



My earliest memory is from when I was three years old. I am being held in my father's arms at the door of the Catedral Metropolitana in Mexico City, and I am terrified. Sitting atop an ancient Aztec burial site, this massive cathedral expressed rich, religious pomp as well as a heavy spirit of conquest and colonial power. Still vivid in my mind is the nave's cross and crucifixion, the veiled messages, and the wooden statues of saints, kings, and martyrs detailed in intricate mahogany and gold leaf. I was so frightened that I forced my father to exit and head outside to the street where it was safe. It must have been around the summer of 1971 when I had this early experience with religious imagery and its power.

I have never forgotten this encounter. Whether innate or empirical in nature, the power those images held over me were both enduring and commanding.

SACRILEG





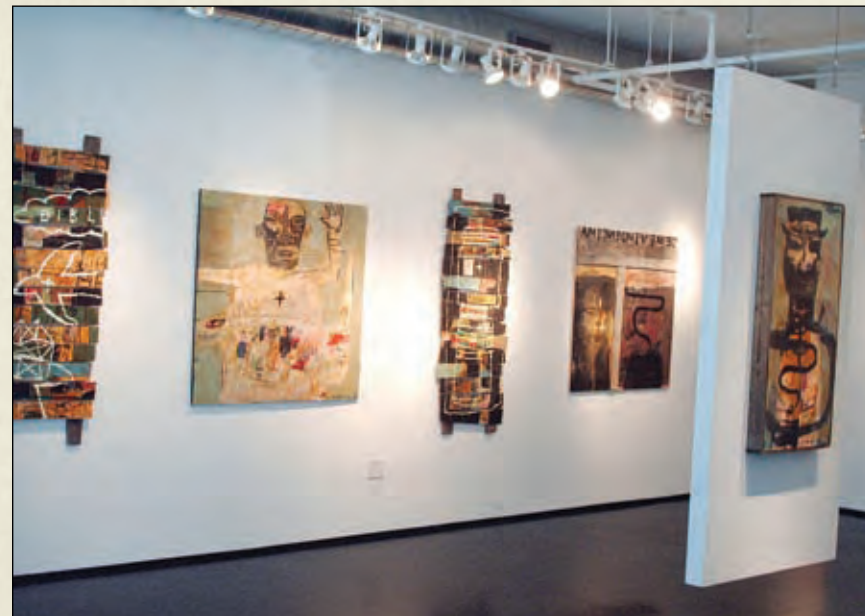
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If we choose to read the Bible literally and follow phrases such as,

“God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind,” (2 Timothy 1:7),

we run into a complicated collision between love and power. For a small child, how would such a collision not inspire fear? I believe the fear I felt as a child came from some source of power held suspended in the religious iconography, the visual culture of the religion, and the magic and mystery that seemed to radiate from within the space. The memory stayed with me well into my adult life as I began to explore the power of images in painting.

Even today in established, dominant religions as well as traditional folk religion, magic forms an integral part of religious thought and behavior, often delineating the borders between the everyday and the sacred. In the industrialized West, magic is generally interpreted as superstition, and is often reduced to a form of entertainment based upon cheap tricks and sleight of hand. In addition, magic has come to mark a distinction between Western and so-called primitive societies, or between

Christian and non-Christian religions. Yet it is not really feasible to consider “magic” apart from “religion,” to which it often has been contrasted. In my mind, the relationship between magic and religion has to do with the power images can wield on a spectator. It is with this thought in mind that I pose the following questions:

Is the power of religious, magical, or occult symbols benign, and therefore understood via semiotics as simply an associate of communications? By implication then, religion's visual culture and its theories could be interpreted through a particular paradigm of knowledge, thus avoiding questions concerning the power of certain religious symbols. On the other hand, is something about religion's use of images much more than what interpretation can offer: the slightly passive association between signifier and signified through the sign? Put another way, is there something alive within a religious image?

Symbols have power. What are the first thoughts you have when seeing a cross? Is it mercy, sacrifice, or knowledge? Accompanying the cross is the idea that all knowledge is bestowed within an icon. This knowledge is locked and encrypted so as to guard a secret. The power of secret knowledge, or the power of a secret in general, has for centuries