Catalogue Preview

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Ronald Christ: Poetic Fictions

Survey Exhibition 1976 - 2012

September 16 - December 16, 2012

Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University
Wichita, Kansas
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Introduction Excerpt

Patricia McDonnell

“I can make a landscape like Mr. Paul Cézanne,” writer Ernest Hemingway exclaimed. “I learned how to make a landscape from Mr. Paul Cézanne by walking through the Luxembourg Museum a thousand times with an empty gut.” He continued, “all such people [artistic predecessors] are easy to deal with, because we all know you have to learn.”

Strong artists appreciate that each artist develops their own expressive language drawing judiciously from earlier artmaking. Ronald Christ is conscious of both the artistic precedents that motivate him and his fresh artistic idiom. Too easily, we fall into the casual habit of stating that one artist influenced another. That flat assertion fails to reflect the nature of inspirational sources, for artists don’t develop passively or in isolation. Rather, they reach for original expression by building from existing models, consciously selecting and internalizing lessons for their own ends and finding new interpretations that suit their artmaking. “We all know you have to learn,” says Hemingway of this dynamic rather glibly yet correctly. Christ is a master of this balancing act. His work exhibits a reverence for time-honored techniques and clear admiration for past masters, while it also carves new expressive and richly rewarding terrain. The present exhibition—a survey of nearly forty years of artmaking—demonstrates his exceptional ability and rigor. Indeed, the accumulative, compounding effect of these paintings, drawings, and watercolors secures his standing as an artist of considerable merit. As Hemingway might state it, he’s clearly learned a thing or two.

Conceiving an image with the visual dynamic and punch of a Christ painting or drawing is a great feat, and the artist acknowledges the labor each entails. Carrying through, mastering control, maintaining exact geometries, executing his strokes meticulously—rare artists have the well-honed technical prowess so
magnificently on display in Christ’s work. Here, his admiration of French artist George Seurat and Italian Georgio Morandi, also artists of uncanny technical precision, makes perfect sense, because Christ’s careful insistence on exacting skill shines through his entire career. Certainly, the visual interplay, arresting subjects, and potent themes are impressive. Nonetheless, the impeccable rendering—the sheer laying down of paint or pencil—is a crucial and consistent contribution to the strength of Christ’s artmaking.

Another key facet in Christ’s work, conceptual depth is very present and not immediately obvious. Great art rarely reveals its meaning immediately or easily. Instead, time spent scrutinizing a painting, carefully observing details and connecting the embedded visual cues slowly yields interpretive layers and complexity of meaning. As Christ remarked, “I make every effort to give the formal and abstract pictorial elements of painting a vital role in reinforcing the narrative intent, rather than relying on overtly obvious meanings.” Indeed, Christ’s art does not contain conventional narrative or storytelling per se. As he expresses it, latent “thematics” are embedded, not simple, transparent anecdote. In this regard, the late Wichita State University art historian Mira Merriman aptly dubbed Christ’s pictures “a mood of poetic fantasy.” Christ would agree with another of his artistic heroes, the modern artist Balthus, when he wrote: “I always feel the desire to look for the extraordinary in ordinary things; to suggest, not to impose, to leave always a slight touch of mystery in my paintings.”

Arresting compositions, exquisite craftsmanship, evocative meaning—these core qualities in the work by Ronald Christ has yielded a signature artistry, one defined by its haunting beauty. Importantly, Christ granted himself the license to craft his own artistic path, shirking the pendulum swings of style in the larger art world. His dedication to honing his own sensibility wisely enabled a sophisticated and seductive artistic voice to emerge and gleam its special quiet radiance. Quoting Merriman again, “Christ creates a magic entertainment for the intellectual eye.”
Works in the Exhibition

All works in the exhibition are included in the full 110 page catalogue.

Multiple details of each work are included.

Works are in chronological order.

Dimensions are in inches.

Height precedes width.
Still Life
1976  oil on linen  22 x 26
Still Life
Details
Encounter at Dusk
1982  charcoal pencil on paper  23 x 29
Encounter at Dusk
Details
Earth Ocean
1984  oil on linen  40 x 50
Escapes
1987  charcoal pencil on paper  30 x 40
Escapes
Details
Night Fires
1988  oil on linen  72 x 136
The allegorical structure of *Night Fires* could be a 1988 version of Thomas Cole’s 1836 *Course of Empire*. Barbara Novak recounts Cole’s sequences in her book, *Nature and Culture*, as beginning with the savage and pastoral states, moving “from the wilderness to the garden...then consummation of empire, lush, sensual, and hedonistic.” Christ’s course for the plains expresses episodes of place and time in one view rather than separate cycles of birth, maturity, and decay. The simultaneity of events in a single scene contains history as part of the perceived present.

