

# When Culture Is Challenged by Art: Pro-Life Responses to Cultural Aggression Against the Vulnerable in the Art of T. Gerhardt Smith

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines three paintings by T. Gerhardt Smith as pro-life responses to the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia: *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome*, *Femicidal National Organization Woman's Planned Parentless Selfish Movement*, and *Killer Caduceus*. After identifying foundational principles of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective, the paper determines that Smith's paintings are consistent with ideas enunciated in St. John Paul II's 1999 *Letter to Artists*.

T. (Thomas) Gerhardt Smith is an eclectic modern artist and an enigmatic personality. His paintings contain representational figures, yet the dominant content of most of his work is abstract. Few comments by the artist himself are extant to explain his work, and critical commentary and scholarship on his oeuvre is thus far non-existent. To compound the scholarly challenge, biographical detail about Smith is scant. According to his surviving relatives,

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Smith was born in 1944<sup>1</sup> and was a lifelong Wisconsin resident. Although he was raised Roman Catholic, he did not participate in the Church's sacramental life. His relatives assert, however, that his Catholicism was evident in all his relationships and work.<sup>2</sup> Credentialed with a BFA from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and a master's degree in education, several of Smith's works were presented in an exhibition titled "Goliath Visiting," held at the University of Notre Dame in October 1990. He was a selectee for the National Endowment for the Humanities Asian Studies Grant Program in 1988.<sup>3</sup> Smith died in Green Bay, Wisconsin on 15 April 2019.

Beyond these few biographical details, Smith produced several paintings that express not only the frustration of those who experience the cultural assaults on human life called abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia but also the sorrow, regret, and other intense emotions resulting from those assaults. It is hoped that the purpose of this research (to promote awareness and appreciation of Smith's work) will be augmented by the criticism of many other pro-life scholars.

This paper consists of three major sections. The first one identifies foundational principles of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective, consistent with St. John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*,<sup>4</sup> which demonstrates how Catholic art aesthetics comports with and distinguishes itself from secular aesthetics. The second section examines specific paintings by Smith that represent an artistic consideration of the life issues. Expansive commentary will be provided on three representative paintings: *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome* (1988), which comments on abortion; *Femicidal National Organization Woman's Planned Parentless Selfish Movement* (1989), which applies to infanticide; and *Killer Caduceus* (1987), which can be interpreted as applying to euthanasia. All three paintings are reproduced at the end of this paper. The final section of this research will evaluate how the paintings are consonant with St. John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While his obituary does not mention a birth date, material on the back of *Killer Caduceus*, which was displayed at the Newman Religious Art Show, specifies Smith's birthday as 15 September 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel A. Nigro, personal interview, 10 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel A. Nigro, "Goliath Visiting," brochure for the exhibition (1990).

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, [4 April] 1999, [w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_23041999\\_artists.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html); accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>5</sup> I thank attendees for the vibrant question-and-answer period that followed the

When contemporaries hear the word “icon,” they invariably think of its technological denotation. It is telling that the online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers as the first definition of the term “a graphic symbol on a computer display screen that represents an app, an object (such as a file), or a function (such as the command to save).” It is as equally telling that a severely-restricted definition of the ancient understanding of the term occupies fourth position in the dictionary: “a conventional religious image typically painted on a small wooden panel and used in the devotions of Eastern Christians.”<sup>6</sup> The history of the term may have moved chronologically from the ancient Greek world to Byzantine icons to (with the advent of film technology) images of favorite actors, such as Gloria Swanson, or historical events now captured as iconic images,<sup>7</sup> such as the Madonna-like image of the Kent State shootings. More importantly, though, each of these representations not only can elicit emotions in the viewer but also stimulate one to action -- whether silent prayer or vocal or otherwise discrete activity of a social justice kind.

