

Devotions and Deviations: Aviva Silverman Harry Burke

Aviva Silverman’s work addresses being, belief, and togetherness. Votive forms, like dioramas and tableaux, are viewed through a contemporary queer lens, resulting in a dynamic study of conflicting histories of communion. The New York-based artist, who in the past has staged theatrical performances in which untrained dogs played characters from popular culture, has recently embedded Catholic and secular figurines in a series of sculpturess questioning how difference and godliness are made in economies of novelty and scale.

“Nothing unknown is knowable,” laments Harper Pitt in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, published at the apex of the AIDS crisis.¹ Playfully tautological, the sentiment summarizes the problems of queer studies and theology. Devoted to the fluctuating positionalities described by notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, queer theory grapples with the political possibilities of incomprehensibility. Religion, likewise, describes frameworks for failures of knowledge. In each case, faith offers a means for dealing with what is unknown.

In her exhibition *Protect me from what I am* at New York’s Swiss Institute (2018), Silverman investigated queer faith and its compromised promises. In the sculpture *Assimilation* (2018), a cube of melded, malformed Catholic figurines provided the base for a conference of taxidermied birds perched on a thorny wreath. Inset in the gallery’s walls, a series of intricate, eye-shaped shadow boxes were populated by further plastic figures, including a small icon of the Statue of Liberty. One *mise-en-scène*, celestially glinting with shards of security glass and mirrors, featured two scuffling birds, a reference to an unlikely instance in which a dove, released by Pope Francis at the Vatican, was attacked by a crow. The exhibition called attention to the imperfections through which spiritual beliefs are humanized.

Age-old iconographic tensions infuse Silverman’s work, rendered contemporaneous in delicate ways. *The Living Watch over the Living ii*, a display at Volksbühne’s LVX, Berlin (2019), consisted of marionette-like angels suspended from the ceiling of a storefront window. Made of colorless hand-blown glass, the angels boasted long cylindrical heads and bell-shaped drapery. The Statue of Liberty recurred in a video depicting activist Therese Patricia Okoumou’s July 2018 protest against the separation of migrant families at the U.S.–Mexico border. Okoumou climbed the monument to call for the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), bringing her message to a global audience of millions.

With this reel of found footage, which played on a small box monitor that hung among her sculptures, Silverman activated a complicated politics of antiracist solidarity. Her gesture implicitly lauded Okoumou’s bravery, although it carried little of the risk of the original action, for which Okoumou received five years’ probation and two hundred hours of community service. Positioning Okoumou as an angel, the installation affirmed queer theory’s argument that actions that deviate from the vicious continuity of heteronormativity are disruptive and transformative. Yet while angels bless the rest of us with life, how fair is it to see such figures as exceptional? Is resistance divine, or a profoundly everyday activity?

Are angels transcendent, in other words, or among us? *We Have Decided Not to Die*, Silverman’s recent exhibition at VEDA in Florence (2019), provided an answer of sorts. Ceiling hung, as if levitating, a model train track carried a sequence of train cars in which synthetic figurine passengers, in radical social groupings, jostled with symbols of industrialization. There were Catholic women in prayer with protest signs, a baby crawling atop an oil tanker, and in one arrangement, three lambs grazing on AstroTurf next to a pile of tiny guns and swords. A passage—“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God,” from Romans 8:39, was translated on one placard to “God Loves Fags – Rom. 8:39,” a slogan carried at a Washington, DC, march for LGBT rights in 1993. Attesting to the cyclical rhythms of history, the looping kinetic sculpture was an allegory of spiritual regeneration and a commentary on the seemingly interminable stasis of capitalist production. “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence,” writes the feminist theorist Karen Barad. It is thus “impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.”² Elegantly dismissing dichotomies of good and bad, sacred and profane, Silverman’s assemblages explore the interdependence that sustains vulnerable communities. We are torn apart yet remain bound together. Knowing this, we become angels.

- 1 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 31.
- 2 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), IX.

55 Aviva Silverman, *We Have Decided Not to Die* installation views at VEDA, Florence, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and VEDA, Florence. Photo: Flavio Pescatori

56 Aviva Silverman, *The Living Watch Over the Living ii* installation view at Volksbühne, Berlin, 2019. Courtesy: Bodega, New York. Photo: Eric Bell

57 Aviva Silverman, *Assimilation* (detail), 2018, *Protect me from what I am* installation view at Swiss Institute, New York, 2018. Courtesy: Bodega, New York



