

Reading the Bible Sculpture Series: An Interview with the Artist | BY JOHN MCDOWELL

Interviewer: To start, what got you going on this series? Also, when I first saw these pieces, I confess that I was a little taken aback at seeing the Bible as a work of sculpture.

Artist: I can understand how you might be taken aback. Growing up I was taught to treat the Bible with respect, and I can remember being careful not to stack other books on top of my Bible or leave it on the floor. I was a little apprehensive about cutting and drilling into bibles. What I hope viewers will understand is that I am not commenting on the Bible *as such*. I am representing attitudes toward and uses of the Bible. The art is about people who read the Bible, not about the Bible as the word of God.

Interviewer: You are working with metaphor then?

Artist: Yes. I am, as you know, interested in language and the way language shapes and mediates meaning. Metaphor is in the root of knowledge and flowers in understanding. I am thus interested in the images and words used about the Bible and belief such as “fishers of men.” I think about visual representations of such words. Since the Bible is central to Christian and hence Adventist belief, it was a natural progression to having the Bible as central to a series of sculptures. The visual representation externalizes and defamiliarizes the metaphor. Estranging the metaphor enables one to look in new and hopefully enlightening ways.

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

Artist: Certainly. Take the piece, *Sound the Alarm*. In sermons, Sabbath Schools and evangelistic crusades, I’ve been exhorted, as I assume many others have, to “Sound the Alarm”; to alert others to the end of the world, Christ’s coming, the necessity of the Sabbath, the good news of salvation—any number of core doctrines. To visually represent that, I used a fire alarm. Place a fire alarm in a Bible



and hang it on the wall, people take notice—which is what an alarm is meant to do. But, think about a fire alarm going off. It does get one’s attention, and we obey it. Obedience, driven by necessity, makes us act. Indeed, it may save one’s life. Enjoyment does not play into the action. In fact, an alarm can be irritating and annoying after a while—especially if perceived as a false alarm. A constant alarm; we cover our ears and run. To use the Bible as an alarm all of the time, what are the consequences? Some are certainly positive, but downsides shadow. I want people to think about these things. I do not wish to pass judgment. I wish to challenge the viewer in a way that I hope engages and rewards.

Interviewer: Did you come up with a list of words then?

Artist: Not exactly. I start with a list of visual images. With art, I think visually first. I need to be satisfied with the visual image before thinking about “what it means.” I have no wish to proscribe a singular or definitive meaning. I go for evocation and suggestion because they invite the viewer’s participation in the creation of meaning; I eschew prescription and sermon in that they present the viewer with meaning already packaged.

Interviewer: While I think I can appreciate your reluctance to tell us what your work means, it would be helpful, now that we’ve talked a bit about process, to talk about the pieces as a way of giving viewers a starting point. I rather like *Compass*.

Artist: I rather like that piece myself. Most everyone who reads the Bible reads out of the desire for guidance. At times most of us have felt lost, left wandering, not



sure which way to go. We use a variety of phrases—sometimes clichés—nevertheless, they are felt realities. We speak longingly for Christ to be our “Captain.” There are plenty of nautical metaphors applied to the spiritual life. I feel that a vintage ship’s compass serves as an appropriate visual metaphor for this way of reading the Bible.



Interviewer: Speaking of things that have to do with water, tell me about *Hooked*?

Artist: Yes, I suppose *Compass* and *Hooked* go together, although I did not think about that when making them. I like to have layers of associations to more fully engage or hook

(forgive the pun) the viewer. This piece suggests various fishing references in the Bible—being a “fisher of men” readily comes to mind. There is also the traditional association of a fish with Christ.

Interviewer: *Gift* has a pretty ribbon, but wrapped in lead?

Artist: After the image occurred to me, I thought about what happens when we give Bibles as gifts. I realized that when we do, the gift comes weighted with expectation—hence the lead wrapping. Particularly when we give a child a Bible as a gift, the gift carries expectations of belief, tradition, of faith, of, even, salvation—all serious matters. We want our children to believe as we do, to have the same heritage, hope, and faith that we cherish: an important, weighty gift because of all the implied and hoped for expectations.



Interviewer: Is it really a children’s Bible that you wrapped?

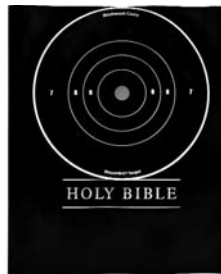
Artist: Yes, I wanted to be authentic, even though you do not see the Bible at all.

Interviewer: Again, intentional, I suspect?

Artist: Yes, but I will leave the explorations of possible implications to the viewer.

Interviewer: I see that you have the ribbon in a form of the cross.

Artist: Yes. It also made sense to me to shape the red ribbon in the form of a cross.



Interviewer: *Target*?

Artist: A book as important to western culture as the Bible, and arguably there has been no other book as important, becomes a book revered by millions, and over time, billions, and also becomes a book that attracts

—over the centuries—attacks. The Bible has been a target, particularly from the nineteenth century onward, by skeptics and non-believers.