The pro-life world also has its accumulating collection of art work that is iconic. The pro-life catalog includes Mary Cate Carroll’s painting/reliquary *American Liberty Upside Down* (1983) and *The Silent Scream* ultrasound made famous by Bernard Nathanson and by the monograph of Donald S. Smith that elaborates the film (1984).<sup>8</sup> Commentary about these art works can be found in many sources, such as published papers from University Faculty for Life conferences,<sup>9</sup> and need not be repeated here. The work of T. Gerhardt Smith should be considered a valued addition to the pro-life artistic canon. The three paintings specified above can be appreciated as pro-life contributions to illustrate problems created by abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

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presentation of this research on 25 October 2019 at the annual conference of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, held at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

<sup>6</sup> The ancient definition would be further relegated to fifth position, since the first definition is bifurcated into an “a” and “b” denotation.

<sup>7</sup> The redundancy “iconic image” is important, apparently, to distinguish between images that are simply noteworthy and those that are more important.

<sup>8</sup> Donald S. Smith, *The Silent Scream: The Complete Text of the Documentary Film with an Authoritative Response to the Critics*, (Anaheim CA: American Portrait Films Books, 1985). Some pro-lifers have argued that Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting *The Scream* is a precursor to Nathanson’s work. However, besides being anachronistic, the connection is tenuous, based solely on the same word used in the title.

<sup>9</sup> Online volumes of the organization’s conference proceedings can be found at: <http://www.uffl.org/pastproceedings.html>.

St. John Paul II's *Letter to Artists* (1999)

While the vocabulary of art aesthetics from a Catholic perspective is built on ancient Greek and Roman principles in terms of seeking truth, goodness, and beauty, Christianity brings several clarifying ideas to the study of what constitutes art. One cannot view either the embryonic<sup>10</sup> art of the migration period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire or the full flowering<sup>11</sup> of magnificent Renaissance or Baroque paintings and sculpture and not perceive the Christian appreciation of the human body as good, or God's creation as beautiful, or the underlying ideas of the art work about human nature or divine teaching as true. In similar manner, the ancients would have perceived the proportion of the Parthenon or any Praxiteles sculpture as manifesting not only correct principles of design but also commentary about what is true, good, and beautiful. The Christian development of ancient art aesthetics, however, clarifies those principles in several respects. St. John Paul II's *Letter to Artists* encapsulates these principles. I will highlight nine statements from this text to advance the appreciation of Smith's works.

John Paul II begins his *Letter to Artists* with a most interesting phrase, "new 'epiphanies' of beauty." The phrase suggests that contemporary artists are "passionately dedicated to the search for" new manifestations of beauty.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> That I use this word to describe the art of the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire is compatible with how St. John Paul II similarly describes early Christian art's nascent stage in his *Letter to Artists*: "Art of Christian inspiration began therefore in a minor key, strictly tied to the need for believers to contrive Scripture-based signs to express both the mysteries of faith and a 'symbolic code' by which they could distinguish and identify themselves, especially in the difficult times of persecution. Who does not recall the symbols which marked the first appearance of an art both pictorial and plastic? The fish, the loaves, the shepherd: in evoking the mystery, they became almost imperceptibly the first traces of a new art."

<sup>11</sup> Lest this summary of thousands of years of art history seem too (to continue the metaphor) florid, consider what St. John Paul II has written in his *Letter to Artists*: "This prime epiphany of 'God who is Mystery' is both an encouragement and a challenge to Christians, also at the level of artistic creativity. From it has come a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation." He repeats the floral metaphor when discussing "the extraordinary artistic flowering of Humanism and the Renaissance."

<sup>12</sup> That the pope used the Greek term "epiphanies" is intriguing, if only etymologically. Since "epiphany" means not so much a discovery, but an unveiling, St. John Paul II must have had in mind not only that the truth, goodness, and beauty of an art work is already present, but also that those elements are discoverable, or more precisely able to be uncovered or disclosed, by the artist him- or herself—a mighty task

Thus, while we may still value Renaissance and Baroque paintings, the pope maintains that contemporary artists are open to expressing their ideas about the true, the good, and the beautiful in completely new forms. This is not a new axiom of art aesthetics. What we call modern art has aimed for “new ‘epiphanies’” since the mid-nineteenth century, just as the Renaissance was considered a new approach to art.

