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Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Vision

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BY DAVID BALZER February 18, 2009 21:02

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There is so much to say, contradictory and otherwise, about the mad, fascinating world of 19th-century British painter and Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood-founder William Holman Hunt that it is shocking to see so little text, even of the expository kind, at the AGO's new exhibition of his work. In a way, it's for the best, as it's possible the approach stems from the new AGO's patented terror at appearing too intellectually or historically rarefied to patrons (an obnoxious, condescending and ultimately self-defeating philosophy that I wish they'd abandon), and so bare-bones text is better than the grade-school Q & A they might have offered. There's also an art-historical party line about Hunt that's been toed for a while, pitting him as an upholder of quaint Victorian values, which we're better off without.

All the same, it would have been useful if the curators had gone to greater lengths to underscore Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites' proximity to our time (only 150 years): these paintings may look like "museum stuff," but they are themselves, in fact, referencing said stuff from a middle-class, industrial point of view (arguably much like Kent Monkman, whose work is on plentiful display elsewhere in the gallery). To be sure, it is silly to validate older art simply by calling it presciently contemporary, but it does seem useful to position Pre-Raphaelitism next to its more recent iterations: Kate Bush and Stevie Nicks iconography, say, or Benjamin A. Vierling's portrait of Joanna Newsom on the cover of Ys. All of this is to say that Hunt's Pre-Raphaelitism is about the excitement and truth, above all the moral philosophy, of imagination, of playing pretend – a concept going back to Shakespeare, one of Hunt's idols, and well before.

If you want to see it this way, there are strong camp and kitsch elements here (certainly Hunt never shied away from bad taste – one of his Jesus paintings, The Light of the World, became a mass-produced abomination at the turn of the last century) but also a radiance: Hunt's serious dedication to allegory, gaudy as it is, feels like a palette cleanser in an age when most new art is about the most banal aspects of the everyday. Hunt sometimes depicted those, too, but through, among other things, much painterly labour, endowing them with notions of saintly transfiguration taken from his bizarre Christian mysticism – which is a lot less distasteful if you consider its roots in a worshipful love of material beauty. If some things become simpler in Hunt's hands, they are never plainer.

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