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ARTS & PERFORMANCE

A Vegas-style staging of the scripture

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Joe Johnson used to photograph cities at night. Shots of and from the rooftops of apartment buildings at night deftly made use of perspective, scale, and the unexpected drama of artificial light. Rarely did people inhabit Johnson's cities. For his new body of work, the photographer has gone indoors, but he works with the same toolkit.

For "Mega Churches," on view at Gallery Kayafas, Johnson visited Southern and Midwestern places of worship that welcome at least 2,000 parishioners. He went when they were mostly empty. His stunning and provocative images of the mammoth churches lay bare the cogs and gears that create their spectacle-driven services. With all the sets, smoke machines, light effects, and huge plasma screens, the churchgoing experience has ironically turned, in places like this, into something resembling a heavy-metal concert or a Las Vegas stage show, complete with stadium seating.

Look at "Stage Set. Munster, IN," used for a reenactment of the Stations of the Cross. It's a stone prison, with iron bars in the window and door, luridly splashed with blood-red paint. Orange cables, a worker's lamp, and a smoke machine surround it.

In "Screens. Louisville, KY," a giant, menacing, inverted black dome housing several plasma screens hangs godlike over the tiny seats below; Johnson shot the image from high in the upper tiers.

He captured "Bolt. Fort Wayne, IN" from below; a video camera stands in for a heroic or saintly figure gazing upward as lightning flies across the ceiling.

Churchly theatricality goes back at least as far as the creation of gothic cathedrals; Johnson captures the latest high-tech iteration. But he presents it nakedly, with electrical cords and control panels, in a way that calls out the ministers and their stage managers for manufacturing spectacles designed to trigger ecstatic responses in their congregants, rather than making quiet spaces for prayerful contemplation.



Above: Joe Johnson's "Bolt. Fort Wayne, IN," part of his "Mega Churches" exhibit; below: Daniel Heidkamp's "Astoria (Bikes)," featured in his show "The Arrangement."



A pleasing visual shock

Daniel Heidkamp's aptly titled show "The Arrangement" at LaMontagne Gallery focuses on compositions of color, pattern, and form. Hot, buzzy tones rub against one another and set off retinal sparks; punchy patterns agitate the paintings. The result is a pleasing, aggressive, visual shock. Oh, and he's actually painting people, which gives the paintings added layers of character and narrative, but these seem secondary to the sock in the eye delivered by the arrangements themselves.

The slope-shouldered slackers in "Astoria (Bikes)" stand in a blankly orange space, defined only by a zebra-stripe crosswalk and cars floating behind them. They wear Hawaiian and camouflage shirts. Their bikes cast red shadows; skin tones range from creamy pink to garish yellow-orange. The punky tones grab at you and push you away.

"Keep on Stepping" is a brilliant complement, all in electric blues. Two black men shimmy on a beach washed in eerie blue moonlight. Patterns on their clothes light up like neon. Heidkamp juxtaposes so many hot blues and violets here, it's hard for the eye to comprehend, and thrilling.

Boru O'Brien O'Connell's tongue-in-cheek photographic portraits of men, also at LaMontagne, bitingly send up notions of masculine perfection. They feature ordinary guys, middle-aged and beyond, posing outdoors, aiming with the precision of catalogue models for an ideal expression of manly solitude. Light chisels the face of the man in "Thinker and Actor," whose eyes gaze inward as he clasps a golden retriever to his chest. The danger is that viewers might take O'Connell seriously; images like this show up in magazine ads and commercials all the time. The men in some of these pictures could easily be shilling for erectile dysfunction medications.

Fun, interactive art

Puns, parodies, and jokes have always been Jeffu Warmouth's mainstay. He and Ellen Wetmore, his wife, have work in "Nourishment," curated by Fred Levy and mounted at the Art

JOE JOHNSON: Mega Churches
At: Gallery Kayafas,
450 Harrison Ave.,
through May 17. 617-482-0411,
www.gallerykayafas.com

DANIEL HEIDKAMP:
The Arrangement
BORU O'BRIEN O'CONNELL:
Mavericks and Daydreamers
At: LaMontagne Gallery,
555 East 2nd St., South Boston,
through May 2. 617-646-4640,
www.lamontagnegallery.com

NOURISHMENT: New Work by
Jeffu Warmouth & Ellen Wetmore
At: Art Institute of Boston, 700
Beacon St., through May 3.
617-585-6600,
[www.lesley.edu/aib/
events/events.html](http://www.lesley.edu/aib/events/events.html)

Institute of Boston in conjunction with the Boston Cyberarts Festival.

Warmouth's interactive video installation brings the viewer into the middle of a fast-food war between "Jeffu Burger" and "JFC." Life-size videos of Warmouth in uniform, ready to serve up the shakes and fries, stand at the ready as the viewer uses a touch screen to order. One or the other will prepare the meal, as his adversary complains. The food is crazy — one server dons onion-ring chain mail to protect himself from the slings and arrows of his business — but usually there's sly social commentary at work. It's a whopper of an installation.

Wetmore, who has a toddler son (and, if one of the pieces is to be believed, another baby on the way), looks at nourishment from the realm of lactation and pregnancy. A darkly comic mural using comic-book-style illustration makes surreal connections between mother, child, and breast; the last is clearly an entity unto itself. The wry video "Reducing Plan: Erasing Ellen" shows her plumply in profile against a black backdrop before she takes a black paint stick and obliterates her belly and bottom, making herself into a stick figure with breasts. I guess if she's still nursing, she couldn't do away with those.