

Distasteful 'Catholic Tastes'

by William A. Donohue

Whitney serves up garbage

One of the more disturbing cultural signs that has evidenced itself since the late 1960s is the decline in standards. Standards have fallen in school, work, the military, athletics, music and art. Especially art. There was a time when great artists were measured by the extent to which they embellished their culture. But no more. What passes as creative these days is the purely iconoclastic. There is nothing ennobling about the scatological or the nihilistic, yet that is what the Whitney Museum seems to prefer. First there was Mapplethorpe and now there is Mike Kelley. Running through February 20th, the Whitney is featuring Kelley's work, *Catholic Tastes*.

If the label *Catholic Tastes* hadn't been adopted by Kelley, there would be little point in this publication taking notice. Curiously, there is nothing explicitly Catholic or anti-Catholic about the exhibit. To be sure, there is much about the exhibit that is vulgar, and the decision to title the showing *Catholic Tastes* was designed to send a message (does anyone believe that the Whitney would have allowed the same exhibition under the title *Jewish Tastes*, or *Gay Tastes*?). Actually, it is the book *Catholic Tastes* that explains the reasoning behind the exhibition. It also explains the virulent anti-Catholicism of Mike Kelley.

Early in the book we learn that Mike Kelley attended a Catholic elementary school. That he now calls himself a "lapsed Catholic" is not quite right. More accurately, Kelley is a man filled with hate, and not just against the Catholic Church: he seems to hate any value structure or institutional framework that is associated with Western civilization or, for

that matter, any civilization whatsoever. What he would prefer he does not say, but the self-styled "blue-collar anarchist" is not someone who is likely to find peace on earth.

Kelley is in a perpetual state of rebellion. It is from his "repressive religious education" that he seeks to liberate himself, though the results seem incomplete at best. For Kelley, no freedom that is not libidinal is hardly worthy of the name. All the kinky fixations that such a freedom affords are there in graphic detail: the proverbial phallus symbols are conjoined with displays of excrement and bodily fluids, thus proving that true art demands more than what Mike Kelley is capable of giving. If it is true that "what you see is what you get," then from Kelley what we get are the contortions of a middle-aged man not yet released from infantile rages.

Kelley's narcissism is another quality that is impossible not to recognize. It is in ventures like *Rothko's Blood Stain (Artist's Conception)*/ *Self-Portrait as the Shroud of Turin* that Kelley's anti-social and anti-religious impulses come shining through. What Kelley demonstrates is that today's brand of anti-Catholicism goes well beyond the kind of conspiratorial charges that the red-necks have long favored. No, today's anti-Catholic is motivated out of a desire to dissolve the Church of its legitimacy and to call into question its moral authority. Kelley hates the Catholic Church for the same reason other modern artists do: the Church rejects any notion of freedom not tied to the liberating effects of Christ's teachings.

If there is any prediction for the new year that is bound to stand up it is the likelihood that the Catholic Church will continue to draw the venom of those opposed to ordered liberty. Sadly, that includes many of those who have laid claim to our culture. Worse, it includes many who, like the patrons of the Whitney, have typically been seen as the custodians of our culture. That they have now become our culture's chief adversaries is not a fortuitous sign.

In 1959, *New York Times* critic John Canaday stunned the avant-garde set by suggesting that “freaks, charlatans and the misled” had surrounded the truly creative, thereby granting legitimacy to the work of phonies. “Let us admit,” he wrote, “that the nature of abstract expressionism allows exceptional tolerance for incompetence and deception.” Canaday aptly concluded, “We have been had.” And now, a generation later, it can also be said that so, too, has the Whitney.

Editors’ note: *Catholic Tastes* is scheduled for exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 30-Aug. 11, 1994.