

Finding God in the Abstract

Hildebrando de Melo and Glen Nelson. *Nzambi (God): Hildebrando de Melo*. New York: Mormon Arts Center, 2018. 52 pp. Paperback: \$9.95.

Reviewed by Jennifer Champoux

Hildebrando de Melo is probably not a Mormon artist you've heard of. And that's just the point. Mormon Arts Center¹ co-founders Glen Nelson and Richard Bushman believe that bringing lesser-known artists to the attention of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints enriches the audience and can facilitate a more dynamic engagement with religious art. By the same token, they believe such an exchange is valuable to the artist too. As Nelson explained, "Our thinking is that an NYC immersive experience—even a short stay—could be life-altering for an artist if done correctly."² To further those goals, as part of the second annual Mormon Arts Center Festival in June 2018, Nelson and Bushman invited de Melo to New York to create a series of artworks. It was the first artist's residency sponsored by the Mormon Arts Center, and the resulting artworks were exhibited under the title *Nzambi (God)* at the Italian Academy on the campus of Columbia University during and after the festival. The Mormon Arts Center also published an exhibition catalogue that includes fifteen color plates of the artworks, an introduction and essay by Nelson, and an interview with de Melo.³

1. In February 2019, this name was changed to Center for Latter-day Saint Arts.

2. Glen Nelson, email to author, Aug. 21, 2018.

3. Nelson's catalogue essay, "Out of Angola," as well as images of the de Melo artworks discussed were reprinted in *Dialogue* 51, no. 3 (2018): 279–94.

The catalogue is largely successful in accomplishing its twin objectives of introducing de Melo to a new audience and fostering a broader, more globally inclusive definition of Mormon art. Not only does the catalogue showcase plates of the artworks but we also learn about de Melo's personal life and artistic symbolism. Nelson's brief essay in the catalogue, "Out of Angola," focuses heavily on the artist's life experiences, including his birth in Angola, his childhood years in Portugal where he was among the very first converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Porto, and his return to Angola as an adult to forge a career as an artist. The interview transcript gives more details and allows the reader to hear from the artist himself.

In terms of enlarging the boundaries of Mormon art, de Melo's abstract art in this catalogue is decidedly different from popular Mormon art styles. It is non-narrative, non-objective, and essentially non-figural. There is no horizon line, and there are written words (including pages of the Bible) pasted on in every direction. De Melo's bold signature, often placed high or near the center of the image, is sometimes all that orients the canvas. There is a sense of movement, energy, and tension in each of the *Nzambi (God)* works. Unfortunately, the vivid, full-color images in the catalogue cannot convey the three-dimensionality of the artworks—the built-up layers of paint, the welded iron, the collaged ephemera—that is so integral to de Melo's work.

Yet Nelson's text adds a further richness to the art by explaining how de Melo's artwork is influenced by both the political turmoil of his homeland and his personal religious faith. For example, Nelson's explanation of *Mustard* reveals that de Melo is using yellow symbolically to represent madness and his forced institutionalization in Angola as punishment for his political art. Similarly, Nelson explains that *VORAX System* is based on the artist's personal acronym for God, capturing what he sees as God's most important qualities. Nelson's text also analyzes the formal elements of this work, including shapes and colors, and shows how they relate to de Melo's objectives.

Readers may have benefitted, though, from deeper analysis of de Melo's style and iconography. For example, there is no real exploration of the use of Bible pages, including why he chose certain passages or used the Kikongo language Bible. Nor is there much discussion of how de Melo's work is informed by other artists and styles. De Melo's art seems to owe a particular debt to the mid-century American artist Stuart Davis, with its references to jazz music (including lines resembling staves or eighth notes in the *Red as Blood* series), flat planes of color, bold lines, and inclusion of words and even objects from consumer culture (such as luggage tags in the *Eye of God* series). Like Davis, de Melo works in a post-cubist style, referencing the collages and sharp angles of Georges Braque and other synthetic cubists, but denying a clear focal point to the image. Unlike Davis and the abstract expressionists who followed him, such as Jackson Pollock, de Melo maintains an emphasis on the center of the canvas, sometimes placing sculpture there (as in *Pre-God*) or in other cases leaving the edges and corners more open and bare (as in *VORAX System*).