The lone viewer at the center of *Night Fires* recalls nineteenth-century painters who placed the small figure in a vast landscape suggesting a physical, emotional, and visual absorption into the infinite. Novak describes the viewer’s response to nature as a cosmic design:

> The viewer, invited to gaze over the figure’s shoulder, could also contemplate both the beauties and the cosmic design of nature. For Americans, this also meant that nature was not an adversary of a locale for adventure, but a place in which to seek knowledge and moral instruction in solitude, an especially reassuring notion because it meant that uncivilized wilderness was not destructive of one’s moral sense.

Christ’s viewer watches moving forces and interactions of nature, rather than contemplating their design. The figure at the lower center of *Night Fires* occupies a pastoral landscape complete with farm and trees, a middle place that has replaced the uncivilized wilderness portrayed by Cole. The metallic grid flowing toward the Heights, the burning loop of wind and fire, the turning celestial bodies are all separate phenomenon within one interconnected system.
The Game
1989  oil on linen  48 x 100
The Game painting reveals a stark interior overlooking the horizon and the farmhouse nestled in the hill. The figures could be viewing a pastoral scene through windows that frame time and space. These figures reconcile the interior space through two directions. Traditional metaphors of art as either a reflection or a window are literally transcribed in this painting as philosophical choices. Participants are flat actors, fulfilling a role within a room that is coldly filled with minimal props. Only a game occupies the foreground, inviting the viewer to move, make a commitment, decide upon the motivation of the players. The woman walks away from the gameboard, toward the sunlit room and the window; the man stares into a mirrored surface, holding the ledge for balance. If the gameboard represents choice, then so do the reflections, the windows, and the space.
Interior with View of Gubbio, Midday
1991  oil on linen  48 x 48
*Interior with View of Gubbio, Midday*

Details
Interior with View of Gubbio, Midday
Detail
art arranges a whereness of being
Wilson Baldridge

After a long silence the percept occurred or recurred this afternoon as I drove of Ron Christ walking from Henrion toward McKnight between the former and the Ulrich Gallery slender navy physique in the vicinity of the Miró mural at that moment Ron looked like one of his many lone personæ crossing vacant city squares no one else in my field of vision just the painter but the clear correlation the similitude between his body seen as a solitary total shape and his painted figures as if the personæ of his art were diminutives his own not absolute likenesses or not necessarily so yet the fleeting family resemblance appeared as if the work gave rise to an abstract self-portrait carried its maker over into itself carried an attitude a manner a way an air it would be a sense of being that Ron Christ’s human symbols often shown from behind striding or standing in deserted piazzas in relation to the chiseled spaces of urban Europe with the intensity of such cultural perspective in Mediterranean colors equal Ron in the geometric depth of Art and that’s how the painter surfaced today crossing a desolate street before the gallery near Miró twixt studio buildings for plastic and graphic arts
Still Life (From Massa Marittima)
1993  oil on linen  55 x 48
Still Life (From Massa Marittima)
Details
From the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino
1999  oil on linen  32 x 32
From the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino
Details
Interval (From Montecastello di Vibio)

2007  oil on linen  48 x 48
Interval (From Montecastello di Vibio)
Details
Tenuous Resistance
2012  oil on linen  48 x 48
Tenuous Resistance
Details
Full Exhibition Checklist

*Still Life*
1976  oil on linen  22 x 26
The Art of Emprise  Emprise Bank  Wichita, KS  From the Estate of Mira Merriman

*Still Life*
1976  oil on linen  22 x 26
Bob and Liz Workman  Manhattan, KS

*Still Life*
1978  oil on linen  18 x 20
Ulrich Museum of Art  Wichita, KS  Gift of Frank and Betty Brosius

*Reverie*
1982  charcoal pencil on paper  23 x 29
Wichita State University Foundation  Wichita, KS

*Encounter at Dusk*
1982  charcoal pencil on paper  23 x 29
Edward Mehler  St. Louis, MO