Among the new principles are the following. An artist is not a creator in the strict sense, an attribute that belongs to God alone, but a “craftsman” since the artist “uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made in the image of God.” In speaking of “the special vocation of the artist,” the pope summarizes thousands of years of human history, nearly equivalent to the range of time covered in art history, with this personalist approach: “The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution that artists offer to the history of culture.”

The pope then demonstrates the chronological progression of this personalist approach, citing ancient art aesthetic theory, which is nearly identical with the Christian view:

The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: *kalokagathia*, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful.”

Since “beauty is the vocation bestowed on [the artist] by the Creator,” the pope further affirms that:

Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation – as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on – feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbour and of humanity as a whole.... Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning.

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fraught with great joy and responsibility indeed.

Of course, the world has added new artistic expressions beyond Renaissance and Baroque art, and the pope acknowledges this development in the art world by highlighting what may appear as the secularization of modern art: “It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself.”

Although this bifurcation of Christian and secular art may be the basis for discussion of much modern art, insofar as it is steeped not in the true, the good, and the beautiful, but the false, the bad, and the ugly or the grotesque, the pope sees hope even in such dismal productions of our modern art period, for “[e]ven when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”

The final statements of the pope’s letter prove quite challenging to the analysis of work by an artist like Smith: “Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God.” He further argues that “Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable.” Finally, quoting Polish poet Cyprian Norwid that “beauty is to enthuse us for work, and work is to raise us up,” the pope suggests that “people of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us.” The saint’s life-affirming and positive comments on artists and artistic production in his *Letter to Artists* are as relevant today when the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia relentlessly attack human life as they were in 1999 when it was first published.

#### *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome* (1988)

The first painting to be considered, *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome*, is easy to understand as a work concerning abortion if only because the subtitle makes it clear: *Post-Abortion Syndrome* (see figure 1). Even if the subtitle were not present, the subject matter would be evident.

Smith’s comments on this painting (written in a syntax that is often telegraphic) should be noted first:

Living with the memory of the death of a child, the death of her motherhood..., living with this memory, holding wrapping the child for the last time. Sorrow without tears, weapons of the love at her hand being wrapped with the child...bloody, red memory.

Out of sight, not out of mind, but out of your mind. Post-Abortion Syndrome...simple format design, but I feel conveys a very strong message...death is, and expected, however premature death is the greatest tragedy.<sup>13</sup>

That is what the artist himself had to say about the painting, but, if these notes were not available, what would the contemporary viewer see?

The painting depicts a woman and a child who seems to have been just recently born; the attached umbilical cord makes that apparent. However, the pallid color of the child, a girl, contrasts with that of the woman. If her flesh tones indicate that she is alive, then the presumption is that the child has died. Once these bare facts are understood, the deeper connection between the characters depicted becomes evident: the woman is most likely the mother. Why else would she fix her vision upon the dead child and have such a sorrowful countenance? Besides that, her breasts are full, reinforcing the idea that she would have nursed the child if she were alive.

Once the facts of the painting and the relationship between the figures have been established, the viewer can extract more from the painting's artistic components, especially applying conventional interpretations of color theory. The characteristics of specific colors identified in this research are culled from the monograph *Color* by Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher, and the following passages summarize general axioms of color theory that apply to the paintings discussed here.

Zelanski and Fisher begin their chapter on the psychological effects of color by commenting on its physiological effects:

According to physiological research with the effects of colored lights, red wavelengths stimulate the heart, the circulation, and the adrenal glands, increasing strength and stamina.... Yellow light is stimulating for the brain and nervous system, bringing mental alertness and activating the nerves in the muscles. Green lights affect the heart, balance the circulation, and promote relaxation and healing of disorders such as colds, hay fever, and liver problems. Blue wavelengths affect the throat and thyroid gland, bring cooling and soothing effects, and lower blood pressure.<sup>14</sup>

The authors then elaborate on the psychological effects of color:

Psychological literature is full of attempts to determine how specific colors affect

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<sup>13</sup> T. Gerhardt Smith. "Artist's Comments," 10 Sept. 2019 (typescript).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher, *Color*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010), p. 41.

