HEAVEN SENT

Josh Faught's exuberant fabric work melds pop references with deep religious themes.

by Glenn Adamson

We will reject White Nationalism. We will expose and oppose racial profiling in policing. We will work to end misogyny that enables sexism and a culture of sexual violence.

NOT EVERY CHURCH in America would greet its parishioners with these words, but they are affixed, Martin Luther-style, to the front door of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle. This gives perhaps some indication of the church's organizational mind-set. Back in 1972, its bishop denounced the bombing of North Vietnam. More recently, St. Mark's hosted a family of Syrian refugees, welcoming them with hand-sewn quilts laid across the beds in their new home. Steven L. Thomason, dean and rector of the cathedral, responded to the election of Donald Trump by issuing a press release that announced: "Our church stands as a sanctuary and safe haven for people threatened by those who would attack them."

Even knowing all this, you might still be surprised to walk into the cathedral's nave and confront a newly commissioned artwork by San Francisco-based Josh Faught. Two panels—each twenty-five feet tall and dyed in bright reds, purples, and blues—hang one above the other on one of the church pillars. Woven into the fabric are song titles from Belinda Carlisle's hit 1987 album, Heaven on Earth. The hanging also functions as a giant DVD cozy; discs of "Passions" (1999–2008), a bizarre soap opera with palpable religious undertones, are tucked into multiple pouches on each panel. The DVD jewel cases are lovingly hand-painted with nail polish and printed with episode numbers as though they were Psalms. The work is simply titled Sanctuary.

An ecclesiastical artwork as progressive as this must be counted a minor miracle, particularly in the dark days of early 2017. How did it come to pass? Part of the story, clearly, is the long-standing liberal vision of the church. Another part has to do with the patrons Bill and Ruth True, who are parishioners at St. Mark's. They commissioned the work and will eventually take private ownership, after it has been on display at the church for eighteen months (their home has high ceilings). A third factor is the unusual intertwining of religion and gay culture in Seattle—about which, more in a moment.

The rest we can attribute to the artist himself. When Dean Thomason discussed the commission with Faught, he said that it would be absolutely fine—in fact, it would be advantageous—for the work to express a commitment to gay pride. Faught says his first thought was "how about gay shame?" He has long been interested in the traumatic aspects of queer life: the fusion of desire and guilt that so many young people feel, the difficulty of coming out, the pain of family conflict. He has said that he can often tell when a work is finished because he starts to feel embarrassed.

In past projects (shown regularly at Lisa Cooley in New York, until that gallery's much lamented demise last year), Faught managed to project an air of confessionalism without actually giving that much away. The inclusion of found objects—like an oversize pink eraser stamped "For BIG Mistakes"—and the repetition of men's first names seemed to suggest regret and nostalgia, but this vibe was always balanced by sheer formal exuberance. Despite his seemingly improviso-
tory approach, Faught has an impressive command of weaving techniques and draws deeply from the discipline's history. It is telling that he often leaves threads hanging, as if the sculpture might still undergo a transformation, or even an unraveling; the artist says that one thing attracting him to textiles is that they “can all just come undone so easily.”

THE AWKWARD LEGACY of 1970s fiber art, which had a brief moment of institutional success and then fell from fashion, looms particularly large in Faught’s work. One can often detect subtle references to artists of that movement, and not just the safe ones like Sheila Hicks or Lenore Tawney but also figures like Walter Nottingham, Josep Grau-Garriga, and Claire Zeisler, artists whose hairy, let-it-all-hang-out sculptures now seem like countercultural relics. I spoke with Faught on this point a couple of years ago, and he noted that he was interested in the way that fiber art had sometimes acted as “a surrogate for political activity, particularly among feminist-identified artists.” Appropriating their vocabulary is an earnest tribute to this radical intent. Given the uneasy art-historical status of fiber art, however, quoting it could never read as straightforwardly heroicizing. Rather, Faught is acknowledging both the rebelliousness and the painful reality of a marginalized history.

Compared to earlier works, Sanctuary hints rather obliquely at the theme of anxiety by including badges that bear cringe-worthy jokes such as “I’m LOL’ing on the outside, but WTF’ing on the inside,” and by giving Belinda Carlisle top billing. As pop stars go, Carlisle, once a member of the Go-Go’s, has lost most of her previous luster and can be understood here only as a nostalgic reference to teenage enthusiams. Faught’s use of her album as the work’s conceptual scaffolding is ingenious, for not only is she a gay icon but also an object of Christian reverence. This last may seem a bit surprising, given the sexy persona that Carlisle projected on MTV back in the ’80s. But it turns out that there is an online subculture of true believers who take the phrase Heaven on Earth literally, parsing her lyrics as hidden expressions of godly devotion.

