event. After reading this text I have abandoned my view of Art and have embraced Contemporary and Modern Art. It has changed my Faith, but also I am entering into the

Pastoral Ministry and because of this book I have made Contemporary and Modern Art a part of many of my sermons. This book should be read by any person who believes art to be simply something that communicates words and thoughts. That is a gross misunderstanding. Thank you Daniel Siedell!

I had to read this in a course at the Christian college where I attended undergraduate studio art school - we thoroughly discussed the text against a dozen other texts on faith and art and this is one that I will continue to refer to.While my classmates and I rarely agreed completely with an author we read, our goal was to explore literature and concepts that helped us work through our questions and challenges as artists who believe in God, and this book led to a lot of notes and writing for my final research paper. I am grateful for how much this author's work assisted my lifelong study of God, art, and what they mean in my life.

Dr. Siedell knows his stuff. His knowledge of art history is superb and his his take on a religious gleaning of art is albeit risky(since spirituality is a taboo word in art camps) but much appreciated. An enjoyable read. I recommend.

Opened my eyes to the importance of and purpose of modern art. Writing style is more academic, but still a good read for those interested in Christian art.

This is a great book that tackles faith and art. The only thing that is a draw back is that for me itwas a heavy read.

Christian Thought) (Westminster Histories of Christian Thought) (The Westminster History of Christian Thought) Cultural Traditions in Iran (Cultural Traditions in My World) Cultural Traditions in Mexico (Cultural Traditions in My World) The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology) Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation (Cultural Liturgies)