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Message from the heavens

Discerning the meaning behind Maurizio Cattelan's violent, provocative and now highly valuable sculpture of Pope John Paul II felled by a meteorite raises many questions for viewers, explains **Martin Kemp**.



Pope John Paul II, dressed in his ceremonial regalia, lies prostrate on a rich red carpet. Clinging to his crucifix crozier, he frowns with disquieting intensity, his eyes tightly shut. Nearby lies a scattering of glass shards. A chunky meteorite has plummeted from the heavens, smashed through the gallery skylight, and come to rest in the crook of his bent leg. We presume that the life-size representation shows the pontiff as dead or injured.

What are we to make of this provocative work by the Italian sculptor Maurizio Cattelan? The sculpture is deemed culturally important. It is of high financial value, and was sold to a private collector in 2004 for US\$2.7 million. Exhibited in prestigious galleries throughout the world, it uniformly attracts media attention and religious controversy.

We can read the narrative readily, but its meaning is harder to discern. There is a great tradition of death narratives in Italian art. We may see a parallel with the martyrdom of St Stephen, who was stoned to death. Cattelan has been careful with the iconographical details. He has replicated the crozier that was originally made by Lello Scorzelli for Pope Paul VI, based on a traditional type from the Val Gardena region in northern Italy. In 1990, John Paul II was presented with a modified, lighter version.

However, we look in vain for a known story into which Cattelan's narrative fragment can be inserted. The artist himself does little to help.

He is renowned for extreme and provocative imagery that he generally refuses to explain. He once encased the owner of the gallery that represents him in a huge, pink penis suit. The gallerist was even persuaded to wear the absurd costume for six weeks. This is the kind of stunt that gives the art world a bad name.

Cattelan stands in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, the supreme maker of anti-art that the art world has canonized as art. In displaying everyday items in galleries, Duchamp challenged the definition of art and also exposed the art world to ridicule. Similarly, in Cattelan's piece, enigma and paradox prevail. We have to make of it what we will, aware that the joke might be at our expense.

Cattelan leaves some clues. The title, *La Nona Ora*, or *The Ninth Hour*, refers to the time of Christ's death on the cross. This representation of the death of Pope John Paul II might be an imitation of Christ's. In a typically elusive interview, Cattelan said, "I like the idea that someone is trying to save the Pope, like an upside-down miracle, coming not from the heavens but from earth". But he adds dismissively, "in the end it is only a piece of wax".

We may add gloss to his statement by saying that the death of a martyr involves human agency, followed by divine redemption, whereas Cattelan's Pope has been struck down by heavenly intervention and awaits earthly assistance. Our responses can range from seeing the image as moving and pious, evoking

our sympathy with him as a modern martyr, to regarding it as shockingly blasphemous.

When the sculpture was shown in John Paul II's native Poland in 2000 at Warsaw's Zacheta gallery, shock prevailed. Two members of the Polish parliament tried to remove the meteorite and demanded the dismissal of the gallery's curator, Anda Rottenberg, whom they described as a "civil servant of Jewish origin". Rottenberg was eventually coerced into resigning.

My mind turns to the stone of the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the focus of supreme devotion for Muslims, which is said to have been presented to Abraham by the Archangel Gabriel. It has been interpreted as a meteorite. Could Cattelan be alluding to the potential collapse of Christianity in the face of Islamic militancy? This would be inflammatory to both religions. However, it is the nature of art that the beholder completes the meaning of the artist's creation. Cattelan invites us to do so in extreme and contradictory terms.

Aware of the recent assaults on religion by scientific atheists, some people may even be tempted to see the felled Pope as an allegory of the conflict between extreme Darwinists and spiritual belief. Cattelan's response might be that, although it is not actually 'wrong', this meaning is unintended. There is more to it. ■

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