*Earth Ocean*
1984  oil on linen  40 x 50
Reuben and Jane Saunders  Wichita, KS

*Untitled*
1984  oil on linen  26 x 30
Ronald Christ and Barbara Mason  Wichita, KS
Earth Ocean 5 (Daybreak)
1985  oil on linen  30 x 40
Ulrich Museum of Art  Wichita, KS  Gift of Frank and Betty Brosius

Interface 2 (Chase County, Kansas)
1986  oil on linen  48 x 60
Hallmark Art Collection  Kansas City, MO

Escapes
1987  charcoal pencil on paper  30 x 40
Hallmark Art Collection  Kansas City, MO

Earth Ocean 7 (Maneuvers)
1987  charcoal pencil on paper  20 x 40
James and Anne Merriman  Glen Ridge, NJ  Trust of Mira Merriman

Earth Ocean 7 (Maneuvers)
1987  oil on linen  48 x 96
Ted and Dorothy Blankenship  Rose Hill, KS

Night Fires
1988  oil on linen  72 x 136
C.E. and Sue Dolsberry  Oro Valley, AZ

Night Fires 2
1988  oil on linen  20 x 30
Ronald Christ and Barbara Mason  Wichita, KS

Windows (Study for a Triptych; Homage to Balthus)
1988  graphite pencil on paper  10 x 21
Professor Don and Brenda Robson  Seward, NE
The Game
1989  oil on linen  48 x 100
Edward Mehler   St. Louis, MO

Figures in the Piazza Della Signoria, Gubbio
1990  opaque watercolor and graphite pencil on paper  9.75 x 13
Leo and Virginia Merriman   Wichita, KS   Trust of Mira Merriman

Stages
1990  oil on linen  61 x 71
Private Collection

Interior with View of Gubbio, Midday
1991  oil on linen  48 x 48
George Vollmer   Wichita, KS

Wedding Party, Piazza Del Duomo, Spoletto
1991  graphite pencil on paper  15.5 x 22.5
Ronald Christ and Barbara Mason   Wichita, KS

Sequences (From Bevagna)
1992  oil on linen  48 x 54
Peter and Susan Tuteur   St. Louis, MO

Still Life (From Massa Marittima)
1993  oil on linen  55 x 48
Ulrich Museum of Art   Wichita, KS   Gift of Frank and Betty Brosius

Golden Days (From Pienza)
1993  oil on linen  54 x 48
Anita L. Jones   Wichita, KS
**Street (From Arezzo)**
1993  oil on linen  48 x 48
Elizabeth and Gary Jones  Wichita, KS

**In Fields Above Umbertide**
1994  oil on linen  48 x 54
Al and Judy Higdon  Wichita, KS

**Dreamer (From Montefalco)**
1995  oil on linen  54 x 48
Bob and Nancy Schwan  Wichita, KS

**From Pienza**
1996  oil on linen  48 x 48
The Art of Emprise  Emprise Bank  Wichita, KS

**From Montone**
1997  opaque watercolor on paper  16 x 18
Don Nance and Pennie Myers  Wichita, KS

**From Montone**
1997  graphite pencil on paper  16 x 18
Alan Smith  Wichita, KS

**From the Duomo, Pienza**
1999  oil on linen  27 x 24
Bob and Nancy Schwan  Wichita, KS

**From the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino**
1999  oil on linen  32 x 32
Don and Elizabeth King  Wichita, KS
From Volterra 1
2002  oil on linen  48 x 48
The Gallery at ArtWorks  Wichita, KS

Sequences (From Montone)
2004  oil on linen  46 x 46
Duane Reed Gallery  St. Louis, MO

Sequences (From Gubbio)
2002  oil on linen  24 x 24
Duane Reed Gallery  St. Louis, MO

Interval (From Montecastello di Vibio)
2007  oil on linen  48 x 48
Duane Reed Gallery  St. Louis, MO

Incomplete Experimental Vault; Homage to Saarinen
2010  graphite pencil on paper  16 x 16
The Art of Emprise  Emprise Bank  Wichita, KS

Tenuous Resistance
2011  graphite pencil on paper  16 x 16
The Art of Emprise  Emprise Bank  Wichita, KS

Tenuous Resistance
2012  oil on linen  48 x 48
Duane Reed Gallery  St. Louis, MO
Credits

*Ronald Christ: Poetic Fictions* has been organized by the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University and sponsored by Emprise Bank, Fidelity Bank, and Southwest National Bank.

The exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of J. Eric Engstrom, Anita L. Jones, Mike and Dee Michaelis, and Reuben and Jane Saunders.
Patricia McDonnell is Director of the Wichita Art Museum, and she served as Director of the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University from January 2007 through September 2012. With a doctorate in art history from Brown University, McDonnell has worked in art museums for over 30 years. She has training in management as well as art history. McDonnell has worked in museums around the country—at the Weisman Art Museum at University of Minnesota, the Rhode Island School of Art and Design Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington state. In those museums, she worked as a curator. She stepped into the shoes of director in coming to the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University. McDonnell currently serves as Vice President for External Affairs for the College Art Association, the international learned society for the visual arts. She is an accomplished scholar and award-winning author on American modernism. She is one a handful of specialists on artist Marsden Hartley. She is the author of one book, substantive exhibition catalogs that accompanied national touring shows, and numerous scholarly journal articles and museum publication essays.

Coronado Heights: A Study in Place  Saralyn Reece Hardy  University of Kansas  American Studies  1994

Saralyn Reece Hardy is Director of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. She earned her B.S. and M.A. at the University of Kansas. As Director of the Spencer Museum, she is responsible for curatorial and scholarly activities, collections conservation and acquisitions, exhibition planning and design, research and publications, curricular support and educational programs, public programs and audience development, fundraising and budget management. Under her leadership, the Spencer Museum has expanded its academic programs and multidisciplinary research, established an international artist-in-residence program, and entered into The Commons, a partnership with the Biodiversity Institute and the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of
Kansas. Prior to her arrival at the Spencer Museum of Art, Ms. Hardy served as the Director of Museums and Visual Arts at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) where she received a distinguished service award in 2002. The Director of Museums and Visual Arts serves as the agency’s nationally recognized expert and authority in the fields of Museums and Visual Arts, providing professional leadership and consultation services, and guidance on the development of policy, strategic directions, and initiatives. She was appointed to the NEA from her work as the Director of the Salina Art Center in Salina, Kansas, where she transformed the small community gallery into a year-round contemporary art center, featuring commissions, socially engaged programs, and exhibitions and artistic experimentation. Under Ms. Hardy’s leadership, the Salina Art Center developed a national and international exhibition schedule, year-round education programs, a state-wide traveling exhibition service, an interactive area for young people, and a film program. Previously, she served as a program coordinator for the Salina Arts and Humanities Commission where she developed a multi-disciplinary artist-in-residence program addressing community needs and long-term cultural development. She began her career at the Spencer Museum, working as a program coordinator for Musing in Museums, an interdisciplinary project exploring the expression of human values in an art museum setting. Ms. Hardy has served on a broad range of boards, advisory committees, and is an active consultant and lecturer. She has been engaged as an advisor to the Getty Leadership Institute, the Bush Foundation, the Mitchell Foundation, the Kansas City LINC, and others, as an advocate for artists and cultural organizations. She is a regular advisor for emerging contemporary arts organizations, community development, public art, and artists.
Wilson Baldridge is Professor of French and Chair of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures at Wichita State University. He received his doctorate from the University at Buffalo (SUNY, 1982). His articles have appeared in the French Review, Symposium, the Stanford French Review, Études littéraires, Renaissance et Réforme, French Forum, the Cahier Michel Deguy, Modernités, and other journals. His article “La présence de Folie dans les Œuvres de Louise Labé,” originally published in 1989, was selected for the collective volume Louise Labé 2005 (Université de Saint-Étienne). He has translated Québécoise poet Suzanne Jacob, viz the multimedia book Filandere cantabile (Marval, 1990). His translations of Michel Deguy have appeared in Tyuonyi, Sulfur, Boxkite, and Circumference and Baudelaire and the Poetics of Modernity. He has participated in all three international colloquia on Deguy’s work (Paris 1995; Cerisy 2006; Bordeaux 2011), and composed the biographical section of Les écrits de Michel Deguy (IMEC, 2002). His translation, with foreword and notes, of Recumbents together with the interpretive essay by Jacques Derrida, “How to Name” (Wesleyan, 2005), received the 2006 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. His research agenda includes “Savoir, inventer,” in the Grand Cahier Michel Deguy (Bordeaux, 2007), “Lumière et révélation dans Sans retour,” in Michel Deguy, l’allégresse pensive (Belin, 2007), and “Reprise de Jumelages” (forthcoming in Michel Deguy à l’œuvre). Within the same trajectory, he presented a paper titled “Foregrounding Distance: Negotiation of East-West Boundaries in Michel Deguy” (IAPL 2011, National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan).