

Spirits in the Material World

Holly Moe

Good News at ArtPace

by John Ewing

"In this day and age, it is more likely that an experience with the Holy Spirit will occur outside of the church," says artist Holly Moe. Her recent ArtPace installation entitled "Good News" was specifically designed to bring that experience to the San Antonio art community. "Good News" succeeds, however, when it reaches beyond Christian fundamentalism's mission to win souls to Christ. In the contemporary art setting, what's really at stake is a much older tradition: the integrity of the artist as a spiritual facilitator in society. "Good News" embodies the conflict between those two objectives and explores the latter to great effect.

Moe's signature medium is wall-to-wall carpet. In "Good News," she uses it to give texture and color to large, wooden forms, as well as to create images. The viewer passes through a gateway in a tall wall



which suggests the biblical parting of the Red sea, and enters a stylized garden setting. The enclosed space created by the "wave" wall contains benches, a working rock fountain, a carpeted tree and individual carpet pictures. Though attractive and tactile, the sole function of these material elements is to illustrate the Bible verses printed as wall texts (Exodus 14: 21-29; Genesis 2: 9; Acts 2: 38; Matthew 6: 26; John 13: 5, 14; Hebrews 10: 19; John 15: 2-11). Moe says that "Every piece of 'Good News' is about providing opportunities to connect with God through prayer." But, unlike the participatory and open-ended activity of prayer, these concrete visuals

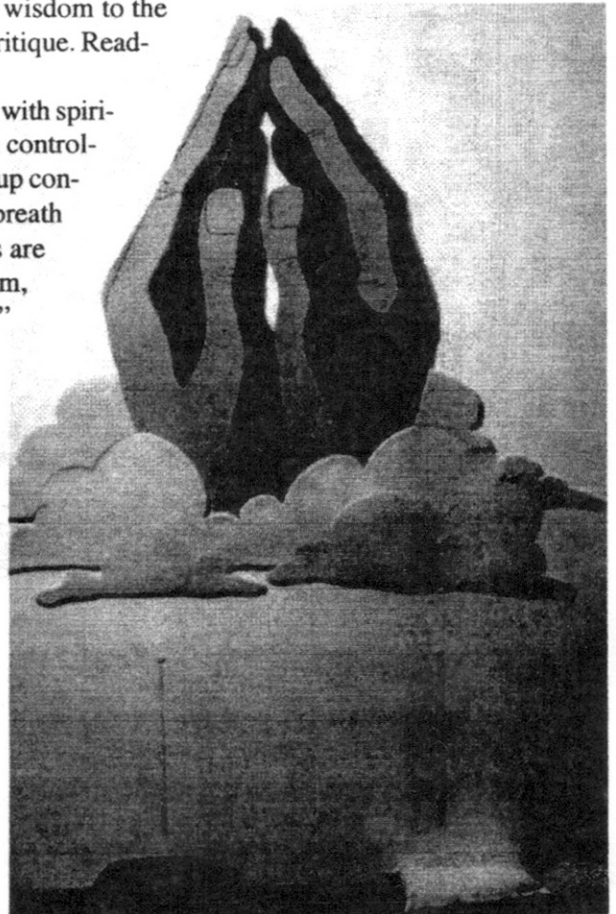
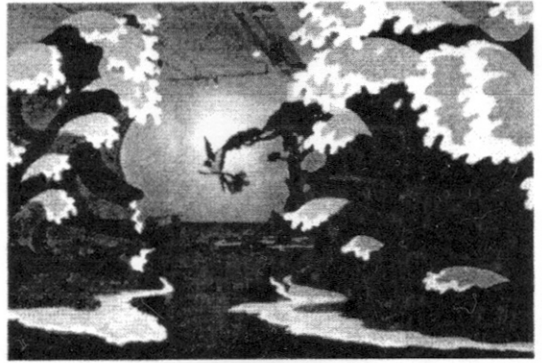
are crafted to serve the dogmatic and closed discourse of the Bible texts.

Spirituality, on the other hand, has nothing to do with dicta or dogma. It is a rupture of the absolute, a step out of time, and essentially a mystery. The spiritual mystery of "Good News" could be overlooked if you missed the reception for the installation. At the opening, Moe asked gallery visitors if they would allow her to wash their feet in the rock fountain and also say a prayer on their behalf. This was a gamble: artistically, socially and spiritually. Transgressing conventional behavior, Moe as artist-in-tercessor created a symbolic connection between the individual and a sphere of potential greater than the individual. Unpredictable and immeasurable, that potential falls somewhere outside the everyday.

To maintain that connection through the run of the show, Moe created a prayer wall on one side of the gallery. Visitors could kneel along the wall and write prayers or messages. The writings range from platitude to vitriol. Some are neat, others are scrawled. Like the washing of the feet and Moe's prayers, there was no predicting what would be written on the wall. Visitors were "led by the spirit" in the moment of writing. There is a collective wisdom to the random messages that is larger than any one prayer or critique. Reading the wall is a spiritual act.

Both religion and art have a long, ambivalent history with spirituality. When there is fear, the discourse is narrow and controlling, dogmatically absolute and airless. When we give up control, a mysterious "something" rushes in and takes our breath away. In a time when most contemporary art practices are crossing boundaries, defying category and merging form, some critics have taken the cynical view that art is "dead" (like God, Socialism & Rock-n-Roll). The public trust in both religion and art is shattered on many levels.

Given that state of the union, we are ripe for spiritual rupture and connections beyond our individual selves. In a year when artist Robert Gober brought a breathtaking installation of a Virgin Mary drainpipe into L.A. MOCA and Art in America magazine praised the spiritual criticism of Sister Wendy Beckett, it is clear that Art and Religion have more in common than ever before. But the artist is like Groucho Marx when he commented, "I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member." The fruits of separateness – beauty, degradation, leadership, critique – are a spiritual gamble, like Jesus' 40 days in the desert. For society at large, that gamble has a growing significance. The bumper sticker says it all: *Arte es Vida.* **=====**



Top - The "Wave Wall" by Holly Moe. Bottom - The "Prayer Wall" by Holly Moe.
Both are parts of her 1998 installation at ArtPace.