When Culture Is Challenged by Art: Pro-Life Responses in the Art of T. Gerhardt Smith to Cultural Aggression against the Vulnerable

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This paper examines three paintings by T. Gerhardt Smith as pro-life responses to the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia: Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome, Femicidal National Organization Woman’s Planned Parentless Selfish Movement, and Killer Caduceus. After identifying foundational principles of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective, the paper determines that Smith’s paintings are consistent with ideas enunciated in St. John Paul II’s Letter to Artists (1999).

T. (Thomas) Gerhardt Smith is an eclectic modern artist and an enigmatic personality. His paintings contain representational figures, yet the dominant content of most of his work is abstract. Few comments by the artist himself are extant to explain his work, and critical commentary and scholarship on his oeuvre is non-existent (for now). To compound the scholarly challenge, biographical detail about Smith is scant. According to his surviving relatives, Smith was born in 1944 and was a lifelong Wisconsin resident. Although he was raised Roman Catholic, he did not participate in Church sacramental life. However, his relatives assert that his Catholicism was evident in all his relationships and work (Nigro, personal interview). Credentialed with a BFA from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and a master’s degree in Education, several of Smith’s works were presented in an exhibition titled “Goliath Visiting,” held at the University of Notre Dame in October 1990. He was a selectee for the National Endowment for the Humanities Asian Studies Grant Program in 1988. Smith died in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on 15 April 2019.

Beyond these few biographical details, Smith produced several paintings which express not only the frustration of those who experience the cultural assaults on human life called abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, but also the sorrow, regret, and other intense emotions resulting from those

A longer version of this article will be published in the 2020 conference proceedings of the University Faculty for Life. See http://www.uffl.org for more information.

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assaults. It is hoped that the purpose of this research (to promote awareness and appreciation of Smith’s work) will be augmented by the criticism of many other pro-life scholars.

This paper consists of three major sections. The first section identifies foundational principles of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective, consistent with St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* (1999) which demonstrates how Catholic art aesthetics comports with and distinguishes itself from secular aesthetics. The second section examines specific paintings by Smith which represent an artistic consideration of the life issues. Expansive commentary will be provided on three representative paintings: *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome*, which comments on abortion (1988), *Femicidal National Organization Woman’s Planned Parentless Selfish Movement*, which applies to infanticide (1989), and *Killer Caduceus*, which can be interpreted as applying to euthanasia (1987). The final section of this research will evaluate how the paintings comply with St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists*.

When contemporaries hear the word “icon,” they invariably think of its technological denotation. The history of the term may have moved chronologically from the ancient Greek world to Byzantine icons to, with the advent of film technology, images of favorite actors, such as Gloria Swanson, or historical events now captured as iconic images, such as the Madonna-like image of the Kent State shootings. The pro-life world, also, has its accumulating collection of art work which is iconic. The pro-life catalog begins with Mary Cate Carroll’s painting/reliquary *American Liberty Upside Down* (1983) and advances to *The Silent Scream* ultrasound made famous by Bernard Nathanson and the monograph written by Donald S. Smith, elaborating the film (1984). The work of T. Gerhardt Smith should be considered the newest addition to the pro-life artistic canon; the three paintings specified above can be appreciated as pro-life contributions to illustrate problems created by abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

**ST. JOHN PAUL II’S LETTER TO ARTISTS (1999)**

While the vocabulary of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective is built on ancient Greek and Roman principles in terms of seeking truth, goodness, and beauty, Christianity brings several clarifying ideas to the study of what constitutes art. One cannot view either the embryonic art of the Migration Period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire or the full flowering of magnificent Renaissance or Baroque paintings and sculpture and not perceive the Christian appreciation of the human body as good, or God’s creation as beautiful, or the underlying ideas of the art work about human nature or divine teaching as true just as the ancients would have perceived.
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the proportion of the Parthenon or any Praxiteles sculpture as manifesting not only correct principles of design, but also commentary about what is true, good, and beautiful. The Christian development of ancient art aesthetics, however, clarifies those principles in several respects. St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* encapsulates these principles, nine statements from which I will highlight to advance the appreciation of Smith’s works.

John Paul II begins his *Letter to Artists* with a most interesting phrase, “new ‘epiphanies’ of beauty” which suggests that contemporary artists are the ones “who are passionately dedicated to the search for” new manifestations of beauty. Thus, while we may still value Renaissance and Baroque paintings, the pope maintains that contemporary artists are the ones who are open to expressing their ideas about the true, the good, and the beautiful in completely new forms. This is not a new axiom of art aesthetics; what we call modern art has aimed for “new ‘epiphanies’” since the mid-nineteenth century, just as the Renaissance was considered a new approach to art.

What are new principles are the following. An artist is not a creator, an attribute which belongs to God alone, but a “craftsman” since the artist “uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made in the image of God.” In speaking of “the special vocation of the artist,” the pope summarizes thousands of years of human history, nearly equivalent to art history, with this personalist approach: “The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture.”

The pope then demonstrates the chronological progression of this personalist approach, citing ancient art aesthetic theory, which is nearly identical with the Christian view:

The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: *kalokagathía*, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful.”

Since “beauty is the vocation bestowed on [the artist] by the Creator,” the pope further affirms that

Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste
this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole... Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning.

Of course, the world has added new artistic expressions beyond Renaissance and Baroque art, and the pope acknowledges this bifurcation of the art world, highlighting what may appear as the secularization of modern art: “It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself.”

Although this bifurcation of Christian and secular art may be the basis for discussion of much modern art (steeped not in the true, the good, and the beautiful, but the false, the bad, and the ugly or the grotesque), the pope sees hope even in such dismal productions of our modern art period, for, “Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”

The final statements of the pope’s letter prove quite challenging to the analysis of work by an artist like Smith: “Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God.” He further argues that “Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable.” Finally, quoting Polish poet Cyprian Norwid that “beauty is to enthrone us for work, and work is to raise us up,” the pope suggests that “People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.” The saint’s life-affirming and positive comments on artists and artistic production in Letter to Artists are as relevant today, when the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia relentlessly attack human life, as they were in 1999 when it was first published.

**SORROW WITHOUT TEARS:**
**POST-ABORTION SYNDROME (1988)**

The first painting to be considered, *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome*, is easy to understand as a work concerning abortion if only because the subtitle makes it clear: *Post-Abortion Syndrome*. Even if the subtitle were not present, the subject matter would be evident.

Smith’s comments on this painting (written in a syntax which is often telegraphic) should be noted first:
Living with the memory of the death of a child, the death of her motherhood . . . living with this memory, holding wrapping the child for the last time. Sorrow without tears, weapons of the love at her hand being wrapped with the child . . . bloody, red memory. Out of sight, not out of mind, but out of your mind. Post-Abortion Syndrome . . . simple format design, but I feel conveys a very strong message . . . death is, and expected, however premature death is the greatest tragedy. *(Artist’s Comments)*

That is what the artist himself had to say about the painting, but, if these notes were not available, what would the contemporary viewer see?

The painting depicts a woman and a child who seems to have been just recently born; the attached umbilical cord makes that apparent. However, the pallid color of the child, a girl, contrasts with that of the woman; if her flesh tones indicate that she is alive, then the presumption is that the child has died. Once these bare facts are understood, the deeper connection between the characters depicted becomes evident: the woman is most
likely the mother. Why else would she fix her vision upon the dead child and have such a sorrowful countenance? Besides that, her breasts are full, reinforcing the idea that she would have nursed the child if she were alive.

Once the facts of the painting and the relationship between the figures have been established, the viewer can extract more from the painting’s artistic components, especially applying conventional interpretations of color theory. The characteristics of specific colors identified in this research are culled from Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher’s monograph Color. That *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome* uses colors of highly connotative value can be addressed quickly and with certainty. The child, ghost-like, is depicted in simple ashen colors, almost a charcoal drawing instead of a lifelike representation of a newborn with lively flesh color. The child’s porcelain-like skin is accentuated by having her rest on a red blanket, red being a symbol of not only bloodshed, but also martyrdom. The mother herself, scantily clad, is barely covered in a yellow (connotative of the color of diseased matter) gauze-like garment, her body as exposed as her emotions. That she is silhouetted against a black and blue background, both colors connotative of sadness and evil, highlights her sorrow, as though she is as encased in sorrow as the child is encased in a baby garment surrounded by a blood image.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this painting is the gaze of the subjects. The mother is looking downward, and it is a psychological maxim that a viewer would feel or be comfortable looking at her since the gaze of sorrow would be avoided. The child, however, is looking directly at the viewer. Who gets the viewer’s attention, therefore, is entirely subjective, depending on the comfort of the viewer, but some speculation should be provided here. The painting could work in a post-abortion syndrome counseling session in one of two ways. If the aborted mother wishes to work through her desire to see the aborted child, then she would fix her gaze on the child in the painting; if the aborted mother is so bereft that she is still at the stage of fixating or obsessing on her own sorrow, then she would identify with the mother in the painting. Either perspective—a focus on the psychological damage to the mother or the body of an aborted child—is suitable, therefore, for beginning a conversation about what occurs in every abortion.

