



FOR RELEASE: September 9, 2021

Sacred Spaces: Art and Spirituality at the Fourth Universalist Society in the City of New York.



The Fourth Universalist Society in the City of New York, 160 Central Park West at 76th Street.

On Sunday September 26th at 11:00 a.m., the Fourth Universalist Society in the City of New York will celebrate its first art installations with works by world renowned artists Stephen Antonakos, Ronald Bladen and Rico Gatson. Installed above the altar and in the chapel, the artwork seeks to align the values of the congregation more closely with the sacred space.

All three artists ascribe to modernist concepts of art making while also believing deeply in the human spirit. As the congregation gathers again in person, as a community, the art on view invites us to explore questions of faith, empowerment, and refuge. Through the use of abstraction, beauty and spirituality, the art displayed suggests a myriad of interpretations and, like Unitarian Universalist principles, welcomes many viewpoints. Senior Minister Schuyler Vogel will explore in his sermon how art can evoke the spiritual by virtue of its revelatory and contemplative capacity.

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Rev. Schuyler Vogel, Senior Minister
Spencer Salzberg, Board President

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Rico Gatson, "Untitled (Flag VII)", projected in sanctuary

Rico Gatson (b. 1966 in Augusta, GA) received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Bethel College in 1989 and his Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale School of Art in 1991. He is a multimedia visual artist whose work explores themes of history, identity, popular culture and spirituality, through sculpture, painting, video, and public art projects. Over the course of almost two decades, he has been celebrated for politically layered artworks, often based on significant moments in Black history. From the Watts Riots, the formation of the Black Panthers, to the election of President Barack Obama. As Gatson has commented:

"The site-specific installation depicts light pictorially as a metaphor for positive energy, power, and hope for a better future. The calming effect of the color palette, pattern, and light provides a respite or escape, as well as a place of contemplation and rejuvenation."³

The "Flag" series uses the limited colors related to pan-Africanism, the American flag, rainbows, banners, and Black liberation flags. The references are to the symbolism of representation, identity, journey, struggle and accessibility, light and hope. In 2019 Gatson completed a large commission for MTA Arts and Design entitled "Beacons"; eight permanent large scale mosaics of prominent Black figures are installed in the 167th Street B and D train subway station in the Bronx.

For further information, images and to view the installations, please contact Loretta Howard (curator) at loretta@4thU.org. The art is on view to the public every Sunday morning before, during and after the 11:00 service and by appointment, commencing September 12 and running through June of 2022.

³ *Interview with Rico Gatson, CMA, 2019*

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Stephen Antonakos "Plain" series, installed in chapel

Stephen Antonakos (1926–2013) was born in the small Greek village of Agios Nikolaos. He came to New York with his family in 1930 and lived here his whole life. From the late 1950s forward, his six decades of abstract geometric innovations with neon include the panels, canvases, direct linear installations, architecturally-scaled outdoor Public Works, and designs for both Meditation Spaces and formal Greek Orthodox Chapels.

Each of the seven framed vertical rectangles in the "Plain" series here is animated and defined by square "cut-outs" whose number and position, far from being systemic, exemplify Antonakos's process, in which "the hand leads the mind." Around these dynamic interruptions, the sensitive gold leaf fields offer their own subtly changing variations of reflectiveness, color, and texture. The "Plains" are like sculptures in frames.

These late Gold Works series were the artist's second major engagement with gold leaf. The first was the group of Neon Panels from the late 1980s named for specific Orthodox saints. These led to his monumental 1992 installation "Chapel of the Saints" in the Ramparts of Saint George in Rhodes. By then, if not earlier, Antonakos's roots were understood to be spiritual as well as formal.

"... gold has a special role in the history of religious art. For ancient Greeks and Romans, and indeed throughout much of the Orient as well, the cultic image was always clothed in gold. Gold created the heavenly light in which the god was wrapped. In medieval art too, whether in mosaic or in panel painting, gold backgrounds provided a timeless, seasonless sky for the sacred narratives of the Bible, and haloes of gold on icons turned the saints' faces into blazing targets, dazzling the eye of the beholder."¹

¹ Thomas F. Mathews, "Byzantium," Harry N. Abrams, Inc, NY, 1998.

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Ronald Bladen, "V", installed in chapel

Ronald Bladen (1918–1988) was born in Vancouver, British Columbia. Bladen has been regarded as an artistic forerunner by Minimalists like Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre. But in contrast to the matter-of-fact work of those artists, Bladen's sculptures are charged with emotional power. Bladen saw nature as a spiritual force. The sculptures embody the force of gravity, the dynamism of planar surfaces, and the impact of scale.

One of Bladen's earliest commissions for a monumental public sculpture was "V", originally titled *Resurrection*. "V" was intended to reach toward the sky and embrace the surrounding environment. Its arms form an open-ended gesture that suggests extension into infinite space. In a personal recollection, Bladen spoke of his experience of,

"...standing high on Parting Ridge at Big Sur sometime in the late 1940s, stretching out his arms and seeing his shadow spread on the clouds below..."

Indeed the gesture "V" is a primal and universal sign for exaltation, one that has existed since human beings first raised their arms in a gesture of triumph. A recent sociological study has indicated that this gesture of triumph is common even among primates and that even athletes who are blind and thus have never seen the gesture will use it at a moment of triumph. The "V" gesture with two fingers made famous by Prime Minister Winston Churchill was one of the enduring symbols of hope and confidence used during World War II and again the "V" became the peace sign during the Vietnam war.²

² From Robert S. Mattison. "Ronald Bladen Sculpture." 2019, Abbeville Press Publishers, NY.