



Contemporary Art and the Incarnation

By Elissa Weichbrodt & Jeff Morton

A wrong turn.

You blanch. You did not intend to end up here. Moments earlier you were striding confidently through a museum gallery of stately portraits and lush landscapes, while extolling the praises of genius artists.

Now, a wrong turn later, you're confronted with a large diptych of two black and white photographs hanging on the wall before you. In the left panel, a neat braid of hair lies on a dark background. A label floats over the bottom of the photograph. It reads, "back." In the right panel, a dark-skinned woman stands facing away from you; her head is shorn and she wearing a simple black dress. Toward the bottom of the photograph, single words—"lash," "bone," "ground," "ache," and "pay"—form a brief, vertical list. The piece is titled *Outline*, made by artist Lorna Simpson in 1990.

You have wandered, inadvertently and unwillingly, into the contemporary art gallery.

For many Christians, contemporary art holds little appeal. Common wisdom suggests that anything made after 1960 is at best obscure and at worst irreligious or obscene. Little appears to tie contemporary art—with its candy piles, wax limbs, and sharks floating in vitrines—to our comfortable notion that art should be aesthetically pleasing enough to be featured in a glossy calendar.

Yet art—even contemporary art—matters. Art matters because it is the fruit of a creative impulse that reflects a Creator. Art, even the art we don't understand, is a reminder of the God whose image we bear. Even more profoundly, however, art is important because the Word became flesh. Jesus, God Incarnate, took on a body and submitted Himself to a specific time, place, and culture in human history. Truth—transcendent and lovely—was expressed through relationship in a visible form.

A true study of contemporary art—or better yet, an interaction with contemporary art—can only take place through a belief in the Incarnation. The Incarnation gives our study of art a purpose. The Incarnation frees us to engage art through culture. And, in the end, the Incarnation allows us to make our study of even contemporary art an act of personal worship.

Looking Forward, Driven Backward

When Jesus took on flesh, He entered in and submitted Himself to time. Time—history—was not something to be tolerated and shortly escaped; the Incarnation reiterated the purposefulness of a transcendent God working in a finite world to usher in His kingdom and bring Himself the greatest glory. This doctrine is made perfectly clear throughout Scripture. In Psalm 104, the psalmist praises God's intimate, continued engagement with His creation. Acts 17 echoes the comprehensiveness of God's interaction with the earth and all that fills it: "for in Him we live and move and have our being." This understanding carries with it a further implication for the very structure of reality.

We generally conceive of history as a linear progression of causes. What happens today is caused by what happened yesterday and days previous. While history is in fact the unfolding of God's sovereign plan for this world, it also seems theologically valuable to understand causality as running backward. What happens today, what happened yesterday, what happened 2,000 years ago, is a direct result of what is yet to come: the return of Christ and the restoration of creation. Louis Voskuil, professor emeritus of history at Covenant College, suggests that, for the Christian, meaning in history hinges on belief in a reality that exists both in and beyond history. Our understanding of the past is driven by our belief of what will happen in the future. Thus, as Christians, we possess rare hope, confident that creation's existence through time (history) and productivity in time (art) is meaningful, directional, and ultimately worthy of study.

Admitting Our Place

Further, the Incarnation enables us to engage art in culturally-relative terms. We can—and should—consider and judge artworks in relationship to the cultures that produced them. Jesus submitted Himself to the constraints of a single culture at a particular point in human history. He dressed, ate, and worked like other men of His time; He filled His parables with examples culled from the specific experiences of the people who surrounded Him. And, though the record of His life, death, and resurrection is enmeshed with expectations and encounters of a cultural moment, the redeeming power of His work has universal and timeless application.

The "dignity"—as termed by historian Mark Noll—that Christ gives to the particulars of history frees us, as Christians, from the burden of imagined objectivity. We do not need to pretend to be untouched or unaffected by our culture. Being finite, culturally-entrenched people does not discount us from pointing to absolute, enduring truth. If we accept that cultures have espoused shifting conceptions of art, we allow ourselves to encounter that art with humility and relevance. Rather than applying the same criteria to the ceilings of the Sistine Chapel, a folding screen from 18th-century Japan, and a photograph taken two years ago, we can willingly consider them in relationship to their historical and cultural contexts.

