

hollow hymns:
review of *the empty church*
at christopher cutts gallery

Curated by Rawish Talpur, featuring artists Christy Langer, Carlos & Jason Sanchez, Drew Simpson, Rae Johnson, Shinae Kim, Sherri Hay, Gordon Rayner, Jobelle Quijano, Richard Stipl, Janieta Eyre, Dana Holst, Daisuke Takeya.



Exhibition view of *The Empty Church* at Christopher Cutts Gallery.

Walking from a sun-mottled courtyard into an exhibition about loss and heartache brought about an internal reset. It was a moment to switch and enter a frame of mind for sombre reflection. Snuffed candles, vacant pews, prayers unanswered— each of these visuals were conjured in the mind’s eye with the title *The Empty Church*. The exhibition ruminates on loss, a haunting curation by Rawish Talpur at Christopher Cutts Gallery.

The first work I examined was an installation by Christy Langer, consisting of five components. There was a series of paintings arranged in a vertical line, accompanied by two sculptures on each side of the upper-mid section. Each painting is square, depicting small cream-coloured birds with various creatures. From top to bottom: *Sebastian* (2009) with a waterfowl (come to life in *Bird* (2012) by Langer); being attacked by two praying mantises in *Martyr* (2009); and being consumed by a fox with remnants of the other small birds as indicated by their skulls, *The Merry* (2009). The motif of the small cream-coloured birds is also maintained in the highly realistic sculptures installed alongside the paintings, *Bundles* (2009) and *Bundles II* (2009). They highlight the painted subjects, already easily identifiable against the merlot, nearly black background. The arrangement of the works suggest a cross, with another hint of Christianity through the stigmata on the birds. The symbol of the white bird representing peace is also implied, though the subjects are of a different species than the traditional dove. The works encapsulate the notion of pain on display, manifestations of violence, and looming loss—a fitting start to the exhibition.



Far left sculpture:

Christy Langer. *Bundles*, 2009. Resin, string, horseshoe nail, oil paint, 6 x 6 x 2.75 inches (15 x 15 x 7 cm).

Paintings at the centre, in order of descension:

Christy Langer. *Sebastian*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 18 x 18 inches (45.5 x 45.5 cm).

Christy Langer. *Martyr*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 18 x 18 inches (45.5 x 45.5 cm).

Christy Langer. *The Merry*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 18 x 18 inches (45.5 x 45.5 cm).

Far right sculpture:

Christy Langer. *Bundles II*, 2009. Resin, string, horseshoe nail, oil paint, 6 x 3.5 x 2 inches (15 x 9 x 5 cm).



Christy Langer. *Bounty*, 2010. Silicone, oil paint, glass, beads, urethane, 2.5 x 20 x 8.5 inches (6.5 x 51 x 21.5 cm)

Working with highly realistic forms, *Bounty* (2010) by Langer is a gripping display of a walleye, lacerated at its stomach to reveal a sprawl of gold eggs in a pool of blood. Langer's dedication is evident in the detail of each scale, the lustre of the golden eggs (the eyes in *Serpent* (2012) also by

Langer share this radiance), and the realistic drama of its arched pose.

On the note of documenting the dramatic is *Misuse of Youth* (2007) by Carlos & Jason Sanchez, depicting two uniformed individuals in camouflage in a shallow trench in the dirt. One of the subjects is resting on their back, still from the waist down though grasping the vest of the person leaning above them. Their companion has a hand on their chest with a face shrouded in worry. *Misuse of Youth* prompts one to reflect on war, the scale of violence perpetuated, and whether or not photography can capture the magnitude of truth and hurt it seeks to document. The scale works in its favour as it envelops the audience with the subjects nearly life-sized.



Carlos & Jason Sanchez. *Misuse of Youth*, 2007. Inkjet print, 58.5 x 87 inches (148.5 cm x 221 cm). 60.75 x 89.25 inches (154.5 x 226.5 cm) framed.