**FEMICIDAL NATIONAL ORGANIZATION WOMAN’S PLANNED PARENTLESS SELFISH MOVEMENT (1989)**

The second Smith painting to be reviewed here, *Femicidal National Organization Woman’s Planned Parentless Selfish Movement*, seems to address infanticide—“seems” being the operative verb since there is little com-
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mentary either from the artist himself or from extant exhibition material that the intentional killing of a born child is meant in this painting, which is much more abstract than *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome*.

*Femicidal* depicts four characters, three apparently human beings, the genders of whom cannot be determined with certitude; the figure on the left may be female, and the fully-clothed human figure on the right may be male, if the criterion of wearing a flowing dress or skirt indicates a female entity and wearing pants indicates a male one. Another character reclines on the lap of the female character. The remaining character is a skeleton hovering in front of the male character.

Like *Sorrow* discussed above, *Femicidal* involves a child reclining horizontally in front of the female figure, this time on her lap instead of placed in front of yet removed from her body. The male figure, reclining comfortably in the right portion of the painting, seems only a background for the more animated character, the skeleton, whose arm remains outstretched, most likely after having plunged some fatal instrument into the

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*Femicidal National Organization Woman’s Planned Parentless Selfish Movement.*

Source credit: Private collection of Dr. Samuel Nigro
child’s body. The dramatic irony of the painting is stunning and evident only when the viewer reflects that the skeleton, a dead artifact of what remains after bodily decomposition, is doing an action which rightfully belongs to the living human male being in the background.

What, though, does Smith’s painting have to do with infanticide? Can a rational case be made that the painting suggests the extreme negation of life which occurs in any infanticide situation? The little commentary mentioned above concerning this work includes artist’s notes which make it clear that one of the characters on the right is “striking out” (note the present participle) for the ostensible purpose of not merely harming but destroying “the future of the child” (Smith, Artist’s Comments). This language presumes that the child would have been born before his or her future could be directly attacked; thus, the painting is an abstraction of infanticide more than any other assault on human life.

Moreover, one can point to an item in the painting which suggests that an infanticide has occurred by analyzing the characters’ choreography.

*Killer Caduceus.* Source credit: Private collection of Dr. Samuel Nigro
Note that the child is not standing upright as the other characters are; even the skeletal character has the benefit of being “alive” because it is standing upright, being able to hold oneself upright constituting a feature of most living creatures. Something (a knife, blade, or some other linear object) has been plunged into the chest cavity of the child character positioned horizontally on the canvas. The association is evident: this action external to the womb was the means of the child’s death, not an action internal to the womb, which is the means by which unborn children are killed in abortion (either by abortion instruments, a toxic saline solution, or an abortifacient pill).

Finally, consider the circumstances within the painting. If this were an abortion-themed painting, the major character hovering over the child would be either dejected over the fatal choice of aborting the child or gravid in her pregnancy, with the same negative emotions attending the choice to kill the child. This is not the case here, since the figure hovering over the child’s body is expressionless because her facial features are smudged, precluding recognition, as though she has been forced into the infanticide by another agent (the male character, her lover, or, worse, her husband). The other characters’ faces are much clearer, so the narrative of the painting’s plot is shifted from the pain that an aborted mother would feel to the pain of the child him- or herself. A final consideration of the narrative is even more chilling: the male character, presumably the father of the child being killed, has abdicated his role of protector of the family; he is the agent who authorizes the infanticide.

