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ART

A Preacher's Art of Spreading the Word

The Rev. Ethan Acres isn't afraid to make a spectacle of himself through his work--in fact, it's his calling.

June 08, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

The Right Rev. Ethan Acres, as he calls himself, looks conspicuous in his powder-blue tuxedo jacket and white ruffled shirt. Standing outside the Patricia Faure Gallery in Santa Monica, where his artwork is on view, he speaks with a Southern accent that makes the president of the United States sound like a Yankee. "I've come to reweave the moral fabric of this sinful city," he announces.

Acres, 25, is a man with two callings--artist and preacher--that are inextricably intertwined. Schooled in contemporary art and recognized by some of today's leading critics, Acres makes work that is all about his faith. At the same time, his religious practices also often can be seen as works of art.

In his exhibition, titled "Lamb of God," paintings, sculpture and computer-enhanced photographic works combine unapologetic references to his Christian beliefs with a sophisticated acknowledgment of Pop and Conceptual art theories. For the run of the show, his mobile chapel, housed in a 1965 Shasta camper, is parked in front of the Bergamot Station gallery, and he will be holding a service at the gallery today at 11 a.m. "All faiths are invited," he says. Throughout the run, outfitted in a neoprene bodysuit with the word "Reverend" stitched on the back, Acres also will be performing baptismal ceremonies in an inflatable swimming pool.

Most of the show is about the Lamb of God theme--for example, there is a life-size mechanical re-creation of the lamb that runs in a circle inside the gallery.

"In the Book of Revelations, Christ is represented as a recently slaughtered lamb with seven eyes and seven horns," Acres says, to explain the work's appearance.

Acres says that, in fact, art is just his "sideline"; religion is his primary calling. Although the show at Patricia Faure is his first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery and he has only been in three group shows, his work already has been praised in *Art in America*, *Art Issues*, and *Artforum*. One critic remarked: "No one knows what to make of him. Everyone wants to think he's being ironic."

Easing himself into a chair in the gallery's office, Acres responds: "I don't intend there to be any irony. But people are going to read irony into it regardless of where I stand on the issue, and that's fine."

He points to a computer-enhanced painting of paradise where, clad in crimson robes, he and his wife both sport clown heads. He cites First Corinthians 4:10: "Paul talks about becoming a fool for Christ's sake. Religious figures would humiliate themselves in public in order to draw a crowd so they could preach the

Gospel. Early ministers would rub dung on their faces, which eventually led to the clown's use of face paint. You were showing your love of God by self-humiliation. I tend to make a spectacle of myself through my work. People think it's irony when, in fact, it's just funny."

Religion has been a major feature throughout Acres' unusual journey from his home in the small town of Fort Payne in northeastern Alabama to his current life in Las Vegas, where he lives with his wife Lisa. When he was 4, his mother, Mary Acres, a church organist, married Albert Satcher, a Southern Baptist minister who, at the age of 13, had climbed an electrical pole on a dare and was severely jolted after grabbing a high-tension wire. Near death, Satcher believed he saw the face of God, and though he survived, both his arms were amputated at the elbows and his hair turned white.

As a result of the experience, Satcher became a circuit minister, giving sermons at as many as seven churches on a single Sunday, with his stepson and wife in tow. "Albert led me down the path, and at the age of 10, I was preaching the night services," Acres says.

One Sunday, as the trio drove into the church parking lot, Satcher realized that his artificial arms had locked into place on the car's steering wheel. Acres had to reach under his stepfather's shirt and cut the leather straps, and Satcher ran into the church with Acres behind him, carrying the artificial arms. "The spectacle of his preaching without arms was incredible. Every person in the church went to the front and was saved," recalls Acres. "It was the most amazing religious experience, and for me, as a young boy, it was overpowering."

Afterward, Satcher frequently re-created the spectacle, with Acres holding up the limbs. "That was the point when I started thinking that the spectacle of religion is an overpowering phenomenon," Acres says.

Acres' great-grandfather and grandfather also were ministers, and his grandmother was a snake handler. He preached until he was close to 15, when his mother and Satcher divorced. Three years later, in 1990, he went to college and, as he puts it, "basically, I began to live a life of debauchery and sin in Texas."

At the University of Texas at Austin, Acres immersed himself in a life of drinking and dancing at bars. "It was a lifestyle I'd never had, sort of 'country comes to town,' " he explains.

In the UT art department, Acres studied painting with Peter Saul, the ribald expressionistic-Pop-style painter. Until then, Acres had been self-taught, and he'd earned his lunch money in high school by doing drawings for people or church murals. "They ended up looking kind of folksy due to a lack of skill, but my heart was in the right place. Like my grandmother used to say, 'God is colorblind and tone-deaf.' "

During the summer of his junior year in college, Acres went to stay near Hattiesburg, Miss., with his father, who is both a biker and a tattoo artist. One night, Acres wound up in a serious fight outside a bar. "I was really wasted. I went back in to drink, looked across the room, and saw this angel wearing a leopard-skin jumpsuit and big red earrings. She came up to me and just like Jesus stilled the waters, I felt really calm. She got me back to the righteous path." The vision was his future wife, Lisa Raif, who brought stability to the young artist's life.

At UT, Acres was encouraged by art critic Dave Hickey, who is on the faculty of the art department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In the fall of 1992, Acres made his first visit to Vegas, which he calls "The Devil's Playground."

"I loved it," he recalls. "It was almost like the prophets of old going into the desert to see visions. Instead of milk and honey, it was 99-cent buffets and free cocktails. The artifice and spectacle of it was perfect."

Acres enrolled at UNLV in 1993, with Hickey as his mentor. And it was in Las Vegas that he returned to his religious roots. "Las Vegas has the most churches per capita of any place in the U.S.," he says. After marrying Lisa at the Graceland Wedding Chapel, with an Elvis impersonator as witness, Acres decided to pursue his dormant calling.

But he ran into an initial complication. "In the South, as long as you have the calling, you can perform services," he says. "In Nevada, it is a much more official process." Two years ago, through a home-study course, he earned an honorary doctorate from the World Christianity Ministries in Fresno. Acres now signs his work with the initials "D.D.," for "Doctor of Divinity" followed by "M.F.A.," indicating the master's in fine arts he received last year from UNLV.

"I'm more proud of the D.D. than the M.F.A. to be perfectly honest," he says.

Wearing his powder-blue tuxedo jacket, he performs weddings as well as services at local pet cemeteries. He says, "I've taken it on myself to usher the spirits of dead animals into that great beyond filled with chew bones and catnip toys."

In his portable chapel, Acres delivers Sunday sermons at trailer parks around northern Nevada. He can be spotted on Fremont Street, Bible in hand, offering spontaneous oratory. "Street preaching is more reactive" he says. "You go out and draw a crowd and the confrontational element is what you feed off."

These days, Acres considers himself nondenominational. He aspires to nothing less than integration of his religion and his art.

"I consider the art to be a form of preaching, another way to spread the word," he says. "My intention is to put the fun back in fundamentalism."

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* The Rev. Ethan Acres, "Lamb of God," Patricia Faure Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., B-7, Santa Monica. Ends July 5. (310) 449-1479.