human health and behavior and how best to put the results into effect.... Bright colors, particularly warm hues, seem conducive to activity and mental alertness and are therefore increasingly being used in schools. Cooler, duller hues, on the other hand, tend to sedate.<sup>15</sup>

Combining physiological and psychological aspects of color, the authors point out that both blind and sighted children

are affected by color energies in ways that transcend seeing. One hypothesis is that neurotransmitters in the eye transmit information about light to the brain even in the absence of sight, and that this information releases a hormone in the hypothalamus that has numerous effects on our moods, mental clarity, and energy level. [Furthermore,] colors that seem to increase blood pressure and pulse and respiration rates are, in order of increasing effect, red, orange, and yellow.<sup>16</sup>

Zelanski and Fisher identify standard connotations of various colors in Western culture over several pages: black symbolizing death; red is “associated with the color of blood, as well as with fire, warmth, brightness, and stimulation” and anger; and gray suggests “independence, separation, loneliness, [and] self-criticism.”<sup>17</sup> They judiciously end their examination of emotions associated with various colors by noting: “The actual emotional effect of a specific color in an artwork depends partly on its surroundings and partly on the ideas expressed by the work as a whole. To be surrounded by blue...is quite different from seeing a small area of blue in a larger color context.”<sup>18</sup>

That *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome* uses colors of highly connotative value can be addressed quickly and with certainty. The child, ghost-like, is depicted in simple ashen colors, almost a charcoal drawing instead of a lifelike representation of a newborn with lively flesh color. The child’s porcelain-like skin is accentuated by having her rest on a red blanket, red being a symbol of not only bloodshed, but also martyrdom. The mother herself, scantily clad, is barely covered in a yellow (connotative of the color of diseased matter) gauze-like garment, her body as exposed as her emotions. That she is silhouetted against a black and blue background, both colors connotative of sadness and evil, highlights her sorrow, as though she is as encased in sorrow as the child is encased in a baby garment surrounded by a blood image.

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<sup>15</sup> Zelanski and Fisher, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Zelanski and Fisher, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Zelanski and Fisher, pp. 43-48.

<sup>18</sup> Zelanski and Fisher, p. 49.



Perhaps the most striking thing about this painting is the gaze of the subjects. The mother is looking downward, and it is a psychological maxim that a viewer would feel or be comfortable looking at her since the gaze of sorrow would be avoided. The child, however, is looking directly at the viewer. Which one gets the viewer's attention, therefore, is entirely subjective, depending on the comfort of the viewer, but some speculation should be provided here. The painting could work in a post-abortion syndrome counseling session in one of two ways. If the aborted mother wishes to work through her desire to see the aborted child, then she would fix her gaze on the child in the painting; if the aborted mother is so bereft that she is still at the stage of fixating or obsessing on her own sorrow, then she would identify with the mother in the painting.<sup>19</sup> Either perspective -- a focus on the psychological damage to the mother or the body of an aborted child -- is suitable, therefore, for beginning a conversation about what occurs in every abortion.

*Femicidal National Organization Woman's Planned Parentless Selfish Movement* (1989)

The second Smith painting to be reviewed here, *Femicidal National Organization Woman's Planned Parentless Selfish Movement*, seems to address infanticide -- "seems" being the operative verb since there is little commentary either from the artist himself or from extant exhibition material that the intentional killing of a born child is meant in this painting. It is much more abstract than *Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome* (see figure 2). Even the aggressively biased title does nothing to justify such a claim, which requires more intellectual activity from the viewer, much like an archaeological dig into an anti-life psyche.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Rothhaar, a colleague who is an emerging philosophy scholar, has suggested that, while the aborted mother and the father of the child are not the only victims surviving an abortion in real life, in this case of a pictorial representation of the effects of abortion, the viewer is also a victim. That is, the viewer must suffer the negative emotions of the abortion experience since he or she is drawn into the painting. Moreover, like any good and, in this case, startling and controversial visual experience, once the image of the sorrowing mother is in one's brain, it is unavoidable that one will ruminate on the meaning and applicability of the image for him- or herself. The dynamics of this psychological process must, however, be relegated to future research.

