

ARTnews

February 1993

\$4.95

SAINT LOUIS

"Recovering the Holy"

What may well be the first interfaith museum of contemporary religious art has been created at Saint Louis University. The Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) will develop a permanent collection of significant contemporary spiritual art and will have changing exhibitions on a variety of themes, according to Terrence E. Dempsey, who originated the idea and is the founding director. The museum's goal is to function as an "ongoing forum for the dialogue between contemporary artists and religious traditions," says Dempsey, an art history professor at Saint Louis University who has a doctorate in comparative art history and religion.

The museum was unveiled in November at the annual meeting of the Society for Art, Religion, and Contemporary Culture, a group founded in the '60s by individuals such as Alfred H. Barr, founding director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, and theologian Paul Tillich.

MOCRA, which officially opens on the 14th of this month, is housed in a chapel on the campus of the Jesuit University that was

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renovated "to make it suitable for the display of art without eliminating the sense that it was a sacred space," Dempsey explains. The chapel, with a ceiling three stories high, consists of a large central nave that measures about 100 by 40 feet, 12 side chapels, a sanctuary, and a balcony.

The works exhibited in the space will be expansive, inclusive, and unpredictable, Dempsey says. The inaugural exhibition, entitled "Sanctuaries: Recovering the Holy in Contemporary Art," is on view through July. The multiethnic, multicultural group of 24 artists includes Lita Albuquerque, Frederic Brown, Michael David, Stephen de Staebler, Ann McCoy, Jim Morphesis, Steven Heilmer, Tobi Kahn, Bernard Maisner, James Rosen, and Eleanor Dickinson. A large work by Paul Klos, *Chartres Bleu* (1986), is a construction of 27 television monitors re-creating the scale, color, and sensation of a window in Chartres cathedral.

As a long-term loan, Michael Tracy has given the museum his monumental triptych *The Eleventh, Twelfth and Thirteenth Stations of the Cross to Latin America: La Pasión* (1981-88), which will occupy the former sanctuary of the chapel. Tracy stretched tarpaulin canvas over wood and applied acrylic, shattered glass, human hair, nails, and gold onto the surface. "It is about social injustice and redemption of the people of Latin America," says Dempsey of the piece, which weighs two tons. "We are made viscerally aware of the suffering, sacrifice, and redemption of these tormented people as gold bleeds through the heavily scarred surface."

The site will also be a venue for dance, performance, video, and other media. The exhibition "Body and Soul: The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater" will open at MOCRA in September, coinciding with a visit by the dance company.

"Art of the spirit and the soul is not very saleable," said Dickinson to a panel in November. "This museum is something we've needed for a long time to counter the excessive commercialization of art." —Peter Selz