

About
Contributors
Support
Jobs
Shop
Snap Review
Podcast

Contemporary
Art Review
.la

Anachronism and Apocalypse: Notes on the Contemporary Medieval

March 1, 2023
Text by Isabella Miller

Search
Carla en Español
Newsletter
Contact
Submit
Index



Elaine Cameron-Weir, *Dressing for Windows/ Dressing for Altitude/ Dressing for Pleasure (detail)* (2022). Fighter jet seat, bronze statue, stainless steel barrel cart, leather jacket, meat hooks, conveyor belt, pulleys, and hardware, 144 x 87 x 150 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.

In the 1980s, Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco linked neo-medieval style with apocalypticism. For Eco, the modern fascination with the Middle Ages visible across twentieth-century popular art and architectural forms (Hearst Castle in central California, the early films of Ernst Ingmar Bergman, mass-market paperbacks like Arthur H. Landis' 1976 *A World Called Camelot* and J.R.R. Tolkien's 1955 *The Return of the King*) might be ascribed to the era's troublesome social, political, and economic dynamics, such as the rise of fascism and neoliberalism's increasing hold on global economic and political structures. These circumstances mirrored changes that burgeoned in the medieval era between 1100 and 1500, when capitalist economies began to supersede feudalism, nation-states became primary political units, and heresy (the culture war of yesteryear) was rendered a punishable offense.

Judgment Day was a cornerstone of medieval ideology, and because its imminent arrival was perpetually deferred, it always loomed large in the medieval imaginary. Eco writes: "These Middle Ages [...] still accompany us and will continue to do so, until midnight of the Day After. Source of so many insanities, [the Middle Ages] remain however as a permanent warning. Sometimes it is not so medieval to think that perhaps the end is coming and the Antichrist, in plainclothes, is knocking at the door."¹ In the mid-late twentieth century, medieval narratives, atmospheres, and archetypes became especially enticing tools to register an enduring doomsday anxiety. According to Eco, we were "dreaming the Middle Ages"²—a dream from which we've not yet woken. Caught between the environmental, political, and economic crises of today, it's not difficult to imagine humanity's imminent demise.

Just as Eco saw traces of medieval fascinations across pop culture in his lifetime, over the past few years, neomedievalism has made a pronounced resurgence, saturating contemporary cultural production with tales of nuns, knights, courtly love, and mortal sin. From Jos Charles' poetry collection *feeld* (2018), Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *Lapvona* (2022), and Lauren Groff's novel *Matrix* (2021), to films like Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* (2021), David Lowery's *The Green Knight* (2021), and Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (2022), popular interest in totalizing (if not always historically accurate) medieval worldbuilding seems to be more widespread than ever. But as the genre increasingly appears in visual art, its relationship to anachronism takes on a slightly different form. From the *commedia dell'arte*³ masks present in the paintings of TARWUK, Joel Dean, Adam Alessi, and Victor Boulet, to the sculptures of Kira Freije, Rochelle Goldberg, and Cameron-Weir, these and other artists strategically appropriate icons and symbols invoking the medieval, rather than attempting to immerse the viewer in a contained narrative fantasy of another historical moment. In other words, they emphasize anachronism to reveal something about our current world.

Like Cameron-Weir, Goldberg and Freije often work with imagery rooted in medieval Catholic art and architecture that nevertheless resonates in our present historical moment. In Goldberg's *Intralocuters* series (2017–present), for instance, she works primarily with the "Composite Magdalene" of Roman Catholic theology, specifically Saint Mary of Egypt, a former prostitute who, upon visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, ventured into the desert to live devoutly in solitude.⁴ Across the series, Goldberg renders Mary of Egypt as one with her environment through organic and inorganic materials—ceramic, steel, wood, human hair, animal fur, and feathers. This depiction of Mary as inextricable from the Earth provides a welcome foil to increasing attempts to escape it, like recent responses to the realities of climate change that embrace virtual or cloud-based worlds.⁵

Freije's recent sculptures also traffic in a kind of hyper-materiality, albeit one more rooted in design and industrial materials. Composed of cage-like metal bands, the figures either resemble or are interspersed with light fixtures. They kneel and stand in various positions of awe and cowardice as though mimicking the postures painted in Renaissance depictions of Judgment Day. But instead of ascending to heaven among angels, or descending into hell among devils, Freije's subjects are cyborgs, not the souls of mortals. In her merging of the technological with the human form, Freije asks us to imagine a future in which the human and the commodity can no longer be effectively distinguished.

