

Art in America

David Michalek at the Brooklyn Museum

Oct 2005 by Michael Amy

In "14 Stations," his exhibition of large black-and-white photographs mounted in 14 lightboxes, David Michalek raises the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society to the level of the sacred. People affiliated with the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing, a nonprofit organization located at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, reenacted some of their experiences as (former) homeless individuals to illustrate the 14 canonical Stations of the Cross, tableaux representing episodes from Christ's Passion. These moving performances, a little like medieval Passion plays, were beautifully captured on film in 2003 by Michalek.

In each episode, the figure of Christ is embodied by a different male or female, black, white or Latino person, to illustrate what Christians consider to be the universal dimension of Christ's suffering. The actors are dressed in contemporary garb and placed in contemporary settings, thereby attesting to what Christians consider to be the lasting efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. The narratives seem to suggest that the plight of the dispossessed may make greater sense and become more bearable to them once they relive the suffering endured by Christ.

In most of the compositions, one or more figures appear in the immediate foreground, cropped and in close-up, thereby bringing the biblical reenactment near to us and increasing our empathy. Witness Station Twelve: Christ Dies on the Cross, in which a young black man, his torso exposed, lies on a blanket with his eyes and mouth partly open and his hands half closed upon his abdomen. Shown half-length, the figure subtly recalls the traditional iconography of Christ as the Man of Sorrows. Michalek perused many such representations from the history of art, although--happily--he never literally appropriates them.

The rich tonalities of the photographs add to the drama of the whole, with the lightboxes enhancing their range. The presentation evokes the streets where the homeless live while "highlighting" their plight. In Station Eight: Christ Encounters the Weeping Women, six figures are arranged parallel to the plane in the middle ground, with a black man as Christ, wrapped in a blanket, sitting in an entranceway in the bottom left corner.

Michalek's commiseration with his fellow humans and deep understanding of the history of dramatic figurative representation have enabled him to produce a profound cycle of photographs.