

research spotlight



Reflections on Haunting the Canon: The Super-phenomena in Art

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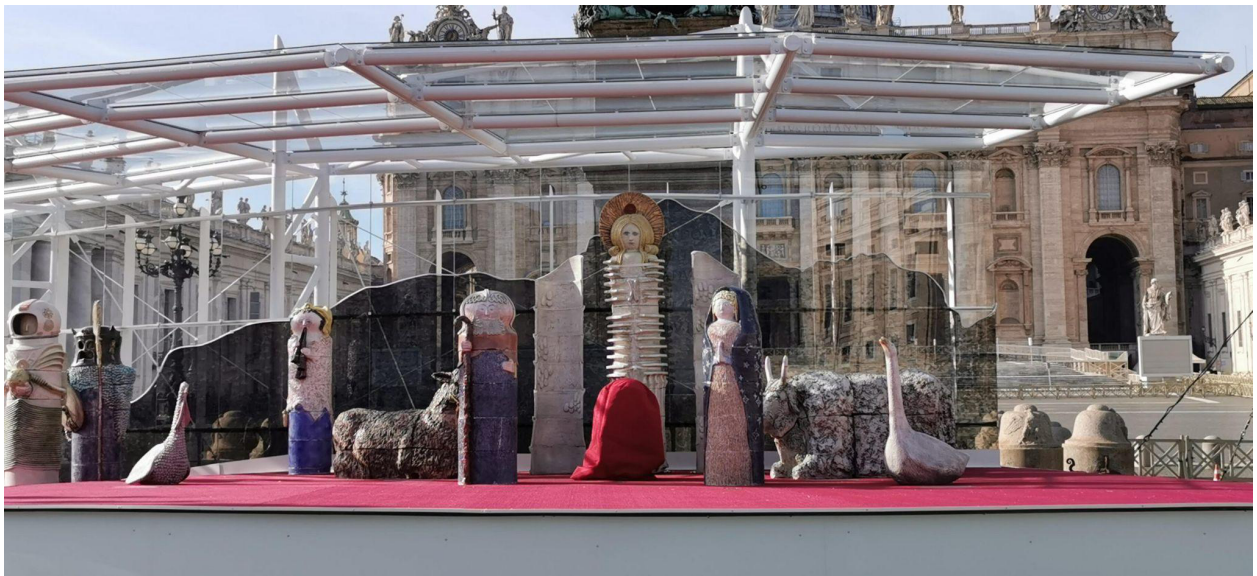


Figure 1 Installation image of 2020 Nativity Scene, Vatican City, Italy created by students and teachers of the F.A. Grue Art Institute, located in Castelli in the 1960s and 1970s. Photographs by and courtesy of Anthony Majanlahti and Hyperallergic.

In December 2020, the Vatican unveiled its annual nativity scene in St. Peter's Square. Headlines across conservative Catholic newspapers quickly latched on to what many observers described as "shockingly unconventional": nineteen monumental ceramic figures, including an astronaut, a cyborg, and a turkey-dinosaur chimera surrounding a covered sculpture of the infant Christ.¹ Headlines read "The Vatican's Embarrassing SciFi Crèche," "Post-Modern Vatican Nativity Scene Provokes Wave of Criticism," and "Why is Darth Vader in the Vatican's Nativity Scene?"² Its most striking components rendered a supernatural occurrence (virgin birth) even stranger. Replacing the traditional wooden manger, a Flavenesque fluorescent tube floats behind ceramic figures forming the outline of a minimalist moonscape. Representations of Mary and Joseph flank a small sculpture of the Christ child veiled by a red cloth. To the left of the holy family, however, is the unorthodox grouping that drew comparisons to *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars*. According to *Vatican News*, this modern version of the nativity represented "a sign of Advent hope in Christ's coming for a world straining under the darkness of the Covid-19 pandemic."³ Though the Vatican operates its own observatory, the headlines make clear that such imaginative retellings of the nativity are too outrageous for many members of the press and public.⁴ For us, however, the tensions this uncanny sculptural group revealed at the end of a hellacious year served

¹ Only representing a select part of a 52-piece sculptural group, the nativity is a collaboration between students and teachers of the F.A. Grue Art Institute, a high school in Castelli, Italy—a town with a celebrated history of ceramic work. The ceramic figures were made using traditional coiling techniques and retain their cylindrical shape, mirroring Bernini's columns that envelop the Vatican's plaza. In December 1970, some figures went on view in Rome, and were later displayed in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Bethlehem, Israel. See: Valentina Di Liscia, "Why Is There an Astronaut in This Year's Vatican Nativity?," *Hyperallergic*, December 17, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/609300/why-is-there-an-astronaut-in-this-years-vatican-nativity/>; and Brian Boucher, "Even the Pope Seems Iffy on the Vatican's Astronaut-Themed Nativity. Here's How the Artwork Became a Lighting Rod," *Artnet*, December 20, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/astronaut-vatican-nativity-1933623>.

² Joe Grabowski, "The Vatican's Embarrassing SciFi Crèche," *Catholic Herald*, December 12, 2020; Edward Pentin, "Post-Modern Vatican Nativity Scene Provokes Wave of Criticism," *National Catholic Register*, December 15, 2020; and Colleen Dulle, "Why is Darth Vader in the Vatican's Nativity Scene?," *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/12/12/vatican-nativity-christmas-pope-francis-239486>.

³ Devin Watkins, "Christmas Tree, Nativity Scene Lit Up in St. Peter's Square," *Vatican News*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-12/st-peters-square-christmas-tree-creche-lighting-ceremony.html>.

⁴ Elisabetta Povoledo, "Searching for the (Star) Light at the Vatican Observatory," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/world/europe/vatican-observatory-consolmagno.html>.

as a catalyst for thinking through art history's uneasy relationship with the supernatural. So, we set out to organize our graduate student symposium to provide a platform for emerging scholars to examine the ways in which artists and art historians are critically engaging the supernatural and strategies of alternate world-making.



Figure 2 Installation image of 2020 Nativity Scene, Vatican City, Italy created by students and teachers of the F.A. Grue Art Institute, located in Castelli in the 1960s and 1970s. Photographs by and courtesy of Anthony Majanlahti and Hyperallergic.

Our interest in the supernatural brought us to enroll in Professor Jenni Sorkin's seminar *Alchemy, Magic, and Spirituality* held in the fall of 2020. Here, an interdisciplinary group of artists and art historians collectively considered themes that haunt the bounds of the acceptable in the field of art history. Together we asked: What counts as historical "fact"? How can archives be reimagined? In what ways do themes of the supernatural maintain colonial categories and systems of oppression in scholarship and exhibitions? It was through Sorkin's seminar readings – and our class

discussions – that we expanded our initial inquiry to encompass super-phenomena. Jeffrey J. Kripal’s conceptualization of “super-phenomena” from his book *Religion: Super Religion* (2017) includes that which pertains to the unknown and impossible in Western thought - “spirits, possession, vision, deification, the miraculous, magical powers, and the paranormal” - and became a valuable tool for unpacking such lines of inquiry during our coursework.⁵ Responding to philosopher David Hume’s essay “Of Miracles” in his *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Kripal historicizes the “super,” yet privileges testimonies and experiences that speak to inexplicable events: “Extraordinary things happen all the time for which we have no proof and never will, but it does not follow from this that they did not happen, or that they are not important to study and try to understand with other methods, for example, historical, hermeneutical and humanistic ones.”⁶ Importantly for us, Kripal’s expansive framework for tracing the paranormal bridges its manifestations across popular culture.

Beyond the sci-fi aesthetics of the Vatican’s nativity, what Kripal deems as super-phenomena have long been a vehicle to explore contemporary culture. One need only look to the success of the Harry Potter, Star Wars, and Marvel franchises to see how interest in magic, science fiction, and the paranormal have captured the American public’s attention.⁷ Themes of the otherworldly also serve as methodologies for recent museum exhibitions. The 2020-2021 exhibition *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art* examines the ways violent histories of genocide, slavery, and settler colonialism inform our collective imagination, and asks “why America is haunted.”⁸ In particular, Jordan Peele’s reappraisal of the horror movie genre in the films *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Candyman* (2021) lend themselves to a more thorough understanding of extreme social injustices, one in which the otherworldly is not a passive entity or a political action, but rather a vengeful force that obscures the tropes of good and evil, generating fictional pathways for escape and survival.

Robb Hernández’s exhibition *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (2017) was also a crucial starting point for us to think through super-phenomena.⁹ As part of the Getty’s *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* exhibition

⁵ Kripal, “Introduction: Reimagining the Super in the Study of Religion,” in *Religion: Super Religion* (New York: New York, Macmillan Reference USA, 2017), xviii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xl.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi. Kripal draws connections between American popular culture and a renewed obsession with the supernatural through avenues such as film, television, and the graphic novel.

⁸ “The Paranormal in American Art,” Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY, <https://www.speedmuseum.org/exhibitions/supernatural-america/>.

⁹ Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska, *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (Riverside: UCR ARTSblock, University of California, Riverside, 2017); Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicx Avant-Garde* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

programming in 2017, *Mundos Alternos* featured Chicana artists who use speculation to reimagine alternative futures. Hernández's interrogation of archival erasures, and the use of speculative aesthetics, questions what counts as historical proof in the field of art history. Speculative aesthetics expands the burden of proof to include touch, emotion, color, memory, oral traditions, and spiritual forces – that which is not necessarily seen, but felt and remembered. For communities whose “proof” has been flattened and omitted, speculation clears avenues for reimagining past events through oral and visual artistic practices. In recuperating lost experiences and memories, Hernández not only understands the archive as a means of colonial control, but also presents a new method for the study of the invisible.

Inspired by the frameworks developed by Hernández and Krippal, we structured our call for papers to include super-phenomena from multiple disciplines, geographies, and time periods. Much to our excitement, Hernández agreed to be the keynote speaker. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we aimed to create a platform for emerging graduate students whose research topics and methodologies were informed by super-phenomena. In April 2021, a group of 80 art historians, artists, and scholars from across the UCSB campus and the country came together virtually. In the opening keynote, Hernández reminded the audience of the ways Latinx art histories and archives haunt colonialist narratives. Hernández presented on queer Latinx artists who refute cycles of violence and erasure through speculative aesthetics to imagine alternative futures beyond strictures of archives, borders, and citizenship.

The ideas above were expanded through the nine graduate student presenters we invited to participate in one of three panels.¹⁰ “Decolonial Futurisms: Reimagining the Sacred” considered the ways some Mexican American artists work within and against the strictures of Catholic imagery to interrogate intersections of race, gender, and spirituality. Papers included in “Otherworldly Bodies: Reenvisioning the Corporeal” examined bodily transmutations as generative sites for analysis. Lastly, papers given in “Paratextual Encounters: Reanimating the Archive” looked at the afterlives of artworks on paper and the secrets they reveal through themes of decay and memory. Moderated panel discussions centered interdisciplinary methodologies—historical, social, political, cultural, scientific, and technological— to expand our understanding of the paranormal in art. The symposium papers helped us and our audiences to see the myriad ways in which scholars consider the otherworldly, and reinforce that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of the supernatural.

Through exploring the theme “the spirit in the shadow,” this volume of *react/review* builds on ideas presented in the symposium by examining the

¹⁰ To view symposium participants' bios and paper abstracts see: “Symposium Program,” https://www.arthistory.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/program/graduate/AHGSA/AHGSA_2021_Haunting-the-Canon-archive.pdf.

“otherworldly *within* or as forms of political action or resistance” in emerging art historical scholarship. However, the symposium’s presenters demonstrated to us that the aesthetics of super-phenomena should not be separated from understanding them as frameworks of analysis. We understand super-phenomena as inherently political, not limited to the realm of aesthetics, but also a methodology, as demonstrated by Hernández’s scholarship.

