

Buy and Be Saved: Leslie Tucker's Devotionals and Postulates

by Mary Brown

Images, and the possibilities and promises they convey, continue to shape our thoughts and behavior in subtle, powerful, and often disingenuous ways. Leslie Tucker's digital collages intertwine religious iconography with fragments of canonical art, everyday items, and the accoutrements of the electronic age. In scale, composition, and presentation, *Devotionals and Postulates* directly evoke the Euro-American tradition of religious painting and illustration, yet their gilded, silvery objects and pearly surfaces, familiar from slick advertising, remind that digital tools and materialism have largely displaced both the painted medium and its spiritual values. At a time when the problems caused by consumption and media manipulation have turned catastrophic, Tucker's critique is most welcome.

Two 2018 *Devotionals* feature a contemporary object of devotion: the smartphone, a device which seems to have entered the human circadian rhythm. *God Loves Us No Matter What* places a pink marble phone on what would be the analogical axis of a Christian image, the central, vertical axis reserved for the most spiritually important icon. Three sheep statues, all ensnared in a gold chain, surround the phone; one looks up, another is foreshortened to directly face the monumental item. A garland of flowers and silver handcuffs surround the sheep, while a spray of white wings, dangling sacred hearts, and pearled, gold staff complete the religious iconography. In *Upon Us a Light Has Dawned*, a Classical portrait bust stares into a phone, tethered to the screen by three strands of gold chain; both phone and figure are enveloped in a torrent of flowers, earphones, text bubbles, plugs, phone and email icons, with a gold chain (composed of handcuffs) snaking throughout the collage. A large set of handcuffs appears again, while in the lower right corner, a child's digitally-rendered hands reach up to the central face/phone pair. An outlet and charger to the right are separated from the tangle, denoting their critical role in perpetuating this system. Portable conduits to endless imagery and information, the devices can easily manipulate and entrap the human need for connection and communication into a tumble down a rabbit hole.

The perils of social media - narcissism, voyeurism, bullying, and targeted misinformation

- also inform the 2018 Devotional series. *Open My Eyes In How Much You Delight In Me* showcases a fluted column and bust fragment (missing the top of its head, notably the eyes and brain) upon a collection of heart-shaped items (decorative saucers, Valentines, locket, and other ornaments) while a small gold item among the hearts spells the brand of an anti-anxiety medication, Xanax. The gold chain is composed of Facebook's lowercase "f" and their original "thumbs-up" icon. In *Where I Am There You May Be Also*, an elegant but antiquated pickaxe / hammer is enveloped by the familiar flower bloom, here also containing Twitter's bird icon, a keyboard, and a chain of *at* symbols (the first symbol in a Twitter handle), and an upside-down skull made of keyboard letters. In the lower right, a sparrow nests in sharp nails, metal "grimace" *emojis*, and a hand grenade made of keyboard letters with a beak-like handle, suggesting a breeding area for the kind of caustic, destructive online rants that have now become normalized.

And Let Them Have Dominion Over All The Earth combines a Classical bust, a human in the abstract, with an infantilized robot. The two figures are connected by chains arranged to resemble the process of human fertilization. DNA strands emanate from the background bouquet. A dog with a food bowl sits next to the bust, possibly to represent one of humanity's redeeming qualities, care and compassion for other beings. This bouquet includes more stylized, orderly succulent plants next to the imperfections of the roses, and in the upper right corner, four winged brains take flight, suggesting that our technological offspring, not us, may well be the future of advanced consciousness. This, and all Devotionals, are signed with a flourish of gold metallic chains over an orderly row of electronic nodes, acknowledging their digital origins.

Postulates (2014-2016), a term for beliefs and assumptions taken as facts, feature an intricate frame of objects, figures, fragments of metals, electronics, and art opening onto a scene superimposed with an incongruous object. *Believer* and *Poseur* (2016) reckon with truth and the absurd, reminding that photorealism is not always the truth. *I Am The First, I Am The Last* (2015) enshrines a light bulb over a lemon sky framed by despondent human figures and serpentine imagery, all minimized to the point of abstraction.

Tucker's compositions raise questions about the trajectory of human culture, shifting values, and our uncertain future. Seductive, but ultimately despairing, Devotionals and Postulates seem to suggest the endgame of consumer culture's misplaced, or displaced, veneration. Alluring but unsettling, the images create spaces to reflect on material desire and consumption, while issuing a restrained warning about their consequences.

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