Like Freije, Cameron-Weir harnesses neomedievalism to further an investigation of the commodity form, a Marxist term that describes the way in which so many features of cultural life have taken on the form and function of objects that are salable or exchangeable. In *Joy in Repetition* (all works 2022), two similar industrial fireproof doors lean against the gallery's back wall, providing weighted support to two identical hanging bronze reliefs of a fallen Christ being tended to by his acolytes. The sizes of the massive doors and smaller reliefs are proportional to each other and, like most objects in the exhibition, cold and greyish in tone. The phrase *Joy in Repetition* reads like ad copy or a hokey slogan touted by a furniture store—an ironically upbeat title for a work that summons both Jesus' sacrifices for humanity and the power and dangers of industry. The work flattens two disparate temporal lines through their formal similarities, creating an aesthetic harmony that enables Cameron-Weir's wry subversion of contemporary marketing clichés.



Kira Freije, *the sudden sleep* (2022). Stainless steel, cast aluminum, and copper, 61 x 40 x 40 inches. © Kira Freije. Image courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

Juxtapositions of medieval Catholicism and contemporary consumer culture also structure Cameron-Weir's *Florid Piggy Memories brought to you on the wing of the Common Ground Dove/ Dressing for Lectern*. In this work, a dirt-smeared display case that might have once contained jewelry or watches is instead filled with slides depicting medieval religious sites and modern violence alike. The images include a depiction of the Virgin and Child from a thirteenth-century missal, the Salisbury Cathedral, the Gurk Cathedral, a series of concrete blast walls, and the stern deck of the battleship USS *Nevada*, which was subject to atomic bomb tests in 1946.⁶ Each photograph, adorned with an ornate pewter frame, is joined to its neighboring photograph with small, circular electrical components recalling jewelry clasps. First, Cameron-Weir materially and conceptually

links medieval religiosity and its orientation towards Judgement Day with the twentieth-century development of world-ending bombs. Then, she turns the fear, grandeur, and gravitas of God and the A-bomb into mere ornaments, as though the end-of-world anxiety of today was already expressed through, or implicated in, the commodity form.

Cameron-Weir's assemblages respond to, rather than erase, the fraught prehistories of the objects that comprise them. *Dressing for Windows/ Dressing for Altitude/ Dressing for Pleasure* positions a damaged fighter jet seat opposite a sculpture of the Virgin Mary kneeling in prayer on a furniture dolly. Their colors and curved forms are uncannily similar, and they both function as counterweights to a leather jacket affixed with meat hooks to a vertically-suspended conveyor belt. Here, the violence of Christ's crucifixion implied in Mary's piety is paralleled with the violence of a fighter jet that has presumably been struck down and plundered. The meat hooks and leather suggest further violence, still, pointing to the brutal slaughter and processing of animals. *Dressing for Windows* evokes an overdetermined narrative of violence that lingers throughout the show yet is impossible to fully comprehend—much like Eco's account of the endurance of apocalyptic anxieties.

Many expressions of the neomedieval respond to present desires to remystify our relationship to society, the Earth, and ourselves. They offer us a chance to escape—or at the very least, aestheticize—the powerlessness we feel in an increasingly technologized and globalized world. But rather than provide avenues away from our world, Cameron-Weir and her contemporaries route us back to it through the deep past, as if to say the medieval is once again contemporary.

This essay was originally published in [Carla issue 31](#).

-
1. Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, new ed. (London: Vintage, 1995), 72. (Original work published 1973). ↵
 2. Eco, 104. ↵
 3. Commedia dell'arte was an early form of improvised theater that emerged in the 1600s, not in the Middle Ages. However, neomedievalism is an aesthetic mode that collapses distinctions between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. The flattening of the two eras abounds in popular media like *Game of Thrones*, or even at the Renaissance Faire, a primary site of neomedievalism. ↵
 4. Western Catholicism characterizes Mary Magdalene as a penitent sinner partially because biblical exegeses from the Early Middle Ages conflate her with St. Mary of Egypt. See: Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994). ↵
 5. See: the island country of Tuvalu's plans to upload the country to the metaverse. Simon Kofe, "Rising sea levels force Tuvalu to move to the Metaverse: COP27 speech," YouTube, November 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXpeO5BgAOM>. ↵
 6. Alex Fox, "Researchers Locate Wreck of Battleship That Survived Pearl Harbor and Nuclear Bomb Tests." *Smithsonian Magazine*, Smithsonian Institution, May 13, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/wreck-battleship-survived-pearl-harbor-and-nuclear-bomb-tests-found-180974860/>. ↵



Isabella Miller lives and works in Los Angeles.

[More by Isabella Miller](#)