<sup>20</sup> The linguistic component of such an archaeological dig is much easier to resolve than the artistic one. Not only is the first word of the title a coined term, merging "feminist" or "feminine" with the Latin suffix "cide", to kill, but the first six words of the title merge two prominent anti-life feminist groups, the National

*Femicidal* depicts four characters, three apparently human beings whose genders cannot be determined with certitude. The figure on the left may be female, and the fully-clothed human figure on the right may be male, if the criterion of wearing a flowing dress or skirt indicates a female entity and wearing pants indicates a male one. Another character reclines on the lap of the female character. The remaining character is a skeleton hovering in front of the male character.

Like *Sorrow* discussed above, *Femicidal* involves a child reclining horizontally in front of the female figure, this time on her lap instead of placed in front of yet removed from her body. The male figure, reclining comfortably in the right portion of the painting, seems only a background for the more animated character, the skeleton, whose arm remains outstretched, most likely after having plunged some fatal instrument into the child's body. The dramatic irony of the painting is stunning and evident only when the viewer reflects that the skeleton, a dead artifact of what remains after bodily decomposition, is doing an action that rightfully belongs to the living human male being in the background.

What, though, does Smith's painting have to do with infanticide? Can a rational case be made that the painting suggests the extreme negation of life that occurs in any infanticide situation? The little commentary mentioned above concerning this work includes artist's notes, which make it clear that one of the characters on the right is "striking out" (note the present participle) for the ostensible purpose of not merely harming but destroying "the future of the child."<sup>21</sup> This language presumes that the child would have been born before his or her future could be directly attacked. Thus, the painting is an abstraction of infanticide more than any other assault on human life.

Moreover, one can point to an item in the painting that suggests an infanticide has occurred by analyzing the characters' choreography. Note that the child is not standing upright as the other characters are. Even the skeletal character has the benefit of being "alive" because it is standing upright, being able to hold oneself upright constituting a feature of most living creatures.

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Organization of Women and the abortion business Planned Parenthood. One presumes that such intellectual perception would be easy; however, as the culture loses its common knowledge base, let alone its knowledge of the history of the pro-life movement, these linguistic elements must be clarified for the contemporary student and general public.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, "Artist's Comments."

Something (a knife, blade, or some other linear object) has been plunged into the chest cavity of the child character positioned horizontally on the canvas. The association is evident. This action external to the womb was the means of the child's death, not an action internal to the womb, which is the means by which unborn children are killed in abortion (either by abortion instruments, a toxic saline solution, or an abortifacient pill).

Finally, consider the circumstances within the painting. If this were an abortion-themed painting, the major character hovering over the child would be either dejected over the fatal choice of aborting the child or gravid in her pregnancy, with the same negative emotions attending the choice to kill the child. This is not the case here, since the figure hovering over the child's body is expressionless because her facial features are smudged, precluding recognition, as though she has been forced into the infanticide by another agent (the male character, her lover, or, worse, her husband). The other characters' faces are much clearer, and so the narrative of the painting's plot is shifted from the pain that an aborted mother would feel to the pain of the child himself or herself. A final consideration of the narrative is even more chilling. The male character, presumably the father of the child being killed, has abdicated his role of protector of the family. He is the agent who authorizes the infanticide.

#### *Killer Caduceus* (1987)

The previous two paintings illustrate how Smith's abstraction gradient increases from dominantly realistic representation mingled with abstract forms to dominantly abstract forms with some realistic representation mingled with unrealistic forms (no one actually sees skeletons interacting with human beings). But *Killer Caduceus* illustrates dominantly abstract forms with the barest of representational figures (see figure 3).

The elements of the painting depict a menagerie of aviary and serpent forms – the entity in the one category being what looks like a bird, the others being what are more obviously serpents. Caught between these elements is what appears to be a human figure. At least one presumes this to be the case by virtue of the arms occupying the center space of the painting as well as the presence of a head, which itself is a hybrid of a human head and the face of another creature. That the color green occupies nearly half the painting is highly connotative. Where green in most representational paintings symbolizes fertility and normal growth, here the denotation of the color green, especially

coupled with the serpent, which is also green, alters the connotation of green as normal and healthy to the other, common connotation of green as in something sickly, something vomited, or something venomous.