We want to conclude with a short reflection on the work that got us here in the first place: the Vatican’s science fiction nativity scene and the controversies it embodies. Originally conceived during the first wave of space travel in the mid-1960s, the inclusion of the astronaut in the nativity brought together two historical moments, collapsing seemingly disparate narratives surrounding science, art history, and organized religion.¹¹ Shortly after the nativity’s unveiling, the press and social media were abuzz: while some applauded the display as an effective strategy to evangelize and unify audiences in a moment of extreme isolation and quarantine, conservatives decried the nativity entirely. In one Tweet, an observer opined “I don’t think the Vatican should behave like an avant garde art gallery, thumbs down from me, a very unfortunate decision I think.”¹² In another Tweet, a viewer commented “This is absolutely pointless. Mary wasn’t in a space suit. Nor were there turkeys present. A totally ugly and meaningless abomination.”¹³ In one interview, art historian Elizabeth Lev bemoaned the nativity stating “The Catholic Church has an incredible tradition of beauty, and yet, after a year of difficulty, we’ve put up something that makes people mock Jesus.”¹⁴ The dismissive language of these negative reviews fall within traditions of relegating advancements in art, science, and technology to the secular realm, assumed fundamentally incompatible with the sacred - an idea that Pope Francis has pushed against in past speeches and engagements.¹⁵ In a call for unity after the nativity’s unveiling, even Pope Francis responded, tweeting “While humanity’s ruin is

¹¹ In December 1970, some figures went on view in Rome, and were later displayed in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Bethlehem, Israel. See: Valentina Di Liscia, “Why Is There an Astronaut in This Year’s Vatican Nativity?,”; and Brian Boucher, “Even the Pope Seems Iffy on the Vatican’s Astronaut-Themed Nativity. Here’s How the Artwork Became a Lighting Rod.”

¹² Lucio J. Ochoa (@phoenix537512), Twitter post, December 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/phoenix537512/status/1337484209347170310>.

¹³ Olga M. González (@OlgaG921), Twitter post, December 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/OlgaG921/status/1338038708126142464>.

¹⁴ Colleen Dulle, “Why is Darth Vader in the Vatican’s Nativity Scene?”

¹⁵ Vatican News, “From Vatican City: Link-up with the International Space Station,” YouTube Video, October 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK-7g3vWXpQ>.

that everyone goes their own way, in the nativity scene everyone converges upon Jesus, Prince of Peace in the night of the world.”¹⁶



Figure 3 Installation image of 2020 Nativity Scene, Vatican City, Italy created by students and teachers of the F.A. Grue Art Institute, located in Castelli in the 1960s and 1970s. Photographs by and courtesy of Anthony Majanlahti and Hyperallergic.

The comments lamenting the sculptures' fantastical appearance are particularly revealing. For us, the tweets elicit “lol” moments while also putting into question the role of contemporary Biblical representations: to bring pleasure through traditional (and realistic) renderings, or to refigure narratives, making room for compelling

¹⁶ Pope Francis (@Pontifex), Twitter Post, December 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1343534666767163397?s=20>.

interpretations.¹⁷ On the one hand, the recent uproar surrounding the nativity implicitly diminishes imaginative retellings of past events. On the other, the controversy seems to only have increased its visibility and didactic power. In this light, it stands to reason that a crucial aspect of super-phenomena in art is its ability to disrupt: to make viewers wince, recoil, laugh, and look toward the future. The supernatural is important for the study of art and culture not simply because they elicit new and diverse aesthetic categories, but also because of its capacity as a strategy to offer insight into major socio-political and environmental problems shaping the present. For those of us open to such convergences, the weirdness of the nativity engenders new meaning, especially during a time of social distancing, alienation, and political debate.

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¹⁷ While clay might seem like an odd choice of material with which to sculpt a monumental space-age installation, its Biblical resonances and legacy in Italian art made it a befitting medium to bridge science and religion in the 1960s.

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