Apart from introducing a new artist and style to a Mormon audience, this catalogue implicitly raises certain questions about religious art, including the merits of abstract as opposed to figurative art, the role of the viewer, and the importance of the artist's biography. Featuring an abstract artist in a solo exhibition at the Mormon Arts Center pushes back against the more representational, narrative artwork employed by the Church. Nelson's personal preference for abstract religious art is revealed in the catalogue's interview when he says, "I think these works of yours that have a more abstract basis are better at describing the mystery of God than if you were trying to illustrate Him in some traditional, eighteenth-century European way" (42). The catalogue thus identifies the complex divide between abstract religious art and figurative religious art but unfortunately stops short of adding discussion or analysis of the many issues attendant to that divide.

Nelson does, however, beautifully describe the way de Melo's work can invite the viewer to participate in the act of creation. For example, he explains, "De Melo's 2010 series *Spider* is about shapeshifting, regeneration, the legendary agility of spiders, and by extension, the artist's willingness to reinvent himself, as well as the hope that a nation can do the same. . . . The picture of a spider as a symbol is rich enough, but de Melo presents something more profound: a picture about the spider coming into being with the simple gesture of a line transformed in the crucible of the viewer's mind" (9). Yet, de Melo's artwork is unabashedly self-referential, and this catalogue follows that lead; the artist's experiences, his beliefs, his hopes, and his symbolism are paramount. On the canvas, the mark of the artist, including his prominent signature, confronts us at every turn. Where, then, does all of this leave the viewer? Is there really room left for the viewer to participate as Nelson suggests? Are the deeper levels of this art accessible to the general public?

In a similar vein, foregrounding the artist's biography changes the way we approach and value art, and this can especially be a point of tension in religious art. We might carefully consider what kind of story we tell about artists when they are seen not just as skilled creators but as, in de Melo's own words, "an instrument in the hands of God."⁴ This catalogue plays into the heroization of the artist. In fact, Nelson's essay on de Melo follows a pattern of artist biographies, familiar since the earliest ones appeared in ancient Greece. These themes include the display of artistic skill in childhood, the recognition of this talent by an adult who helps arrange for training, the removal of the artist from his family and place of birth (often with a substitute father), triumph over extreme obstacles, the speed of the artist's work, and the artist's

4. "Hildebrando de Melo: Mormon Artist," https://www.mormonwiki.com/Hildebrando_de_Melo:_Mormon_Artist. This archive of Mormon artists is being compiled by the Mormon Arts Center.

receipt of divine creative power.⁵ This catalogue ticks all the boxes and paints a picture of de Melo as a man wholly given over to his creative impulses—working hunched on the floor above his canvases from dawn to dusk, listening to music as he paints rhythmically, “as if [the canvas] were a drum” (3), and producing a monumental number of works in a short period of time. Clearly, some elements of de Melo’s life simply match up coincidentally with famous artist biographies. But it’s also true that these particular elements are strongly emphasized in the narrative put forward, perhaps revealing the influence of popular myths of genius.

Despite these characterizations of the artist, the *Nzambi (God)* exhibition catalogue (which is only available at www.mormonartscenter.org) is an important contribution to the study of Mormon visual culture. It encourages viewers to think more broadly about artists and styles of art from a global church, to make space for new voices, and to develop a more critical dialogue with religious art in general. And the exhibition was well received. According to Nelson, as of August 2018 “nearly all of the works in the exhibition have been acquired by institutions and private collectors.”⁶ Prior to moving into their new homes, the *Nzambi (God)* artworks were on view from October 2018 to January 2019 in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library on the Brigham Young University campus in Utah, where the conversation could continue.



5. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979).

6. Glen Nelson, email to author, Aug. 21, 2018.