**KILLER CADUCEUS (1987)**

If the previous two paintings illustrate how Smith’s abstraction gradient increases from dominantly realistic representation mingled with abstract forms to dominantly abstract forms with some realistic representation mingled with unrealistic forms (no one actually sees skeletons interacting with human beings), then *Killer Caduceus* illustrates dominantly abstract forms with the barest of representational figures.

The elements of the painting depict a menagerie of aviary and serpent forms—the entity in the one category being what looks like a bird, the others being what are more obviously serpents. Caught between these elements is what appears to be a human figure; at least one presumes that by virtue of the arms occupying the center space of the painting as well as the presence of a head, which itself is a hybrid of a human head and the face of another creature. That the color green occupies nearly half the painting is highly connotative. Where green in most representational paintings symbolizes fertility and normal growth, here the denotation of the color green,
especially coupled with the serpent which is also green, alters the connotation of green as normal and healthy to the other, common connotation of green as in something sickly, something vomited, or something venomous.

Is the interpretation here of the venomous nature of the green snakes justified? One could argue affirmatively for two reasons. First, the representational forms of the serpents are true to the natural world where there are indeed some snakes which are green which are highly venomous. Second, if this painting is in some way a caduceus, then the viewer realizes something has gone terribly wrong with this iconic image; the snakes are off the pole on which they are supposed to writhe. Thus, this convolution (leftist professors would say deconstruction) of the ancient symbol of the caduceus as a symbol of humanity’s effort to cure reinforces a stark function of snakes: they kill.

This last detail ineluctably leads into the consideration of this painting as a statement on euthanasia. The artist’s intent is not to comment strictly on abortion or infanticide, but on a broader category of attack on human life, euthanasia, which devolves on the idea of life unworthy of life beyond the chronological aspects which constitute the temporal domains of abortion and infanticide. A human life which is deemed unworthy of life can range from one’s being unborn to one’s babyhood; thus, abortion and infanticide are the terms used to denote killing human beings at those stages of life. However, euthanasia is the proper term for any other form of medical killing or assisted suicide perpetrated against human life from one’s childhood to the most advanced senior years. The artist himself suggests the true intent of the medical profession attacked by the death-inducing serpents; “cold death” is the more realistic and therefore honest meaning of “euthanasia”—not “good death” as its Greek etymology would suggest, but contrary to the protection of human life, lacking all human compassion and love, and therefore cold.

Now that these three paintings have been reviewed, the final section of this research will evaluate how the paintings comply with Catholic art aesthetics, especially enunciated through St. John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists*. This task is particularly challenging for the pro-life researcher since Smith’s art is negative on virtually all fronts. The topics are controversial; the figures depicted are tortured, morose, and nihilistic; the colors used are dark and sad; and the depictions are obscure, enigmatic, and non-representational. The summary opinion of the paintings could be that these are tortured works from a tortured artist unable to survive in a tortured contemporary world and whose viewers are tortured into deriving a tortured meaning from what is depicted. How, then, can Smith’s art comport with Catholic art aesthetics, especially those principles enunciated in not
merely a pope’s, but a saint’s correspondence to artists like him? Applying the list of nine highlighted statements will show that Smith’s paintings are, indeed, not only worthy of serious attention, but also consistent with St. John Paul II’s ideas about art.

The first two of the pope’s comments and their applicability to Smith’s works can be combined since they concern the nature of the artist him- or herself. The pope emphasized how contemporary artists “are passionately dedicated to the search for” new manifestations of beauty and that they strive for “new ‘epiphanies’ of beauty.” The mother in Sorrow is as beautiful as any Madonna from the Renaissance; her voluptuous form alone would justify this claim. That Smith uses a post-aborted mother as the subject for his painting, however, is so new in the repertoire of modern art that it is rare to find scholarly treatment of this image.¹

Depicting an infanticide as an act of a non-human entity hidden within or emerging from a human being and venomous snakes escaping the pole of the traditional caduceus are two manifestations of life-destroying actions which are new in the art world. Traditional infanticide paintings clearly depict human mothers smothering, strangling, or killing newborn children; see, for example, Joseph Highmore’s The Angel of Mercy (c. 1746). Smith’s work alters the dynamic completely. While the infanticide painting contains what looks like flowing garments as artistically rendered as any Baroque masterpiece, the infanticide occurs not at the hands of the mother, but by Death itself. Similarly, the depiction of the corrupted key symbol of the medical profession, the caduceus, should lead the viewer to a painful epiphany: the medical profession has turned from healing to killing.

The pope’s comment on the interrelationship between the good and the beautiful pertains to Smith’s work as well. Remember that St. John Paul II writes that “The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection.” The viewer cannot simply pass by Smith’s paintings without having such reflection generated by a quantity of questions: why this image, why this representational figure, why this color, why this abstract form, why this geometry between characters, why this darkness, why this light, etc. The answers to these questions will constitute the “fruitful” part of the pope’s equation. One must come to a conclusion about the ideas presented in the paintings.

The penultimate series of statements by St. John Paul II merges his commentary about what the inherent beliefs of the artist should be. What is Smith trying to say about “the inmost reality of man and of the world” in three remarkably dismal paintings? The absence of any redemptive figure or element in the paintings (there is no cross, no crucifix, no savior im-
age, no religious symbol in the works) forces even the staunchest secular person to wonder why. If the paintings celebrated abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, then the figures would appear, for example, as the jovial couple looking on the dead body of their aborted child, as in Mary Cate Carroll’s *American Liberty Upside Down*. Absent any celebration, then, the viewer must wonder where the redeeming value of such seemingly nugatory works resides. Recall that John Paul writes, “It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself.” Like the absence of redemptive figures in Dante’s *Inferno*, perhaps the central import of Smith’s depressing paintings is, paradoxically, the absence of any suggestion of a religious power. The humans depicted in the paintings clearly manifest how morose, depressing, nihilistic, and fatal their actions against human life become when God is absent.

The final highlighted statements from John Paul’s letter confront this humanism devoid of God which wrought such havoc in Smith’s world as of 1990 and continues to devastate our own, thirty years later. “Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption,” John Paul writes. “Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable [because] People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.” Smith’s works, simply by virtue of their existence, manifest this “universal desire for redemption.” Even though they may be uncomfortable viewing assaults against their fellow human beings, people still look, for example, at car accidents (the psychological principle of schadenfreude applies), yet they want to be freed from those horrors. They do not want mothers to participate in the killing of the unborn, or parents to authorize the killing of their newborns, or those in the medical professions to destroy human lives. These paintings, then, constitute a pictorial form of rhetorical negation, whereby one states what something is not for the express purpose of stating what something is. Knowing the evils of the threats against human life will, finally, assist us, as St. John Paul II urges, “to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.”

Pro-life academics are well aware that what they write about post-abortion syndrome, racial factors in abortion rates, or psychological ramifications of forcing the elderly to consider euthanasia instead of life-affirming medical care are vitally important contributions to counter anti-life
threats against human life. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Ring Cassidy’s work on post-abortion women is something everybody must know to be aware of the damaging psychological effects of abortion on women. Raymond Adamek’s sociological studies on demographics of anti- and pro-life activists are classic and should be mandatory for anybody active in either movement. Social scientists examine dehumanization as thoroughly as William Brennan did in his initial research into linguistic dehumanization (1995) and his subsequent expansion of that research in 2008.

What else remains? As every humanities academic knows, literature and artistic works benefit from a study of the credibility of the writers or artists and a logical analysis of their work, but the dominant Aristotelian concept in artistic production is pathos, the feelings or emotional power stimulated by the work. Because they can assist social scientists by illustrating the emotions affected or created by threats against human life, the Smith paintings enhance communication on the life issues. While it may be difficult for a female patient on the psychiatrist’s couch to talk about her abortion or a male patient to talk in a standard doctor’s office about his role in securing the death of his child, it is safe to discuss abortion when one talks about a figure in a painting. The same type of distance offered by the infanticide and euthanasia paintings may offer enough space for those suffering from these other assaults on human life to communicate their anxiety or guilt about those practices. Optimally, once viewers understand the works and reflect on their own experiences regarding the life issues, the paintings may also stimulate corrective action regarding the controversial issues they address.

Notes

1. One exception may be Agnete Strøm’s 2004 research into Paula Rego’s *Untitled: The Abortion Pastels* (1998–1999). However, one can argue that Strøm’s article is not so much research as propaganda.

References


Nigro, Samuel A. Personal interview. 10 October 2019.


