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A Garden Divine: Beware of Snake

'Back to Eden,' at the Museum of Biblical Art

By **KEN JOHNSON** JULY 17, 2014

It's one of the greatest stories ever told, the Bible's tale of God, Adam, Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, as related in Genesis 2:4 to 3:24. Derived from Babylonian mythology, it circulated in Jewish oral tradition before being written down in the 10th century B.C. It's not long: In English translation, it amounts to fewer than 1,300 words. Despite its brevity and antiquity, it remains as resonant today as ever.

"Back to Eden: Contemporary Artists Wander the Garden," an exhibition at the Museum of Biblical Art, presents paintings, sculptures and videos by 18 artists, all produced since 2000. Organized by Jennifer Scanlan, a guest curator, it's uneven as an art show. But as a prompt for meditating on the story's events and dramatis personae and its relevance for these modern times, it has a lot going for it.

"1000 Paths (to the Divine)," a video projection resembling a psychedelic light show, by Sean Capone, spectacularly evokes the Creation. In the beginning, there are swirls of glowing color. Midway through comes a division of waters above and below. Flowers bloom and dissolve. Finally, the colors shrink to points of light in infinite blackness: the universe of space and time.

The end of the story is pictured in Fred Tomaselli's "Study for Expulsion," in which two little naked figures with their circulatory systems exposed walk away from a great, radiating pattern made of marijuana leaves, pills and tiny photographs of snakes, birds and bugs, all sealed under a smooth layer of resin. Adam and Eve are thus expelled into a world of strife and depravation, separated from the oneness of divine being. The

drugs in the picture allude to one way some people try to get back to that prelapsarian state.

Among the show's most striking works are those pertaining to the villain of the tale, the conniving serpent. A magical piece by Mat Collishaw consists of a dark mirror in an elaborate, baroque frame of lacquered wood and black Murano glass. Looking into the mirror, you see the animated video vision of drifting wisps of smoke and a snake emerging from darkness, scarily coming toward you with menacing eyes.

A goofy, long-tailed lizard the size of a big dog stands on four squat legs on a bed of live moss and succulents, like a prehistoric specimen model in a natural history museum. A sculpture by Mark Dion, it's called "The Serpent Before the Fall" (2014), referring to a theory that the serpent had legs before it was cursed by God to crawl on its belly for all time.

In "The Space Between Garden and Eve," a daguerreotype over three feet wide by Adam Fuss, a pair of big black snakes commingle on a mattress's quilted surface. This eerie image suggests that sexuality may have had something to do with Adam and Eve's fall from grace.

In "The Fruit Eaters," a large, smeary painting by Barnaby Furnas, a giant red snake circles around the blurry figures of Adam and Eve in the garden's tropical environs. The first humans are eating softball-size pieces of yellow fruit from which golden juice abundantly flows. There's a sense of greediness in their consumption. They've learned the thrill of surrendering to temptation.

Exactly what species the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was, no one knows, but in the context of this show, a sculpture by Rona Pondick is suggestive. It's a dwarf blue pine cast in bronze and painted gray with about two dozen little, shiny, copper-colored human heads, like buds, at the tips of its branches. It implies that the tree's fruit embodies some sort of supernatural, possibly demonic consciousness.

Several artists represent the post-lapsarian world as a man-made dump. "Gowanus," a large, florid painting of a sickeningly polluted urban canal, by Alexis Rockman, viscerally pictures paradise lost. Dana Sherwood's "Banquets in the Dark Wildness" addresses the dysfunctional relationship between humans and animals. It's a complicated assemblage of

cooking tools, fake food and small monitors showing nocturnal surveillance videos of raccoons exploring formal dinner arrangements that Ms. Sherwood sets up for them.

Other pieces in this vein are less affecting. A long plastic garden hose coiled like a snake, by Lynn Aldrich, called "Serpentarium" is clever but not deeply imaginative. Neither is a minor piece by Pipilotti Rist: a shelf displaying a plastic watering can, various commercial products and a flower-filled vase on which is projected a video of hands manipulating, tearing and crumpling flower blossoms.

As for regaining paradise, suggestions here are relatively feeble. Naomi Reis's drawings of buildings on stilts with plants growing all over them recycle an overly familiar architectural fantasy. Lina Puerta's lush, jewel-studded sculptures of fake plants spilling down from the top of a gallery wall similarly proffer botanical decoration as a way to restore balance between nature and culture.

It's both a strength and a weakness of the exhibition that it leaves you with many more questions than answers. What does Eden represent? A state of mind? A social utopia? An environmentalist dream? A memory of prenatal bliss? Union with the divine, whatever that might be? And the flaming sword placed by God at the east entrance to prevent people from returning, what's that about? Why should it be so difficult? What would it take to get back to Eden?

Perhaps art is a way to sneak back in — if only for occasional brief visits.

"Back to Eden: Contemporary Artists Wander the Garden" continues through Sept. 28 at the Museum of Biblical Art, 1865 Broadway, at 61st Street; 212-408-1500, mobia.org.

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