

ARTS & IDEAS

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JULY 9, 2006



"Modern Jesus Tattoo," 1978, photographed on Court and Union streets in Brooklyn.



"Joe's Medallion," 1980, on 18th Street between 5th and 6th avenues in Brooklyn.



"The Sin of the World," 2002, at the corner of Townsend and Tremont avenues in the Bronx, is one of the featured photographs in Larry Racioppo's "The Word on the Street" exhibit.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LARRY RACIOPPO

NYC PHOTOGRAPHER LARRY RACIOPPO'S IMAGES ARE A TESTIMONY TO INNER-CITY FAITH

MEANSTREETSGETRELIGION

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Somehow the Museum of Biblical Arts failed to pull Our Lady of the Driveway into its fascinating photo essay on street art. But other curbside pieties, like the Holy Cross of the Construction Site and the Madonna of the Barbershop — so familiar that New Yorkers barely register them — are featured in "The Word on the Street," a long-term survey by photographer Larry Racioppo.

Racioppo's perfect for the topic. As the in-house camera man for the city Department of Housing, Preservation and Development, he's all over the five boroughs. He knows where to look. As an Italian-American, Roman-Catholic Brooklyn native, he was born to do this work.

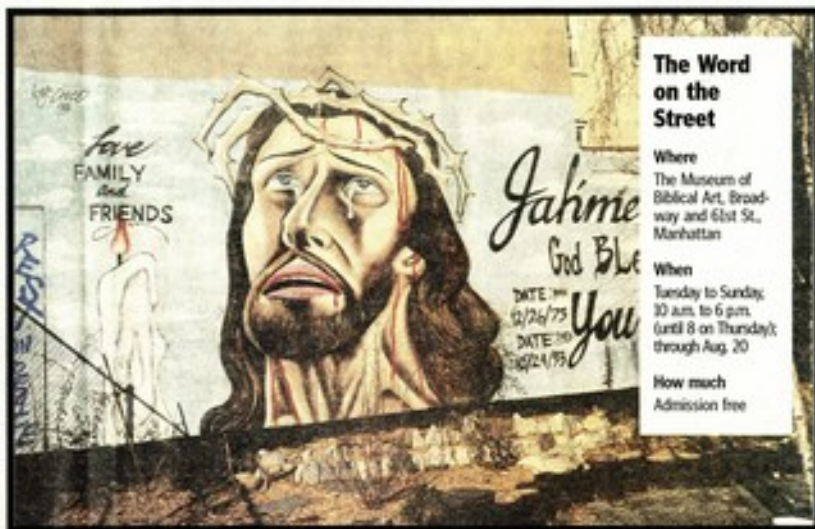
He's done other series, at places like Fresh Kills, Ellis Island and the Mermaid Parade, but the religious material has proved irresistible to curators.

It's easy to see why. It raises meaty questions like, "How is it that as the godless city grinds up the meek and the pure of heart, someone can write 'Jesus is Love' in blue spray paint at the smelly back end of an alley somewhere?"

Like graffiti, declarations of faith usually happen in places where they will be noticed, on walls and along sidewalks. People also carry them on their person, as jewelry and tattoos. Jesus crowned with thorns seems to be especially popular, around the neck or needled into the biceps.

Racioppo found a lumbering old mack truck adorned with a glowing portrait of Padre Pio, the recently sainted Italian cleric. He shot dedicated storefronts ("The God Bless Deli Grocery") giant murals and outdoor shrines.

He's attentive about impromptu exhortations. The best one, scrawled on a dark



The Word on the Street

Where
The Museum of Biblical Art, Broadway and 61st St., Manhattan

When
Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (until 8 on Thursday) through Aug. 20

How much
Admission free

SEE RELIGION, PAGE E 2

"Jahmie," 1990, East 1st Street in Manhattan.



"Pablo's Cross," 1994, Rockaway Beach Boulevard and 47th Street in Queens.

Museum of Biblical Art exhibit spotlights 'Word on the Street'

wall somewhere, seems especially appropriate to city-dwellers. It is the verse: What does it profit a man if he gain(sic) the world but lose(sic) his SOUL?

MoBIA curator Patricia C. Pongracz organized the 74 mostly color images into categories: "Street Memorials," "Devotion at Work," "Altars

and Shrines" "The Word on the Street."

She made smart decisions about which photographs to enlarge. A Bronx barber shop full of saints and holy pictures is blown up to life-size. It's so clear, you're ready to walk in, pick up a magazine and wait for a trim.

Speaking of magazines, one

homemade workplace shrine has half-dressed pin-ups scissored out of Hustler or Playboy, next to conventional Catholic devotional items, next to candles and statuary in the Afro-Caribbean santería tradition. Whoever assembled this holy place pays attention to all kinds of powers, Hugh Hefner among them.

Most subjects, like the rest-in-peace mural memorials that are a Latino tradition in the barrios, are presented straight on, without fuss. Among the richest pieces in the show, they aren't easy to interpret.

What is the story, you can't help but wonder, behind "In Memory of Mike," a very well-drawn panorama just off New Lots Avenue in Brooklyn? It has the usual information: Sad messages to the deceased from the wife and kids; date of birth, date of death.

In the center of the picture, a version of Michael the Archangel — right out of classic Catholic iconography — is battling the devil. At either side of the match, there are BMWs.

One has to wonder: Were these Mike's beloved vehicles? Was he a dealership salesman? Or did he perish in a collision?

OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

The most elaborate manifestations in the show function as formal places to pray. One is a tiny, 100-year-old neo-Gothic family chapel in



PHOTO COURTESY OF LARRY RACOPPO

"Insurance by Jesus," 2005, was shot on Vermont Street near New Lots Avenue in Brooklyn.

the Bronx. The other is the semi-private handmade Our Lady of Mount Carmel grotto, a large, handmade open-air shrine in Rosebank.

Golden light was flooding the grotto — divine grace made visible — when Raccio shot it. It is the holiest-looking photograph in the show.

Of course, at the 2-year-old Museum of Biblical Art, an undertaking of the American Bible Society, "The Word on

the Street" is presented as evidence of spiritual ideals, gifts and/or abilities.

The museum's free to see the work any way it chooses. But, in a different context, say the International Center of Photography or the Whitney Museum, "The Word" might look different.

Socio-culturally, the whole thing is interesting. The world of "The Word" is an overwhelmingly working/middle class Roman Catholic phe-

nomenon. But as the city's demographics change, so do its street devotions.

As the three-decade timeline of "The Word on the Street" suggests, as Mexicans arrive in the city in increasing numbers, the rosy, fair-haired madonnas of Italian-American tradition are making room for the darker-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe.

Michael J. Fressola is the arts editor for the Advance. He may be reached at fressola@siadvance.com.

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