The Museum of Crime and the Museum of God

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May 16 - June 23, 2007

apexart

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apexart's exhibitions and public programs are supported in part with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts.

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ISBN: 1-933347-19-8

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A "museum" is nowadays an institution, an anchor of civic pride that comprises the local cultural treasury, often begun as a collection of trophies picked up in military or economic wars. In its older sense, though, a museum is a ragtag assemblage of bones and shells, reliquaries and chromolithographs, medical oddities and thinly veiled pornography. That sort of museum could once be found in storefronts, in the back rooms of bars, in tents on the fringes of popular resorts, and in wagons traveling an endless circuit of small towns. It might pretend to some edifying purpose, although that was transparently a hustle; on the other hand it could actually contain meaning, although very often one unknown to its proprietor and imparted to its visitors through some invisible means that bypassed thought. It is in that sense that this museum should be understood.

It is a collection of curiosities of sometimes dubious pedigree, assembled entirely from my walls, my filing cabinets, and my attic. The bipartite name, in part an homage to the nineteenth century language of broadsides and sermons, establishes the twin poles of a visual predilection. This predilection – not necessarily identical with a taste or a sensibility – is mine, although I don't entirely understand it.

I was born in the middle of the twentieth century in southern Belgium. My father's urban working-class family were probably not much more than Easter Catholics, but my mother came from the peasantry of the Ardennes mountains. There the faith was absolute and unquestioned, dark and punishing, image-ridden and all but animistic, based far less on scripture or theology than on barely syncretized pagan rituals from the old religion of the hills as it existed before the Roman conquest.

Religion supplied most of the aesthetic substance of my childhood. The first music I heard was Gregorian chant; the first paintings and sculptures I saw were displayed in the naves and side chapels of the many local churches. A large percentage of the decorative matter in our home was religious. This iconography had little in common with the anodyne nursery scenes and honey-colored Jesuses of present-day suburban Christianity. Our religious imagery was black and white and red. It was somber, forbidding, immediately menacing. It presented a world of stark absolutes. You could die at any moment – you could choke on your dinner or be run over by a streetcar – and then you would face the hanging judge, who had created you and therefore knew just how much of a sinner you were. There was no chance of going to heaven; the best you could hope for was an interminable sentence in purgatory.

There was worldly imagery out there, too, of course, if not a great deal of it. I read comics from an early age; my father read books about the war. We didn't have television – few did, there and then – and I didn't see my first movie until I was at least eight years of age. My mother was determined to preserve me from the corruption of adult popular entertainment. My first New York City memory, after we had emigrated to the United States when I was six or seven, is of walking down 42nd Street while my mother holds my head turned away from the sidewalk displays of the movie theaters. Naturally, it did not take me long to begin pursuing the forbidden, embodied as the imagery most actively shunned in our home. That wasn't sex, which was so far beyond the pale it was not even remotely alluded to, and it wasn't violence, exactly, since that permeated everything: religion, the war, every example of history. Rather, it was crime.

Crime was, above all, the repository of every mystery of adult life. It occurred at night, on city streets, in bars and nightclubs, and it involved women in low-cut evening gowns and men with their coat collars turned up. There was drink involved, and guns, but even more striking and enigmatic were the corresponding emotions: a kind of knowingness, a sort of cold passion, a dead calm in the midst of chaos. That much I was able to glean from the paperback covers and movie posters I occasionally saw. My father didn't like crime novels, but they came into our home anyway, since he had a sister and brother-in-law who were news agents and who fairly often sent us boxes of miscellaneous printed matter – they didn't discriminate among genres. Any lurid cover of a *Fleuve Noir* mystery, briefly glimpsed before it was silently whisked away, was a telegram from the actual world, the life that went on while I slept.

I did not grow up to become a criminal, although I made a few stabs at it in adolescence. I remained enthralled with the imagery of crime, however – one of the few things I've saved from high-school art classes is a meticulous copy of the cover of an Avon paperback of James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*. Eventually I began to write about crime, in both its fictional and nonfictional forms, for many of the same reasons that drew me to the subject initially – I was never as interested in violence as I was in the settings, the preliminaries, the characters, the language of cigarettes and currency and facial expressions, and the ways in which crime represented a momentary spike in the landscape of flat banality. Sooner or later it occurred to me that what we call crime – and here I mean property crime – is merely a form of commerce, labeled deviant because it is generally practiced by the powerless. I became increasingly interested in crime as its ostensibly legitimate analogues – ownership, marketing, development, growth, – increasingly dominated the formerly marginal world I inhabited.

In the meantime I had lost all attachment to religion, long ago, at the threshold of adolescence. But my fascination with the imagery of crime had led to a generalized fascination with the commonplaces present in that imagery: the bedrooms and gas stations and bus depots and vacant lots. I was drawn to emptiness and mundanity, as well as to the fleeting dramas that erratically lit up that empty landscape. The ecstatic counterweight to crime was religion, specifically the American phenomena of tent revivals and river baptisms. What I loved about the imagery of religion in pre-corporate America was its stubborn plainness, its resolute materiality. There was no fanfare, no gold, no Gothic architecture – the visual language of religion was consonant with the farmyard and the city street. Poverty constrained it, but dogma also assured its hard, unpainted surface, its words of one syllable, its metaphorical arsenal that translated scripture into the terms of a life dictated by landscape and weather.

And then I worked my way back, visually, to the religion I was born into, and discovered that it had much in common with its American analogue. It was dark and menacing because soil conditions were bad and climate could not be relied upon. Failure was the usual outcome. European Catholicism involved some knowledge of history, but it was history in the form of ruins, its grandeur a sort of unreliable memory. In both countries, religion and crime were outlets for the extreme emotions kept in check by the exigencies of labor.

Crime and religion are competing mystery cults, both pointing to doors leading out, to an unknown that might prove to be a void. Both trade in fear, with an occasional and fleeting dose of exhilaration. Their imagery has a great deal in common because they make allusion to a sphere outside daily life, but expressed strictly in terms of that life. Both are dominated by black and white and red, which are the shades of extremity. Both face down death by converting it into a promise.

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