Art in History: An Evolution

Given this understanding of culture and time, art history cannot simply be the illustrated version of the history of ideas and events. Art is always shaped by the culture that produces it. Throughout history, four general purposes for art have emerged: aesthetic (meant for beauty), mimetic (meant to capture reality), expressive (meant to capture emotion), or instrumental (meant to effect change in the viewer). The changes in how art looks is tied tightly to what it was meant to do.

The medievals, for example, conceived of art's function as being instrumental, a means of religious instruction. In this framework, they had no reason to paint naturalistic landscapes, portraits, or still lifes, genres that would emerge later in history. Similarly, the Italian Renaissance culture understood art as primarily providing visions of ideal beauty. Given this expectation, artists had no reason to capture scenes of daily life, a practice that Dutch Baroque artists would later espouse as an important form and function of painting.

When we look at art—and especially contemporary art—we must take into account the function assumed by its cultural moment. Today, and for much of the last 50 years, art has primarily been created to serve an instrumental purpose, confronting viewers with sharp critiques of popular culture, religion, politics, and even art itself.

The apparent certainty of modern reason, the presumed security of an old political world order, and the unquestioned eminence of the West crumbled in the wake of World War II. These global shifts sparked new questions of reality, morality, power, and privilege. Further, the increasing ease and accessibility of cameras and film—media that captured the world with inimitable detail and accuracy—erased much of the allure of making strictly representational and realistic art. Our culture today is critical, cynical, and political; the art which emerges responds by searching for significance and demanding change.

Looking for Familiarity

Let us return to Lorna Simpson's *Outline*. (You can view the image at the end of this narrative) For many of us, art of this kind is difficult because it conflicts with older or more popular definitions of art. Most contemporary artworks do not align with the expectation that the ultimate goal of art is to be a vision of loveliness and skill. While their visual component is important, it is not an exhaustive formula for critique. Though *Outline* would hardly be considered beautiful, it still packs a visual punch. The ranging tones of blacks and grays contrast richly with the stark white words, and the texture of the hair plays against the various smooth surfaces of background, fabric, and skin. It is clear, however, that simple aesthetics is not an adequate template for interpretation.

When we accept that the role of much contemporary art is to prod, question, upset, and reveal, we can enter into conversation with the piece. Instead of thinking that contemporary art is inferior because it is less visual, we can instead conceive of it as being relational. Though we may be tempted to treat this work as a confusing—though not entirely unpleasant—art photograph, doing so would mean disregarding its culture-given role. We must look deeper, considering how the unfamiliarity of Simpson's *Outline* challenges our normal modes of seeing.

To see this piece relationally is to interact with it. We need to ask questions.

How is this different from what I usually expect from a photograph? Although *Outline* is a picture of a person, there is a striking difference from familiar portrait photography: this woman has her back to the camera (Fig. 2). Such a posture conjures multiple cultural connotations, ranging from defiance to indifference to ignorance to shame. The woman conceals her face—the particulars of her identity—but her skin, her hair, and her body reveal the more general categories of race and sex.

What do those words mean? The clipped words are reminiscent of magnetic poetry, and playing with combinations seems natural. Using the lefthand panel's word, "back," as a kind of prefix, we create: "backlash," "backbone," "background," "backache," "backpay," and then, flipped, "payback." Coupled with the enigmatic photographs, the compound words evoke a strange double vision, calling to mind specters of prejudice, violence, and labor while affirming a quiet, surviving strength. We are forced to consider the assumptions we made about the woman in the photograph and to imagine her relationship to the words we have woven.

What am I supposed to think? Part of the power of Simpson's work is the embedded ambiguity. In past interviews, Simpson herself acknowledges that viewers may not be able to confidently grasp the precise meaning that she intended with her terse but evocative phrases. Yet thoughtful viewers will find that their gaze at the photograph is disrupted by the juxtaposition of text. Instead of seeing a photograph as a straightforward capture of reality, viewers are forced to interpret the image in conjunction with the words. In a sense, Simpson invites her viewers to enter in to the creative process, to unravel a mystery rather than simply receive a picture.

Grace Through Struggle

The demands made by this artwork upon us, the viewers, may initially be disconcerting. We may not be accustomed to artworks that ask us to bring our knowledge, experiences, and even emotions to bear on the interpretation. We long for a certainty of understanding; we want to know what the art means.

