

JESSICA MURPHY

EVERYMAN, EVERY CROSS

A unique exhibition at St Louis University inspired by the story of Good Friday explores universal truths of suffering, compassion and self-surrendering love

The artist Eleanor Dickinson's *Crucifixion* series depicts several people placed on a cross, each of them someone she knows who has endured great suffering. The subject of Dickinson's *Crucifixion of Dountes* is an African-American man from Oakland, California. Dickinson positions the viewer at the foot of that cross, directing the viewer's gaze upward at Dountes' large, imposing feet, his straining muscles, his vulnerable nakedness. The black velvet canvas might suggest that sun has been blotted out. Yet, light still shines on this figure. Dountes is not without dignity and strength.

Dickinson's piece – art of the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA) at St Louis University in Missouri – achieves what the museum's "Good Friday: The Suffering Christ in Contemporary Art" exhibition aims to accomplish: to showcase modern art inspired by Christ's final hours and to invite visitors to use this art to empathise more closely with the suffering Christ.

It is unusual for a museum to offer a guided meditation. Here, exhibition and space come together to make a "museum retreat" entirely possible; the works on show offer much for Lenten reflection, and much to appreciate in terms of genre, medium and subject.

The first exhibition of its kind to examine the events of Christ's final hours, "Good Friday" (until 25 April) represents the work of more than 30 artists – from Georges Rouault and Salvador Dalí to contemporary artists Tobi Kahn, Jim Morphesis and sculptor Peter Ambrose. In keeping with MOCRA's mission as an interfaith art museum, the artists in the exhibition are from Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and of no particular faith tradition, but all have in some way been moved by the image and humanity of Christ's suffering.

Like the Stations of the Cross, the exhibition "Good Friday" moves the viewer on a pilgrimage through the day chronologically, beginning with the Garden of Gethsemane, continuing to Jesus' trial, Veronica's veil, the

Crucifixion, the Pietà, and finally Jesus' burial.

In the Pietà grouping, for instance, is a figurative sculpture *Pietà Stone: Meditation on the Last Temptation* by Steven Heilmer. The Carrara marble, unfinished at either end, is wrapped in cloth (rendered from the same stone), evoking our associations with Mary and Jesus, of grieving mother and deceased son, but also allowing the viewer to examine that relationship with new eyes.

In the "Burial" section is Cuban artist Juan González's *Don't Mourn, Consecrate*, the window art for Grey Art Gallery's first work on Aids, a work that juxtaposes the crucified Christ with the epidemic. (This piece was also a part of MOCRA's exhibition "Consecrations: The Spiritual in Art in the Time of Aids", and two other works in the exhibition were created in a gesture of dedication to González, who died of Aids-related complications.) An image of Hans Holbein's gaunt Christ figure from *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* lies beneath a large foreboding sky. To the right is a listing of the numbers of Aids-related deaths from 100,000 in 1984 to 43,600,000 in 2008. To the left of these sobering figures is a wreath of roses, a symbol of hope in many Latin American cultures.

As well as the exhibition's focus on Christ's mortality, there are also images of compassion and hope. In the section associated with Veronica's veil, there is a photo emulsion of a man – an indigenous Guatemalan – on a linen sack. The man is wearing a crown of thorns, and he looks boldly at the viewer, with an expectation of respect. The piece speaks to Jesus' belief in the dignity of the poor.

MOCRA is housed in what was formerly a chapel for the Jesuit community. (Fr Terrence Dempsey, MOCRA's director, claims to be one of the lucky few who got to turn his religion and art history doctoral dissertation into an actual museum.) There is a large central sanctuary – three storeys high – a balcony gallery and 12 side chapels with marble altars. The stained glass and the central nave have been preserved.

It is apt that the former chapel has become



Don't Mourn, Consecrate by Juan González

a safe haven for artists who address spiritual concerns in their work. Sixteen years ago, when MOCRA first opened, Dempsey says, the climate was much more inhospitable to these artists, who were sometimes afraid of backlash from the art community for being labelled a "religious" artist or of backlash from religious communities, who perhaps misjudged the intention of the work. (One artist who contributed work to the museum early on warned Dempsey not to "ruin his career", making it clear that showing one's work in a religious context was risky.)

Quite the opposite has happened. The museum has received considerable attention from the art community and has acquired a permanent collection of great depth and substance. It has also offered a wide range of travelling exhibits: from an installation of Andy Warhol's joyful *Silver Clouds* to Buddhist artist Lewis DeSoto's *Parinirvana*, and the spiritual elements in Alvin Ailey's dances.

But the permanent collection, from which "Good Friday" is derived, speaks in a more far-reaching way to the museum's long-term commitment and mission. At the far end of the museum, where the altar would have once been, is the museum's centrepiece, the imposing, 31-foot-wide *Triptych: Eleventh, Twelfth and Thirteen Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión* by artist Michael Tracy. The canvas resembles an expansive landscape – textured with nails, human hair and shards of glass; the canvas is intentionally ripped and it sags from its own weight. But in this wasteland – what might represent great human despair and neglect – are traces of gold. For Tracy, this gold represents God's presence amid the greatest of tribulations.

■ Jessica Murphy is an arts writer based in Seattle.