

Rachel Howard: *Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian)*

Eleven works mark artist's first U.S. solo museum show



Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian), 2011-2016

Oil and acrylic on canvas, wood, 7 towels, and pigment
 10 canvases, each 66½ x 66½ in
 Box: 30½ x 14 x 13 in
 With towels: 43 x 14 x 13 in
 Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern

no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand.” – Bertrand Russell, from “*Why I Am Not a Christian*”

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS — In her first U.S. solo museum show, London-based painter **Rachel Howard** brings her *Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian)* to MASS MoCA for its U.S. premiere. In *Paintings of Violence*, Howard addresses not “a bacchanalian violence, but the steady calm hand of violence on a greater scale.” The canvases in her exhibition do not so much depict violent acts as function as evidence of such actions, with deep visceral crimson oil paint dragged down a shocking pink ground. The installation, which consists of ten paintings and a single sculpture, will be on view at MASS MoCA beginning **February 17, 2018**, with a members’ reception on **March 24**.

“In real life people are cruel for one of two reasons — either because they are sadists...or else for the sake of something they are going to get out of it — money, or power, or safety. But pleasure, money, power, and safety are all, as far as they go, good things. ... Wickedness, when you examine it, turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way.” – C.S. Lewis, from *Mere Christianity*

“Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear... fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is

Howard has long engaged with human cruelty in her practice—“When I paint about human cruelty it’s about getting things off my chest,” she says—including in the series *Repetition is Truth - Via Dolorosa* (2005 – 2009) and *Suicide Paintings* (2007). She is deeply influenced by art history and literature: in the case of *Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian)*, the work’s title references both C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* and Bertrand Russell’s “*Why I am not a Christian*,” texts which argue respectively for

and against adherence to Christianity. Lewis wrote that Christianity is the pursuit of a life at one with God and the rest of existence—a “good” life. He characterized Christianity as a “fighting religion” which believes itself to be in the midst of a “civil war” between God and “the rebels.” According to Lewis, we are not absolutely good—that is, at one with God—and therefore God is “the only comfort.” He is also, according to Lewis’ formulation, “the supreme terror.” Russell meanwhile argued that a mutual basis in fear intimately links cruelty and religion, characterizing Christianity’s belief “that hell-fire is a punishment for sin” as “a doctrine of cruelty” responsible for centuries of violence: “the more intense has been the religion of any period,” Russell wrote, “the greater has been the cruelty.” For Russell, the best response to the “terror” of the world is to “conquer” it with “knowledge, kindness, and courage.” Howard has described her own position as “squeezed somewhere in between” Lewis and Russell.

Paintings of Violence is the result of five years of slow, methodical work. The deliberate pace and precision of Howard’s process parallel the particular type of violence that this installation engages, which Howard has described as “maximum damage, planned and calmly carried out.” This “controlled violence” recalls holy wars and crusades, forced conversions, and shock and awe tactics. The kind of violence implicit in Howard’s paintings is not only outward-focused, but also directed towards oneself: the canvases mirror Howard’s own height and wingspan, approximately 66 inches in each direction. Each canvas began with a grounding field of fluorescent pink, down which Howard methodically dragged strips of deep Alizarin Crimson oil paint, using a T-square to shape the precise edges. The durational relationship between Howard’s body and the canvases—a repetition of the same set of movements over the course of years—evokes the ritualized action of self-flagellation. The white towels that Howard used to wipe the excess paint from the T-square are folded neatly and stacked on a rough wooden plinth, each crusted with the colors of recently spilled blood, as though used to clean up the scene of an accident or violent crime. Together, the paintings and cloths ricochet between abstraction and performance, suggesting a violence whose vast scope hovers at the edge of imagination.

About the artist

Rachel Howard (b. 1969, Easington, County Durham, UK) graduated from Goldsmiths, University of London in 1991. She was short-listed for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2004, and received the British Council Award in 2008. She has had solo exhibitions at institutions including MACRO Testaccio (Rome, Italy, 2016) and Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina (Museo *MADRE*) (Naples, Italy, 2011), and her work has been exhibited at the Imperial War Museum (London, UK, 2017), Sala Pelaires (Palma de Mallorca, Spain, 2017), The Drawing Room’s Drawing Biennial (London, UK, 2017 + 2015), Somerset House (London, UK, 2016), Royal Academy of Arts’ Summer Exhibition (London, UK, 2016), Ackland Art Museum (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), and 21er Haus (Vienna, AT, 2015), among many others. Howard’s upcoming exhibitions include Rachel Howard, *Der Kuss*, Blain|Southern (London, UK, January 24 - March 17, 2018) and *Repetition is Truth - Via Dolorosa*, Newport Street Gallery (London, UK, March 21 - May 2018). She lives and works in London and Gloucestershire, and is represented by Blain|Southern. <https://www.rachelhoward.co.uk/>

Images

High-resolution images are available through this link: <http://bit.ly/RachelHoward>

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Gallery admission is \$20 for adults, \$18 for veterans and seniors, \$12 for students, \$8 for children 6 to 16, and free for children 5 and under. Members are admitted free year-round. The Hall Art Foundation's Anselm Kiefer exhibition is seasonal and will reopen in May 2018. For additional information: [413.662.2111 x1](tel:413.662.2111) or visit massmoca.org.

Hours

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