Meanwhile there are smaller works that require inspection, such as *Untitled* by Drew Simpson. In it, there are twelve squares surrounding a large square at the centre, each a finely-detailed work against a black background. The still-life works focus on various meats (their respective sources) and other forms of nourishment. It considers the cost of sustenance and the cycle of consuming.



Drew Simpson. *Untitled*, 2008. Oil on masonite, 23.5 x 23.5 inches (59.7 x 59.7 cm).

Continuing the idea of cycles is *Death of the Child* (1985) by Rae Johnson, one of the two poles of the exhibition. The unsettling painting features swarms of colour emanating from the writhing bodies. The layers of limbs, faces, snakes, and light make for a confrontational and almost violent display. Recognizing that this work developed from an attack of sexual violence against a child and their murder, the distortions and violations of autonomy make for an unnerving experience.



Rae Johnson. *Death of the Child*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 78 x 89 inches (198.1 x 226.1 cm).



Sherri Hay. *So Full is the World on Calamity That Every Source of Pleasure #1*, 2007. Charcoal on mat board, 29.75 x 39.5 inches (75.5 x 100.5 cm). 32 x 42 inches (81.5 x 106.5 cm) framed.



Sherri Hay. *Game Three*, 2006. Charcoal on mat board, 29.75 x 39.5 inches (75.5 x 100.5 cm). 32 x 42 inches (81.5 x 106.5 cm) framed.

Game Three (2006) by Sherri Hay, further recognizes the violent nature of loss. Within the work are layers of people: an audience viewing a crowd of people fighting in a enclosed area, at the centre is one individual on a platform under the glow of spotlights. *Game Three* deftly depicts the spectatorship inherent in witnessing another person experience hardship and the voyeurism of watching people experience anguish rather than feeling it firsthand. Sherri Hay's second work *So Full is the World on Calamity That Every Source of Pleasure #1* (2007) continues the buzzing and chaos in the mass of people climbing and thrashing in a confined area. The black and white works stand in contrast to Shinae Kim's *Circe's Bath* (2024) and *Saturday's Inferno* (2024), alternating along the same wall. Kim's works mirror the choreography and composition of visual dramas of yore, though substituting the naturalistic forms for crude brush strokes and a more lurid palette to depict the vortex of bodies. They successfully balance Hay's works: rough and fine, saturated and monochrome, choreographed and chaotic— all capturing destruction and loss.



Shinae Kim. *Circe's Bath*, 2024. Oil on panel, 38 x 44 inches (96.5 x 112 cm).



Shinae Kim. *Saturday's Inferno*, 2024. Oil on panel, 40 x 50 inches (101.5 x 127 cm).

Though in my eyeline as I entered the exhibition, I had not reflected upon *The Empty Church* (1994) by Gordon Rayner until halfway through the visit. The work features two dogs in attack before an altar. There is a child surrounded by divine rays in a wooden shrine with a floral arch. The fight between the dogs has added an element of chaos to the space of devotion through the splatters of blood and the fallen candles. Rayner's depiction is of a violent sort of prayer, marking the change from supplication to desperation.



Gordan Rayner. *The Empty Church*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 71 x 54 inches (180.3 x 137 cm).

Christianity is further felt in *What Gives You the Right to be Held* (2022) by Jobelle Quijano. In the painting are two scenes, the first is of two individuals seated on a bed, one with hands folded as they look down towards the second subject as they clip the former's toe nails. Within the second scene (the right third of the painting) are two individuals gazing towards each other, eye-to-eye. Between the two subjects and staring outwards is a goat figure, often associated with Satan. This stands in contrast to the crucifix in the earlier section of the painting. The hazy layer and the warped perspective of the goat-gaze perspective bring about a dreamlike quality to the work.



Jobelle Quijano. *What Gives You the Right to be Held*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (91.5 x 122 cm).



Richard Stipl. *Untitled*, 2010. Modelling clay, oil, and hair, 11 x 16 x 5 inches (28 x 40.5 x 12.5 cm).

