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Exhibit: 'A Broken Beauty'

Laguna exhibit is heavy in Christian imagery, unlike most recent art, with its secular bent.

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We expect to encounter Jesus Christ at church.

He's in the sermons. He's in the Bible. He's in the crucifixes hanging on the wall.

But we don't expect to encounter Jesus in the contemporary art museum.

Though he's been a favorite, and dominant, topic of artists for centuries, he's not as popular in art made since the turn of the 20th century.

As aesthetic tastes have evolved, a separation of church and the artistic state seems to have occurred, and Christian art sometimes isn't taken as seriously as secular creations in the modern art space.

However, a new exhibition at the Laguna Art Museum embraces new Christian art and representations of Jesus, as well as other Judeo-Christian imagery. "A Broken Beauty: Figuration, Narrative and the Transcendent in North American Art," on view through Feb. 26, is full of Jesus, although the title doesn't necessarily indicate that.

The show, curated by Gordon Fuglie, director of the Laband Gallery at Loyola Marymount University, features the recent work of 15 North American artists who focus on figurative, or body-related, work in painting, sculpture and other media.

According to the introductory panel text, "A Broken Beauty" was inspired by French philosopher Simone Weil, a Jew who converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1930s. She believed in a certain, special beauty borne of suffering, one that transcends superficial notions of beauty and prettiness.

The exhibit involves strong religious themes and is divided into six sections: "After the Fall," "Presence Encountered," "The Terrors of History," "Sanctified," "The Mystery of Being" and "Ecce Homo." The biblical references are not subtle; they're intentional.

"For so long, artists mainly made their work for church or state," said Tyler Stallings, chief curator at the Laguna Art Museum. "There was a relationship, a connection with religion and art. But in the mid-1800s, they sort of got separated out."

Since then, spirituality and specifically religious imagery haven't been that popular in modern and contemporary art, he said. This show is an attempt to reconnect with religion and what's perceived as an important part of art history.

The opening sections of "Broken Beauty" contain images of saints, the Madonna, and Adam and Eve.

War, the Holocaust and survival fill up the middle sections.

The final portions are heaviest on the Jesus imagery. Melissa Weinman draws "Study for Christ: Matthew" (1998) in charcoal and conte crayon, in a fashion reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's classic "Vitruvian Man" and "Study of Proportions."

John Nava has painted a study for "Baptism of Christ" that features a kneeling Jesus under two hands pouring water over his head.

David Robinson has crafted a "Cruciform Diptych" (1999) out of cement. He also sculpted a figure bearing water buckets in the same iconic, agonized form as the crucifix-bearing Jesus.

And Gaela Erwin has painted a "Self-Portrait as Jesus Christ" (2003), with the crown of thorns worn atop her blond hair.

For the most part, "A Broken Beauty" contains intriguing and aesthetically pleasing works. It hits the bull's eye, if you believe in the concept of Jesus Christ as savior and messiah.

But if you don't, it could prove perplexing that such strong Christian themes are featured in what's typically a non-denominational space. The Laguna Art Museum does receive annual funds from the city, so some taxpayers may not be enthused about this government-funded embrace of one particular faith.

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