Faught is fascinated by Carlisle’s triple-coding, her ability to appeal equally to suburban kids, gay men, and devout Christians. His incorporation of her song titles into the banners echoes this, as it evokes both a listing of Bible verses and a homemade mix tape. He is also wickedly funny, and perceptive, to have paired her with the TV show “Passions.” The series was intended in earnest, and accepted as such by religious viewers. But its exaggerated emotions and creaky storylines—lots of dream sequences and flashbacks—earned it a place in the annals of millenial camp taste. By the late 1990s, even its daytime TV format seemed tragically dated, implying someone at home with nothing to do but cry.

The program’s showrunner, James E. Reilly, could well be construed as working from a queer sensibility. Prior to his efforts on “Passions,” Reilly achieved notoriety as the head writer for “Days of Our Lives,” creating storylines that were notable for their fantastical themes. The show could even be read as an allegory of the closet. Its plots often revolved around the dangers of sexuality; it was shot entirely indoors, probably for budgetary reasons, thereby engendering a feeling of claustrophobia.
Faught was an obsessive fan of "Passions" when it first aired, watching every episode on the cable channel Lifetime as devotedly as he had listened to Belinda Carlisle ten years previously. In Sanctuary, these two textual crushes—a secular pop album and a sacred soap opera—operate as complements. The juxtaposition is spelled out in the work's overall form, with one banner devoted to the A side of Carlisle's album, the other to the B side, one half dominated by red tones, the other, by blue. You could read that pairing as political if you wanted to, though there is also interior decoration to be considered—the stained-glass windows in the church have similar colors.

The quality of emotional attachment in Sanctuary's references is deepened through the work's materiality. Faught dyed the warp threads (the ones held in tension on the loom) using an uncommon technique: bundling them under a layer of ice that in turn was sprinkled with powdered pigments. Melting distributed the dye onto the cotton fibers slowly, producing an intense yet blurred effect. Further visual splendor was added through the use of a synthetic gold lamé weft. Cheap and cheerful, it may be (Faught bought the thread, all 600 spools of it, through the craft mega-chain Michaels), yet the gold adds a note of grandeur, equally reminiscent of a medieval tapestry and a drag queen's frock.

The duality that runs through Faught's work also has a particular local resonance. While researching the project, he learned about a gay club that had once existed in the city, set in a deconsecrated church building. Going variously under the names the Monastery or the Sanctuary, it started out in 1978 as a typical social club but later became notorious for drug use and hard-core sex. It was closed down by city authorities in 1985. Local historians have done important work in excavating this story and other materials from the city's underground history. Drawing particularly on the archives of St. Mark's late choirmaster Peter Hallock and queer activist Tim Mayhew, Faught has reproduced various flyers and other documents, and attached them to his banners with jumbo plastic clips. By alluding to these disparate strands, weaving them together in his work, he sought to do some justice to Seattle's queer history.

Despite the many layers of content in Sanctuary, the work ultimately resolves into a single line of inquiry: what is sacred, to whom, and why? Even to pose these questions is unusual in the history of ecclesiastical art; to do so by conflating spirituality with pop ephemera is rarer still. Religion is, after all, a domain of eternal faith. Believers may experience doubt; they may undertake complex theological speculation. But such investigations of the soul and mind are premised on certainties. Without conviction—in the case of St. Mark's Cathedral, a belief in the Christian God—there can be no transcendence.

Faught approaches these articles of faith as an outsider. Raised Jewish, he is today thoroughly secular and nonobservant; making the work, he "felt a little like Whoopi Goldberg in Sister Act." There is certainly an element of dissonance in Sanctuary, perhaps even of challenge—the worship of a former Go-Go is not exactly authorized by the Good Book. But the hanging is by no means a satirical artwork. Indeed, it seems founded on deep respect. Faught recognized the uplift that a church can provide, and looked for correspondences in his own experience. Lord knows, we could use more dialogue like this, occurring between people of very different worldviews and different passions. As a wise woman once put it: "I begin, baby, where you end. / We belong together." ("Circle in the Sand," Heaven on Earth, side A, track 2.)

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