Following suit in surreal nature is *Untitled* (2010) by Richard Stipl, a bust of a nude, frail individual. Their eyes are nearly entirely black with long, wispy, white eyelashes extending towards their nose. Their ears are large and complement the curvature of their bare head. The sheen of the surface of the sculpture can be seen on the scalp, the wide smile and cheeks, the curve of the nose bridge, and in the protrusions of the collarbones and ribs. The most notable feature is worn around the subject's neck, a bird's foot—wearing death on their chest.

Overt displays of death are the focal point of Janieta Eyre's works in the *Rehearsal* (1993-1994) series. Each of the photographs feature the subject in a lifeless sprawl on the ground, limbs extending outwards. These contemplations of death consider the mortality of the self and the question of: What if it ended here? At any moment that chapter of our life could conclude, whether it is in the kitchen, at the end of a drink, or while restrained in an unfamiliar room.



Janieta Eyre. *Rehearsal #12*, 1993-1994. C-print, 11.5 x 17 inches (29 x 43 cm). 21 x 25.5 inches (53.5 x 65 x 4 cm) framed.



Janieta Eyre. *Rehearsal*, 1993-1994. C-print, 13 x 19 inches (33 x 48.5 cm). 22 x 28 inches (56 x 71 x 4 cm) framed.



Janieta Eyre. *Rehearsal #16*, 1993-1994. C-print, 13 x 18.5 inches (33 x 47 cm). 24 x 27.5 inches (61 x 70 x 4 cm) framed.



Janieta Eyre. *Rehearsal*, 1993-1994. C-print, 13 x 15 inches (33 x 38 cm). 22.5 x 23.75 inches (56.5 x 60.5 x 4 cm) framed.

Reorienting myself in the gallery, I find myself before the second pole of the exhibition, Rae Johnson's *The Dawn* (1985). In it are two subjects, one resting in bed while the other is seated in their company. *The Dawn* reminds one of the labours of taking care of those that are facing sickness: at which point did they go from healthy to ill? From vitality to fragility (as seen in *Untitled* by Stipl)? It's not quite the same as a sudden death, with the witnessing of ongoing treatments and periods of remission— one must witness the gradual decline of health in their loved one. *The Dawn* embodies the fatigue in addition to extended mourning and grief, captured aptly in Johnson's work.



Rae Johnson. *The Dawn*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 79 inches (157.5 x 200.5 cm).

With loss comes loneliness and isolation, a fragmented sense of being. *Casket* (2015) by Dana Holst harnesses this sentiment in the pockets of identifiable features: two tired eyes, the hint of a brow arching into a nose, a smudge of a mouth, framed by swaths of hair. While the earlier black and white works held a vivacity, this painting gives the impression of fading out. The isolation is further felt in *Ishinomaki Okawa Elementary School* (2015) by Daisuke Takeya. Said work depicts a bright sky, a gradient of cobalt through powder blue. In the lower right corner of the painting are buildings situated before green hills. There is a highway establishing perspective in the lower left corner, with the road going past the buildings into the greenery. While beautiful, the isolation through the lack of people is clear. Were those buildings left behind as a testament to the community? Are there people we cannot see? Will anyone return?



Dana Holst. *Casket*, 2015. Oil and encaustic on paper, 22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm).

Not all questions are answered, though they make for a meaningful gallery visit. Similarly, not all loss can be translated into something soft and palatable. The works in *Empty Church* are still mesmerizing and beautiful, though not in a comfortable way that puts one at ease. Loss can be a monstrous, massive, writhing thing that



Daisuke Takeya. *Ishinomaki Okawa Elementary School*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 36 x 46 inches (91.4 x 116.8 cm).

leaves one as a spectre or husk of their former self. The displays of pain coupled with the desire to make pain beautiful make for hauntingly alluring experiences. On the other hand, it can be more powerful to exhibit the way in which pain is horrific, uncomfortable, and graphically violent. Talpur's curation strikes a careful balance between the two, making for a poignant exhibition.

The Empty Church
Christopher Cutts Gallery
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Toronto, ON.
July 20, 2024 - August 10, 2024;
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