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By Peter Aspden

The Vatican hopes to reunite art and faith with its debut at the Biennale



'In Principio' by Italian collective Studio Azzurro (2013)

Contemporary art has not, in recent years, enjoyed the most cordial relationship with religion, and with the Catholic church in particular. Witness its notorious contribution to the subject at the end of Christianity's second millennium: Maurizio Cattelan's "The Ninth Hour", starring sculpture of the Royal Academy's *Apocalypse* exhibition in 2000, showing a life-sized waxwork of Pope John Paul II struck down by a meteorite. The work struck a tone halfway between pathos and parody, but respectful it wasn't.

So the news that the Vatican was participating in this year's Venice Biennale for the first time in its history caused more than a parochial stir in art circles. It had wider philosophical ramifications. Here was an opportunity, as described by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the pontifical council for culture, to begin to "heal the rift between art and faith" that has been a feature of western thought for the past 150 years or so.

The stakes are high: for the Vatican, it is a chance to show it can engage with contemporary culture in an atmosphere that is liberal, irreverent and playful. The Biennale, on the other hand, faced with an art scene that becomes ever more dominated by commercial interests, wants to show that even here, art can deal with one of its traditional remits: a serious reflection of the sublime.

The Pavilion of the Holy See in Venice's Arsenale district – a station of peace in a former factory of weapons – is conceived in three parts, based on the book of Genesis. The first deals with the theme of Creation; the second with “Uncreation”, or the fall of man; and the third with “Recreation”, the charging of a new meaning for humanity's existence.

The narrative may be theologically inspired but the artists chosen to address the theme are not authors of sacred works. They are Studio Azzurro, an Italian collective who work with interactive mixed media; the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka, best known for his shots of the Prague revolution in 1968; and the Californian environmentalist painter Lawrence Carroll. Each has been commissioned to deal with one of the three parts of the central theme.

The pavilion will be introduced with a link to the Vatican's illustrious history in commissioning art: a triptych of images based on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel vault by the Roman artist Tano Festa.

“This art is not destined for liturgical purposes,” said Cardinal Ravasi at the unveiling of the artists at the Vatican earlier this month. “That may happen at some point in the future. But what we want is to begin to repair the fracture that occurred between art and faith.” In the face of an art world that was often provocative, and occasionally blasphemous, he said, it was important for the church to engage in an “authentic dialogue”.



Part of Lawrence Carroll's take on the theme of 'Recreation'

That desire is echoed by the artists. Carroll, who was born in Melbourne to an Irish mother, does not describe himself as a “religious artist”, although he does admit to being a practising Catholic “at times”. He says he was surprised by the commission. “But they invited me because of my past work, not to follow some script. They will fit in their ideas around the work I have been doing for the past 30 years.” He, too, sees the pavilion as instrumental in forming a new liaison between art and faith. “I think bridges are important. And this pavilion allows a bridge for the exchange of ideas, for conversation.”

Carroll was chosen for the final part of the Genesis trilogy, that of “Recreation”, for the references in his work to Arte Povera and the reuse of found objects. Studio Azzurro will use their 120 square metre installation space to evoke a mass of stone, gradually opening to reveal the creation of the animal and vegetable kingdoms, while Koudelka’s photographs engage with more sombre themes: war, environmental destruction, the clash between nature and the industrial world.

The artists have been deliberately chosen for the abstract qualities in their work. “We didn’t want to start by saying, ‘Make us three Crucifixion scenes, or three Madonnas,’ ” said Cardinal Ravasi. The themes covered in Genesis were universal. “This is the start of a journey,” he said of the Vatican’s involvement in contemporary art’s most eminent festival. “It is not the finish.”

There has been controversy in the Italian media over what have been described as the high costs of the participation, although the Vatican was at pains to point out that its true costs, €750,000, are being met entirely by sponsors and donations.



Josef Koudelka's 'Trittico' (1986-97)

Paolo Baratta, president of the Biennale, says the Vatican's debut is a "significant development" in an age that has seen contemporary art achieve mass popularity, and become threatened by the dangers of "commodification". He said the pavilion would prompt a "vaster and more captivating debate on art".

For these reasons, the Holy See's pavilion promises to be one of the chief talking points of the Biennale. Micol Forti, curator of the Vatican's contemporary art collection, says it is an idea whose time has come. "The Biennale is a place of exchange, and of diversity, featuring every type of culture," she says.

She sees the rupture between art and faith as part of a broader breakdown "between art and society" that took place in the middle of the 19th century. "It caused many of the dialogues to be interrupted, and you can still see the results today," she says. "You can see it in the reaction of the public before contemporary art. When children are put in front of a Mondrian, for example, they say one of two things: either that it is an advertisement for shampoo, or they say, 'I could do that'.

"Our civilisation has been wounded by these fractures, but we believe we can begin to heal them. And the beautiful thing about wounds is that they leave scars. And it is important to conserve the scars too."

Runs from June 1 to November 24