Yet, such paradox and difficulty inhabit an inescapable role in our lives as Christians. Our faith calls us to embrace paradox, to believe in a God that demands justice but offers grace, and to insist that bearing the cross is wearing the crown. We live in tension, as people who are fallen but redeemed. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul writes: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."

Art, like marriage, a good job, or church fellowship, can provide glimpses—but only glimpses—of God's glory as we wait for the glory to come through Christ in the consummation. Our "dim" vision often keeps us from recognizing or grasping the grace held out to us. Even in reading Scripture, we may struggle to comprehend the truth in the book of Habakkuk or the imagery of the Psalms. The difficulty of interpretation, however, does not compromise the reality of the meaning.

Even further, the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, gives us a mandate of tying ourselves to this difficult art. By living incarnationally, our inextricable bond to culture can be transformed into a means of service. We are humbled when we are forced to identify with the struggles and pains of our culture; we cannot conceive of ourselves as being superior to those around us. An incarnational understanding of history and culture leaves us in a somewhat uncomfortable state, but with a clear call for self-denying compassion that extends even to the difficulties of contemporary art.

Activating Faith

Rather than viewing difficult contemporary art as a waste of time or an attempt to dismantle our faith, perhaps we can view it as exactly the opposite. It can be a place where our faith becomes active. A relationship with contemporary art requires us to engage the world of the unknown and to take risks, strengthening faith and belief.

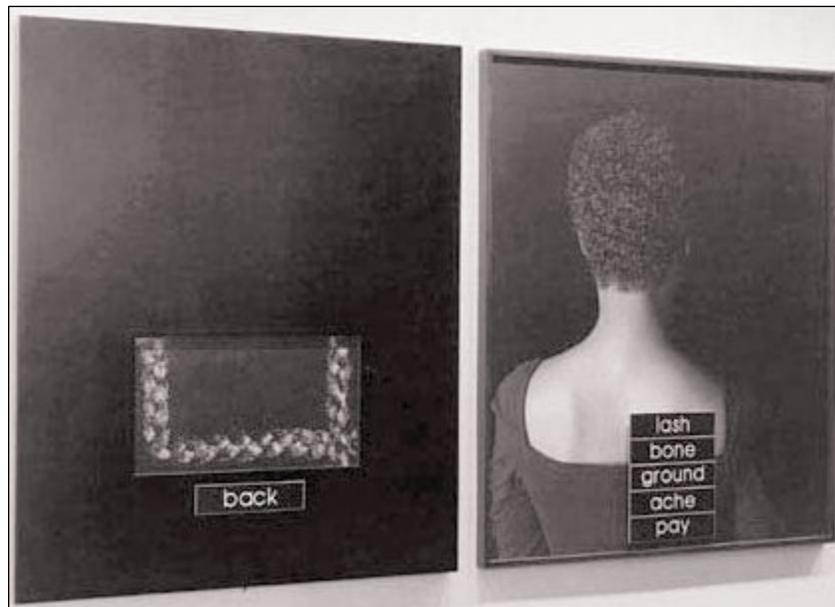
When we look relationally at Lorna Simpson's *Outline*, we are challenged to think critically about our own responses. What assumptions do we make about the woman's race, life, or personality based on the few visual clues given to us in the photographs? How do we honestly confront the history and current reality of racism suggested by the text? How do we see ourselves in relationship to this woman? Though relating to art such as *Outline* can be a painfully assaulting process, it can also lead us to a place of confession while illustrating the depth of God's grace offered to us, to the artist, and to our culture.

The doctrine of the Incarnation both frees and compels us in our interaction with contemporary art. We are free from fear because we see history as the outworking of God's perfect will, driven onward by the reality of the eschaton. If we submit to the limits placed on us by our finitude and place in history, we are free to be humble and honest by looking at art in the context of its culture.

But the Incarnation also compels us to tackle the difficulty of contemporary art by recognizing the grace of uncertainty; entering compassionately into the hurt and doubt of our culture; and using even an ugly, confusing artwork as an impetus for our own sanctification. These works can add fullness to our lives, enriching the textures of joy and sorrow or pain and healing in the process. Drenched in the reality of the Word becoming flesh, contemporary art can encourage anticipation in the Church for the day when we will see clearly instead of through a glass dimly, and respond with grace.

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Lorna Simpson – "Outline"