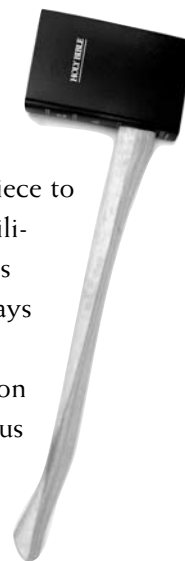
Interviewer: I notice that the Bible you used for *Target* is a Catholic Bible. That was that a deliberate choice, I suppose?

Artist: Good observation. Yes. It also happened to be the Bible large enough to take the target! So it worked out. I wanted to highlight the fact that attacks on the Bible have not all come from non-believers. Within the Christian tradition we have a long and sad history of attacking the beliefs of others—targeting the way others read the Bible. Even within a tradition, differing readings—far too often, and at great cost to personal lives—are targeted. Adventism has its own sad history in this regard. We target each other with great viciousness disguised in self-assured righteousness. We are also capable of targeting others—including Roman Catholics. The choices with this piece are indeed intentional.

Interviewer: The ax piece, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, is a little intimidating or shocking. I’m a little uncomfortable about it .

Artist: Good! That’s part of the point. This piece can be seen as a companion piece to *Target*. I have always been uneasy with militaristic language in the service of religious ends. The link between militarism and ways of reading the Bible forms a dangerous union. Those who use the Bible to sanction and justify violence exist. While most of us deplore physical violence, far more read and use the Bible and *their* reading of the Bible as a way to attack others—for their beliefs, for the way *they* read the Bible and wreak emotional, relational, and spiritual devastation. We all want to be “right,” making it an easy slide into using the Bible to hack away at interpretations

artist interview ➔ continued on page 59...



we do not agree with. We have this unfortunate tendency to equate a particular interpretation of scripture as scripture, forgetting that every act of reading is an act of interpretation. Coming to meaning—what a text *means* is establishing a relationship between the self and the text. Introduce the self into the equation and, like it or not, one introduces human fallibility. No one likes to be fallible, or worse, wrong. Thus, it is easy to get defensive and even aggressive when challenged. A value in Adventism, the priesthood of all believers, appears to be on the wane. A frontal system is moving in with winds that proclaim that while all Adventists are equal, some are more equal than others. There exists a remarkable readiness to attack those within who are perceived to be less “Adventist” than others. When one’s *modus operandi* is concern and fear—for the church, for doctrines, for identity—and there is the feeling of being under attack, it is instinctive to reach for weapons at hand—even the Bible. And we are back to the *Ax*. In the moment one wields a weapon one loses the ability to recognize, appreciate, or even acknowledge consequences: the damage done—the hurt, the deep pain, the heartache inflicted on others.

Interviewer: I see your point, but we cannot be satisfied with any old interpretation. “Everything goes” does not work.

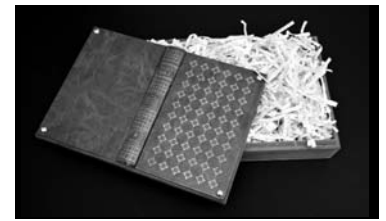
Besides, in the Bible the words of St. Paul urge us to “Put on the whole armor of God.”

Artist: True enough, but note that the text’s emphasis is not on armor, but on the virtues of truth, righteousness, faith, and note: peace. We are to fight evil—not flesh and blood. I believe, to adapt an idea from the Czech author Ludvik Vaculik in his wonderful little book, *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator*, the degree of a church’s (or an individual’s) Christian maturity is not measured by how the church deals with those who agree with it, but how it treats those who don’t. As he goes on to say, “Where there is agreement, freedom doesn’t come into it—freedom only begins where dissent begins.”

Interviewer: To shift to the last and one of your most puzzling pieces: *Boxed*. What’s going on?

Artist: Yes, perhaps it is not as straightforward as some of the others. I do like ambiguity because it helps entice the viewer to take a second look, to more fully engage

with the piece. I like it best when a viewer has made the piece his or her own by looking at it more than once.



Meaning, as I’ve said, is relational. One idea that you might entertain with this piece is that when the Bible is read in a way that boxes it into a particular ideology, one consequence is that one shreds the Bible. To put it another way, unwavering allegiance to a particular ideology or belief becomes a lens that turns everything one reads into a refraction of that ideology or belief. I am not saying that one should not have an ideological lens; in fact, it is important that one does. Caution, however, is invaluable. One should be continually conscious of the lens one is using and be ready to adjust the lens—rather than operating as if the lens is always correct. Things eventually get blurry if this is the case, and what one reads is no longer the text but the ideology. It seems to me that the Bible refuses to be boxed and contained. To do so, in a sense, destroys it. The Bible does not survive being boxed up.

Interviewer: You mentioned that these pieces are part of an ongoing series. Could you talk about other ideas you have, about what you plan on doing next?

Artist: No. I don’t mean to be rude, but I do not talk about work before it has come into its own. Too much can change between conception and creation. Sometimes the idea does not work at all. Talking about it beforehand is premature and has the tendency to kill the creative impulse. I have several more ideas on my list, and I would like to see how and if they work out. I am, however, always open to ideas you or anyone else may have for the series.

Interviewer: I’ll keep that in mind. If I think of anything, I’ll send it along.

Artist: Thank you. For me, one of the great pleasures in life is a new idea. ■

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