

# THE POWER OF THE SPIRITUAL

**'Celestial Terrestrials' draws from a variety of cultures, countries and eras to explore man's beliefs.**

By HEATHER LUSTFELDT  
Special to The Star

"Celestial Terrestrials: Between Heaven & Earth" at Rockhurst University's Greenlease Gallery is a complex, layered exhibition featuring a multicultural and cross-generational selection of work centered on aspects of prayer, spirituality and depictions of invisible entities.

Organized by freelance curator and Star contributing reviewer Elisabeth Kirsch, the exhibit features works by 21 contemporary artists, most drawn from the region. Kirsch complements their expressions with an eclectic selection of non-Western sculpture and objects, including a fourth-century Greek vase, a 19th-century Burmese Buddha, a 20th-century Hema guardian figure from Congo and much more.

The mix is both exciting and overwhelming given the vastness of the subject and amount of work on display. Unlikely convergences of style, time period, culture and belief systems create a charged, diametrical context in which Kirsch achieves an integrative installation, albeit tightly contained within the small space.

Many pieces were made for this show; others were lent from private collections.

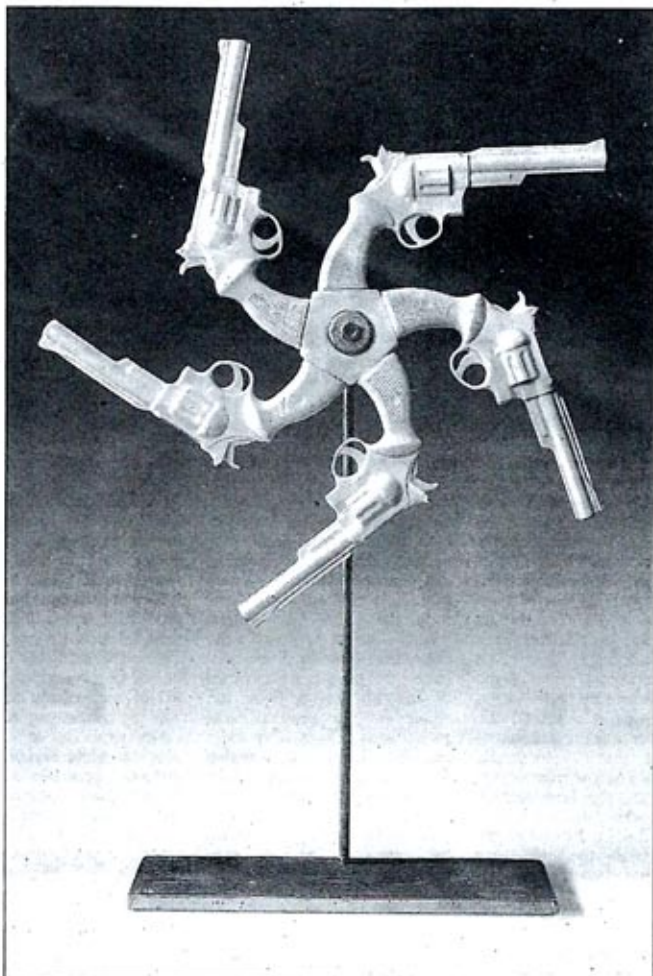
Variations on the triptych abound, including a group of "sentinel" figures by Jason Pollen (2011) made from planks of wood, wire and pigment, which effectively creates a visual and conceptual link between the non-Western and contemporary works.

A vibrant mixed media textile work suspended near the entrance, "Tupac Shakur (Tupac Resurrection)" (2005-11), by St. Louis artist Sun Smith-Foret, invokes African-American quilt-making and an African king's coat. The piece pays tribute to its namesake, rapper Tupac Shakur, who died a violent death.

Nearby, "Conjuring Vest" (1996), by Renee Stout, shimmers with medallions, reflective stones, crystals and intricately beaded medicine pouches, emitting an aura of magic.

Some works, including a triptych of portraits by Marcus Cain and a digital print of three strange, emaciated figures by Kim Lindaberry, use the body to suggest supernatural and psychological transformation and ascendance.

Others, including Dan Younger's intricate sculpture, "Another Lost Soul" (2011); a beaded work by Jessica Kincaid, "Old Testament Superpowers" (2008); and a triptych of luminous collages by Vivian Torrence, are narratives utilizing specific iconography to invoke Scripture,



FROM THE ARTIST

The exhibit includes Linda Lighton's "44 Magnum Mandala" (2011), made of porcelain and steel.

history and myth.

The sound of bubbling mud-pots from a video, "A Cosmographical Triptych: Iceland" (2010), by Richard Welnowski, augments a sense of earth and nature. While the piece appears to be a direct documentation of live volcanic activity, Welnowski writes vaguely about the "mystical" qualities of Iceland and the widespread belief in elves, adding a curious and confounding element to the work.

In her essay, Kirsch touches upon the fascination with supernatural themes in

popular culture and argues that the subject of spirituality and religion has been largely ignored within postmodern art criticism, a key idea that would be fascinating to see further developed.

A few pieces demonstrate a blend of aesthetics typical of postmodernism, straddling lines between irony, sarcasm and sincerity in rather enigmatic fusions of spiritualism and pop culture.

Dylan Boothmer plays off the telephone booth in an interactive public artwork, "Prayer Booth" (2003), featuring a kneeler and instructional graphics on the

## on display

"Celestial Terrestrials: Between Heaven & Earth" continues at the Greenlease Gallery at Rockhurst University, 1100 Rockhurst Road, through Dec. 3. Hours are noon-5 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and by appointment. For more information, call 816-501-4407.

method of kneeling and praying.

"While Walking, One Night (1986)" (2011), a text piece on a church announcement board by Christopher Leitch, acknowledges the existence of God in everything, including lampposts, windows, "Even that little bit of (feces) clinging to your shoe? Yes, that's God too."

Nora Othick's "Suzanne: Verse 2" (2011), a framed pastel based on the song "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen, depicts Jesus as a shirtless sailor with a tattoo of the Virgin Mary on his arm with the word "mom" beneath. These works inject humor into the exhibit, balancing currency and a sense of the sublime.

Linda Lighton strikes a serious note with "44 Magnum Mandala" (2011), featuring a ring of white cast-porcelain pistols envisaging the idolatry of guns and violence that is insidious in American culture. The boldness of this work is countered by a subtle, ethereal abstract painting by Ron Slowinski, another example of the wide range of expressions on view.

Ke-Sook Lee and Tanya Hartman create personal senses of the soul and prayer with pieces involving hand-stitching, text and suggestions of water, earth and sky.

Lee's "Blossoms in the Sky" (2011) is a beautifully site-specific composition with a series of 13 multisized embroidery rings framing vignettes of celestial-like sewn patterns, lace work, gorgeous blues and text. Meandering up the wall toward the clerestory windows, it, in Lee's words, "evaporates into the air."

Hartman's three double-sided "Prayer Paddles" (2010-2011) are emotive with typed prayers to "treat others with dignity" and to remember the joy and love we feel as children.

Despite the perfect juxtaposition with Rockhurst's permanently installed Van Ackeren Collection of Religious Art in an adjacent gallery and a remarkable installation, this exhibition deserved much more.

Kirsch could have used vastly more space and resources to develop her thesis. As is, she has come up with a fascinating springboard for further scholarship and work in this largely untapped area of contemporary art.