

Street Religion

Solo exhibition by Young-jun Tak

August 17 – September 30, 2023

Young-jun Tak's exhibition aptly titled "Street Religion" opens with the sculpture "Their Presumption of Our Filling," a work that holds common and religious symbols, with the intention of welcoming passersby into the gallery. The sculpture of two røde pølser (red sausages, or hot dogs, to this American) bear the hand-carved visages of Saint Nicholas in early and old age. Originally the patron saint of ending hunger, Saint Nicholas in many contexts of course also implies the patron saint of milk, cookies, and the raging capitalism of Christmas presents. The two Saint Nicholases nuzzling together with ketchup and mustard in their metal cradle bring this beloved childhood street food, its attendant local nostalgia, and an introductory queerness into the gallery.

Once inside, the visitor encounters a second sculpture, "Our Holding in Their Gaze," Tak's metal and ceramic Christmas tree that dominates the space.

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When I was a young child, my family would drive across what felt like an interminable swath of the eastern United States to visit extended family for Christmas. We would pack up suitcases and bags of beautifully wrapped presents, each labeled for the branch of the family we were going to visit—Grandma & Grandpa, Uncle or Aunt so-and-so, Cousins such-and-such. I remember my parents' stress at buying the right presents, and my own anticipated comfort at the familiar decorations in each house, the Christmas tree taking central pride of place with gifts abounding underneath, always the same year after year. A true carefully orchestrated American dream.

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"Our Holding in Their Gaze" is a different kind of Christmas tree—a bare metal frame echoing orthodox crosses, from which hang pine green cast ceramic body parts, instead of decorations and living greenery. His tree speaks to the interruption of queer experiences—intimacy, celebration, protest, marriage—by religious groups convinced that the control of others will lead to their own righteousness. Individuals who take ancient texts read through the lenses of zealots and myopic scholars to hand pick the list of those who are allowed into society and salvation from the fear of death—and those who are not.

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I remember the time there was no Christmas tree at my one house on our Christmas pilgrimage. Whether it was the first time I noticed—my expectation of presents and decorations surpassing the attention of my cousins—or the first time it had been absent, I'm not sure. But I do remember my uncle's disdainful explanation that the Christmas tree was a pagan symbol that distracted from the true message of Christ's birth.

I was shocked—at first, at his refusal to participate in this ritual I had never before seen rejected. And then at the possibility that this simple tree had a much more complicated history than I had yet imagined. Where, actually, did this "pagan" ritual come from that made its way to every living room and shopping mall I had ever visited in suburban America?

As we know well, the symbols of most religions can be wielded to welcome some, while casting others out. Over centuries, each branch of the major monotheistic religions we live with today have found their ways to create codes, hierarchies, and outsiders. Today is no different, with political and economic interests casting allegiances with religious ones to determine the legal and social structures within which we are all permitted to live.

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In all of his works, Tak imagines the ways that different shared spaces impact the queer body. These spaces can be domestic, religious, or civic—all overlapping forms of public and private that play out opportunities for control in different ways. Tak has said that the queer body is particularly attuned to the social, political, and moral structures embedded into architectural choices, be they public or domestic, and the edges of these spaces - as they are not commonly built for the queer body. It is easier to see the embedded choices if it is not built for you.

By Melanie Kress, Senior Curator, Public Art Fund, New York

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