Is the interpretation here of the venomous nature of the green snakes justified? One could argue affirmatively for two reasons. First, the representational forms of the serpents are true to the natural world where there are indeed some green snakes that are highly venomous. Second, if this painting is in some way a caduceus, then the viewer realizes something has gone terribly wrong with this iconic image. The snakes are off the pole on which they are supposed to writhe. Thus, this convolution (leftist professors would say deconstruction) of the ancient symbol of the caduceus as a symbol of humanity's effort to cure reinforces a stark function of snakes: they kill.

This last detail ineluctably leads into the consideration of this painting as a statement on euthanasia. One can surmise this point from Smith's own commentary on this painting (remember, as noted above, his telegraphic style):

"...the medical symbol being distorted to attack the figure coils ripping tightly around the medical profession and slowly taking the life/death hovering in back..." Lethal force makes physicians the oxymorons of forensic medicine – no art, no Hippocrates, cold words, cold death. If life does not matter, nothing does.<sup>22</sup>

From the above passage, one must surmise that the artist's intent is not to comment strictly on abortion or infanticide, but on a broader category of attack on human life, euthanasia, which devolves on the idea of life unworthy of life beyond the chronological aspects that constitute the temporal domains of abortion and infanticide. A human life that is deemed unworthy of life can range from one's being unborn to one's babyhood. Thus, abortion and infanticide are the terms used to denote killing human beings at those stages of life. Euthanasia, however, is the proper term for any other form of medical killing or assisted suicide perpetrated against human life from one's childhood to the most advanced senior years. The artist himself suggests the true intent of the medical profession attacked by the death-inducing serpents. To render it as "cold death" would be a more realistic and therefore honest meaning of "euthanasia." It is not "good death," as its Greek etymology would suggest, but

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, "Artist's Comments." Besides these comments, the art historian would consider a secondary fact of the artist's intent. When this painting was displayed at the Newman Religious Art Show, the identifying tag on the reverse of the painting simply read *Euthanasia*.

contrary to the protection of human life, it lacks all human compassion and love, and is therefore cold.

Now that these three paintings have been reviewed, the final section of this research will evaluate how the paintings comply with Catholic art aesthetics, especially enunciated through St. John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*. This task is particularly challenging for the pro-life researcher since Smith's art is negative on virtually all fronts. The topics are controversial. The figures depicted are tortured, morose, and nihilistic. The colors used are dark and sad. The depictions are obscure, enigmatic, and non-representational. The summary opinion of the paintings could be that these are tortured works from a tortured artist unable to survive in a tortured contemporary world and whose viewers are tortured into deriving a tortured meaning from what is depicted.

How, then, can Smith's art comport with Catholic art aesthetics, especially those principles enunciated in the correspondence to fellow artists by one who was not merely a pope but is a saint?<sup>23</sup> Applying the list of nine highlighted statements will show that Smith's paintings are not only worthy of serious attention but consistent with St. John Paul II's ideas about art.

The first two of the pope's comments and their applicability to Smith's works can be combined since they concern the nature of the artist. The pope emphasizes how contemporary artists "are passionately dedicated to the search for" new manifestations of beauty and that they strive for "new 'epiphanies' of beauty." The mother in *Sorrow* is as beautiful as any Madonna from the Renaissance; her voluptuous form alone would justify this claim. That Smith uses a post-aborted mother as the subject for his painting, however, is so new in the repertoire of modern art that it is rare to find scholarly treatment of this image.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The reader will recall that the three paintings discussed here were completed by 1989, ten years before the pope issued his *Letter to Artists*.

