

Art review: At Able Baker, a show on spirituality feels disjointed, but that's not all bad

'The Pilgrim's Progress' takes the unusual step of including historical reproductions of Shaker images.

“The Pilgrim’s Progress” is Able Baker Contemporary’s quirky but ostensibly unironic foray into spiritual art. It’s a fascinating show with a bizarrely functional aesthetic. If you could call it “beauty,” it would be the type the surrealist Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore-Lucien Ducasse) famously described as “beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella.”

The goal of “Pilgrim’s Progress” appears to be a broad view of regional religious and spiritual art. It reaches from mystical modernists like Richard Brown Lethem to street-style, posterized Christian “icons” to Shaker “gift drawings.” But the title even tilts toward a false start. It refers to the 1648 Christian allegory written by John Bunyan: “The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come; Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream.” It has long been a particularly popular Christian text, but Bunyan was a Christian on the edge: He spent many years in prison for his semiheretical acts and texts. Bunyan worked on “Pilgrim’s Progress” while in prison for his religious activities. Waterman’s “Angeles Domini” combines the visionary with the institutional in a clearly devotional manner: A man has a church, literally, growing out of the top of his head.

Lethem’s visionary scenes pop with authenticity in this context, but they are the exceptions. Each sets up its own system, although, ultimately (and

I imagine, unintentionally, since Lethem is a Quaker) they can work well as Christian-based mystical meditation objects. “Horses of Plenty” has a cross at its center. “Prairie Dog” circles in on its ground dweller as a circle over a horizon-lined landscape. And “Touch Stones” follows a triangle to make a trinity of simple objects, including a cross and a holy-ghostish feather. Whatever your take on his work, however, Lethem is strong in this context.

There is also strong work that simply feels out of sorts when presented as primarily spiritualized.

Haley Josephs’ “Eve” is more art historical than biblical. A 1519 Durer print shows a pair of thoroughly secular peasants at the market. And Elizabeth Jabar’s images are strong and psychologically complex, but they are fundamentally humanistic. Her pair of silhouetted profiles deliver racialized images with a basic nod to community and added multiplicities of forms (faces, fires, ladders, tents), but the sense is heritage, not metaphysics.

Jon Blatchford’s acrylic over laser print scenes are similarly engaging as artworks, but they fail to connect to any sense of higher power, except possibly in a Shaker-like salt-of-the-earth sense along the lines of, say, Jean-François Millet’s French peasant labor scenes, such as his 1850 “Sower.”

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Winslow Homer and Frederic Church began a path of painting in Maine that aligned with the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. To be sure, there is a spiritual clutch to the nature worship broadly evident in ambitious Maine plein air painting.

So, on a basic level, the idea of serious spirituality aligns the works in "Pilgrim's Progress" with traditional regional sensibilities, but the show feels like an encyclopedic attempt that fell short.

The Shaker works, to be sure, are fascinating, but without appropriate institutional peers, they feel isolated, like outsiders. And in religious terms, that is an uncomfortable perspective.

Lautréamont's awkward notion of beauty is fitting to "Pilgrim's Progress" because it revels in the uncanny aesthetic of disjointed elements under bright, well-focused lights. And this is true of seeing spiritual (or "mystical" or "religious" – all these terms are, to a certain extent, insufficient and misleading) work in an art gallery, curated with a Frankensteinian combination of commercial art gallery, museum and contemporary kunsthalle logic.

In a museum, if the goal were didactic or historical, the Shaker reproductions could work, but in a gallery alongside works by so many contemporary artists, it's too much of what we might find on a dissecting table when we expect something a little more alive.

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