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Jake Van Wyk's Angels and Beasts – An Art Exhibition: No Holds Barred

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Editor's note: David Versluis wrote this paper to celebrate the final art exhibition of Jake Van Wyk, Professor of Art at Dordt College. The image below is titled "The Coming" — a 7 foot by 12 foot ceramic tile piece by Jake Van Wyk.

Jake Van Wyk's Angels and Beasts—an art exhibition: No Holds Barred



by David Versluis

*But it takes Holy Scripture to tell the truth, that the sun is a servant of the Lord speaking to all and sundry about the Hound of heaven and earth.*¹ —Calvin Seerveld



David Versluis is Professor of Art and Graphic Design at Dordt College.

For at least a decade the highly symbolic apocalyptic books of Revelation, Daniel, and Zechariah have inspired much of Jake Van Wyk's ceramic sculptures and reliefs. The book of Revelation, in particular, influences Van Wyk's work.

Much of Van Wyk's work in this exceptional exhibition is an expression of emotions. Interestingly, Van Wyk's artwork highlights a paradox of visually based thought—what Iowa State University Art Educator Dennis Dake talks about as being created by implied and subconscious processing and automatism.² This exhibition acknowledges Van Wyk as an automatist artist, a characterization that can be seen in the interchange between his clay work and his prints and drawings.

Van Wyk, who grew up in the Christian Reformed Church and is grounded in the Reformed tradition, does not approach the symbolism of Revelation as fundamentalist eschatology, trying to decode the symbolism in order to predict the end times. For Van Wyk, Revelation is about visualizing and expressing an unseen dimension. The apocalyptic genre and the themes of death, judgment, heaven, and hell can be disconcerting to viewers. Yet, with unique sensory perceptiveness, Van Wyk focuses on the astonishing apposition of strong images that Revelation evokes. This exhibition is about the symbolic portrayal of the artist's imaginative ability.

Van Wyk believes that drawing and modeling from life and nature as a way to personify the spirit and movement of his subject gives meaning and im-

pact to his work. His work embodies what the prodigious early modern French sculptor Rodin said: “Art cannot exist without life. If a sculptor wishes to interpret joy, sorrow, any passion whatsoever, he will not be able to move us unless he first knows how to make the beings live which he evokes. For how could the joy or the sorrow of an inert object — of a block of stone—affect us? Now, the illusion of life is obtained in our art by good modeling and by movement. These two qualities are like the blood and the breath of all good work.”³

In the works in this exhibition, Van Wyk creates life and dynamic movement through his personal style and with surface treatments that range from gestural marks to highly finished or more natural-looking glazes. The impact of *The Coming* is in offering front and side views in which figures meet the viewer in the round—in human scale. Van Wyk preserves and sometimes exaggerates the sketch-like qualities and textures of his clay figures, and the uneven surfaces come alive when struck by light.

Artistically, Van Wyk explores traditional tools, but he sees and uses them in a new light, which presents exciting possibilities. An essay once quoted by Van Wyk is titled “Exploration of the Tool,” in which the author states, “tools may be considered more basically—not as ‘drawing’ or ‘painting’ tools, but as tools that make a mark of some kind when combined with some material.”⁴ This statement may be the essence for many of Jake’s pieces. He is interested in action work, that is, as the essay continues to say, “the position of the hand, arm, or body, and how they are moved; the position of the tool and the portion of it that is grasped or used and the position of the material in relation to the tool enter into the exploration.”⁵

VanWyk’s abstract work and the multi-color lithographs are his forte. In Jake’s graphics he usu-

ally works the space by dividing the layout with improvisational *marks* in gestured patterns, textures, and syncopated rhythms. With this work he emphasizes changes in direction through the marks, shapes, layering of subtle color, and slight fragmentation. Each mark, each stroke, of the lithographic crayon or the incredible richness of reticulated tusche made by a wide brush is expressively independent, autonomous, and yet coherent. Many of Van Wyk’s pieces are strangely beautiful and perhaps are best described the way Mikhail Baryshnikov described Merce Cunningham’s dance performances—as a “kind of organized chaos.”⁶

Light is key to Van Wyk’s work, moving the viewer from the surface to the deeper meaning of eternity. The light shines through in the negative spaces of the white paper of his drawings and prints and in the sheen of his sculptures and reliefs. His techniques of layered ceramic glazes that build-up shine on shine seem to capture, reflect, and originate light. And, while the light in Van Wyk’s sculptural pieces contrasts with the shadows, the shadows never overpower the light.

Endnotes

1. Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, first ed. (Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 12. Print.
2. Dennis M. Dake, “A Natural Visual Mind: The Art and Science of Visual Literacy.” International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA). Ames, IA. 11 Oct. 2000. Keynote speech.
3. Auguste Rodin, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, trans. Jacques de Caso and Patricia B. Sanders (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984) 41.
4. Author of source unknown.
5. Author of source unknown.
6. Francis Romero, “Merce Cunningham.” *Time* 10 Aug. 2009: 21. Academic Search Elite. Web. 24 Sept. 2013.