<sup>24</sup> One exception may be Agnete Strøm's 2004 research into Paula Rego's *Untitled: The Abortion Pastels* (1998-1999: "The Abortion Pastels: Paula Rego's Series on Abortion," *Reproductive Health Matters* 12/24 supplement (November 2004): 195-97; accessed 15 October 2019. However, one can argue that Strøm's article is not so much research as propaganda. The beginning sentences of the article suggest not only the rarity of finding art concerning abortion, but also the explicit anti-life feminist function of Rego's work: "At last, women's experience of abortion is hanging on the walls of a museum so that we do not forget so easily what abortion is about. *Untitled: The Abortion Pastels* are great canvases depicting women undergoing abortion. The artist, Paula Rego...is a remarkable artist and has a huge production that spans more than 50 years. If you don't know her work, let *Untitled* be your starting point to

The depiction of an infanticide as happening to a non-human entity hidden within or emerging from a human being and the portrayal of venomous snakes escaping the pole of the traditional caduceus are two manifestations of life-destroying actions that are new in the art world. Traditional infanticide paintings clearly depict human mothers smothering, strangling, or killing newborn children; see, for example, Joseph Highmore's *The Angel of Mercy* (c. 1746). Smith's work alters the dynamic completely. While the infanticide painting contains what looks like flowing garments as artistically rendered as any Baroque masterpiece, the infanticide occurs not at the hands of the mother, but by Death itself. Similarly, the depiction of the corrupted key symbol of the medical profession, the caduceus, should lead the viewer to a painful epiphany: the medical profession has turned from healing to killing.

The pope's comment on the interrelationship between the good and the beautiful pertains to Smith's work as well: "The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection." The viewer cannot simply pass by Smith's paintings without having such reflection generated by a quantity of questions: why this image, why this representational figure, why this color, why this abstract form, why this geometry between characters, why this darkness, why this light, and so on. The answers to these questions will constitute the "fruitful" part of the pope's equation. It is insufficient merely to ask questions about the "link between good and beautiful." One must come to a conclusion about the ideas presented in the paintings.

In regard to St. John Paul II's commentary about what the inherent beliefs of the artist should be, we can ask: What is Smith trying to say about "the inmost reality of man and of the world" in three remarkably dismal paintings? There is no cross, no crucifix, no savior image, no religious symbol in the works. The absence of any redemptive figure or element in the paintings forces even the staunchest secular person to wonder why.<sup>25</sup> If the paintings celebrated

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discover a great artist and feminist" (p. 195).

<sup>25</sup> The closest representation of an explicitly religious element occurs within *Femicidal*, where red slash marks, notably in groups of three, could reference the Trinity, the number of crosses on Calvary at Jesus's Crucifixion, or some other symbolic meaning; the modal "could" must be used here since the artist himself did not leave any commentary about the meaning of these slashes. The slashes are scattered over the top space of the work and only coalesce into a cruciform in the middle of the bottom half of the painting, separating the reclining figure from the skeleton and male character. Thus, one is able to conjecture that the intention of the artist was to convey some religious imagery; otherwise, the slash marks would have resumed the chaotic

abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, then the figures could appear, for example, as the jovial couple looking on the dead body of their aborted child, as in Mary Cate Carroll's *American Liberty Upside Down*. Absent any celebration, then, the viewer must wonder where the redeeming value of such seemingly nugatory works resides. Recall that John Paul writes: "It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself." Like the absence of redemptive figures in Dante's *Inferno*, perhaps the central import of Smith's depressing paintings is, paradoxically, the absence of any suggestion of a religious power. The humans depicted in the paintings clearly manifest how morose, depressing, nihilistic, and fatal their actions against human life become when God is absent.

The final highlighted statements from John Paul's letter confront a humanism devoid of God that has wrought such havoc in Smith's world and that continues to devastate our own, thirty years later. "Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption," John Paul writes. "Artists are constantly in search of the hidden meaning of things, and their torment is to succeed in expressing the world of the ineffable [because] People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us." Smith's works, simply by virtue of their existence, manifest this "universal desire for redemption." Even though they may be uncomfortable viewing assaults against their fellow human beings, people still look, for example, at car accidents (the psychological principle of *schadenfreude* applies), yet they want to be freed from those horrors. They do not want mothers to participate in the killing of the unborn, or parents to authorize the killing of their newborns, or those in the medical professions to destroy human lives. These paintings, then, constitute a pictorial form of rhetorical negation whereby one states what something is not for the express purpose of stating what something is. Knowing the evils of the threats against human life will, finally, assist us, as St. John Paul II urges, "to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us."

A question should be raised at this paper's conclusion. How do these three paintings by Smith and similar art works enhance the scholarship on the life issues written from a social science perspective? The following answers are

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pattern of the top half of the painting.

tentative and subject, hopefully, to increased scholarship by younger pro-life academics who are poised to replace those anti-life professors who have already done enough damage to the professions and the culture from their positions in academia.

First, it is presumed that reflection on works of art like Smith's can advance scholarship on the life issues from a social science perspective. Pro-life academics are well aware that what they write about post-abortion syndrome, racial factors in abortion rates, or psychological ramifications of forcing the elderly to consider euthanasia instead of life-affirming medical care are vitally important contributions to counter anti-life threats against human life. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Ring Cassidy's work on post-abortion women can make us aware of the damaging psychological effects of abortion on women.<sup>26</sup> Raymond Adamek's sociological studies on demographics of anti- and pro-life activists are classic and should be mandatory reading for anybody active in either movement.<sup>27</sup>

The social sciences would be remiss in neglecting the artistic achievements of pro-life artists such as Mary Cate Carroll and T. Gerhardt Smith, primarily based on a rhetorical analysis done in light of certain social science principles. Most social science academic scholarship operates on two major Aristotelian concepts, *ethos* and *logos*.<sup>28</sup> Social scientists rely not only on the credibility of the researcher investigating certain problems (the *ethos* concept), but also on the reasoned and thoroughly researched data and methodology used to support projects and studies to address those problems. Focusing on human beings is, of course, the essence of the social sciences. (What other entities do social sciences concern themselves with if not the sociological principles which apply to human beings, or the psychological theories that apply to human beings, or any other division of the social sciences whose conjectures and data-driven theories apply to human beings?) Social scientists delving deeper into paintings such as Smith's would thus examine

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Ring-Cassidy and Ian Gentles, *Women's Health After Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: DeVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Ray Adamek, "Abortion Activists: Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behavior," 31 January 1985 (typescript); "What America Really Thinks About Abortion," 1 May 2004 (typescript).

<sup>28</sup> Kairos, the appropriateness of the situation, is implicit because every social science project and study depends on a circumstance in the real world which needs to be addressed or a problem which needs to be corrected.



dehumanization as thoroughly as William Brennan did in his initial research (1995) into linguistic dehumanization and his subsequent expansion of that research in 2008.<sup>29</sup>

What else remains? As every humanities academic knows, literature and artistic works benefit from a study of the credibility of the writers or artists and a logical analysis of their work, but the dominant Aristotelian concept in artistic production is *pathos*, the feelings or emotional power stimulated by the work. Because they can assist social scientists by illustrating the emotions affected or created by threats against human life, the Smith paintings enhance communication on the life issues. While it may be difficult for a female patient on the psychiatrist's couch to talk about her abortion or a male patient to talk in a standard doctor's office about his role in securing the death of his child, it can feel safe to discuss abortion when one talks about a figure in a painting.<sup>30</sup> The same type of distance offered by the infanticide and euthanasia paintings may offer enough space for those suffering from these other assaults on human life to communicate their anxiety or guilt about those practices. Optimally, once viewers understand the works and reflect on their own experiences regarding the life issues, the paintings may also stimulate corrective action regarding the controversial issues they address.

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<sup>29</sup> Brennan's monographs are *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable: When Word Games Take Lives* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1995) and *John Paul II: Confronting the Language Empowering the Culture of Death* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> English professors can testify anecdotally to the power of writing about controversial issues from an objective, third-person perspective. If a writing assignment addresses such issues, inevitably a student may feel safe enough to conjure up memories of his or her own participation in such a matter. This principle applies not only in writing about abortion, but also sexual or drug abuse or other conflicts.

Figure 1: Sorrow Without Tears: Post-Abortion Syndrome  
(Source credit: Private collection of Dr. Samuel Nigro)



Figure 2: Femicidal National Organization Woman's Planned Parentless Selfish Movement (Source credit: Private collection of Dr. Samuel Nigro)



Figure 3: Killer Caduceus (Source credit: Private collection of Dr. Samuel Nigro)

