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‘On the Road’, Santiago de Compostela

By Julius Purcell

How the historic Spanish city is using contemporary art to celebrate one of its most famous pilgrims

Man kind is always the same, noted Dryden of Chaucer’s pilgrims, “and nothing is lost out of nature, though everything is altered”.

Commemorating the pilgrimage of St Francis of Assisi to Santiago de Compostela exactly 800 years ago, the lavish visual art exhibition that has just opened in the Spanish city similarly dwells on the affinities and the gulf between Francis’s age and ours.

Bringing together pieces by Tacita Dean, Roni Horn, Anthony McCall and 32 other contemporary artists, *On the Road* cost around €1m – much of it from sponsorship, say its organisers, the Galicia regional government, but it is a budget that will still strike many as distinctly un-Franciscan in spirit. Others might criticise the sometimes strained relationship between certain objects and the saintly theme.

It is unlikely, though, that anyone would come away from this huge display, ranging across a palace, a church and a park, without being affected by the enduring ideas St Francis has stamped on our collective consciousness. A new pope who has pointedly



Roni Horn’s ‘Untitled (A Dream . . .)’ (2012) in the Church of Santo Domingo de Bonaval

called himself Francis; inequality; material versus spiritual value; our troubled place in the natural world: all this is fresh and familiar, even if the actual figure of the friar is blurred in the vast temporal distance that separates us from 1214.

In one of 12 pieces created for this exhibition the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs has edited a film of the seven days he spent walking around the perimeter of his Mexico studio. Pacing for 10 hours a day, he clocked up 118km, the distance of the route by which pilgrims arrive in Santiago from the Galician port of El Ferrol. Its title, *Albert's Way*, recalls the repentant Nazi, Albert Speer, who used to recreate routes between cities in his mind as he paced the yard of Spandau prison.

Personally, I felt that the full impact of Speer's prison walks rests on his being in prison, not an art studio, though the siting of the piece captures the underlying tension between historical closeness and distance. The bulk of the exhibition is housed in the mossy, rambling Palacio de Gelmírez adjoining Santiago's cathedral, where Alÿs's internal pilgrimage is relayed on screens along a breathtakingly beautiful Romanesque passageway.

"It is no use walking to preach unless our walking is our preaching" is one of the saint's aphorisms. Looking at Alÿs's film loop, pondering why, in an otherwise bare room, a car hubcap is leaning against the wall, I was struck by how pilgrimage has always had a whiff of the postmodern about it. Chaucer knew that to travel talkatively was better than to arrive. Pilgrimage was a medieval road movie, whose goal, and centre, was always shifting.



The Santiago in which Francis is believed to have pitched up, 800 years ago, was a potent geopolitical symbol. At the farthest western reaches of the known world, the shrine of St James was a challenge to the tottering might of Muslim Spain to the south. A stone's throw from the Palacio, Francisco Asorey's 1930 monument is an earlier commemoration of Francis's visit, around whose plinth humble folk mingle on the same level with knights and bishops. This is exactly the representational tradition, inherited from Giotto, that curator Gloria Moure says she has avoided in this exhibition. "Contemporary art can go beyond appearance," Moure explains, "to explore the extraordinarily exciting figure of St Francis . . . through his attitude, through the way he challenged the world around him."

Exhibition artists Christian Boltanski and Tacita Dean in front of Richard Long's 'Camino Hands' (2014)

References to Giotto are, happily, not omitted entirely. The first room in the palace, with works by Jannis Kounellis, Yves Klein and Antón Lamazares,

is dominated by gold, a nod to the Byzantine tradition that Giotto emerged from, and transformed. These link to the palace's final room, in which Tacita Dean's film explores the frescoes in the Upper Basilica of St Francis in Assisi. True to Moure's line, Dean has eschewed the saintly narrative in *Buon Fresco* (2014), using a macro lens to bring us right up close to the fresco's shading and moulding, showing the verve, simplicity and near-abstraction with which Giotto dashes off a roof tile, a bird's wing, a fingernail.

Anthony McCall's *Face to Face III* (2013) consists of two cones of light, filled with dry ice, which project curved forms on to screens. Visitors can plunge into the cones, breaching its hard-seeming, tentlike edges. The thread linking McCall with, say, Dean, is often thinned to abstraction but there is method in it: the interaction of bodies in space has long interested McCall, and is not so removed from that revolutionary idea of man as a part of nature, an idea often ascribed to Francis himself.

Mircea Cantor's film, *Deeparture* (sic) (2005), is of a deer and a wolf that find themselves sharing the same space, creating a fragile, compelling tension: a little ecological system in which the viewer feels involved. Superficially, Joseph Beuys' video *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974-78) treads similar ground, although the coyote trapped in a cage with the German conceptualist finds itself in a very unequal ecology, forced to endure Beuys' attempts to redeem the world through his own narcissism. If St Francis preached to the birds, Beuys is merely preachy.

Few would come away from this display without being affected by the enduring ideas of St Francis



Tacita Dean's 'Buon Fresco' (detail, 2014)

Having exhausted the rooms of the Palacio, *On the Road* goes on the road, resuming in the Church of Santo Domingo de Bonaval, 10 minutes' walk away. I tried, and failed, to find Francis in Roni Horn's "Untitled (A Dream Dreamt in a Dreaming World is not Really a Dream . . . but a Dream not Dreamt is)" (2012), but it certainly looks stunning here in the milky light of the gothic nave. Glass tubs, tinted in a seemingly glowing violet, are grouped across the stone floor like

jellies just out of their moulds. Their sides are cloudy, while clear glass stretches over their tops like a quivering meniscus. Nearby, in a side chapel, Nam June Paik's "One Candle" (1988) is a tremulous naked flame, reinterpreted and amplified in multiple projected images.

The last piece of all, “At the End of the Road” (2014), is sited in the Bonaval park alongside the church, an intervention by the Galician artist Jorge Barbi in the decommissioned cemetery there.

Shaped like an angular U, the cemetery structure is a curiosity in itself, its long, pitched roof not unlike the classic stone granaries that dot the Galician landscape. To its ranks of previously white recesses, Barbi has applied different pastel colours, supposedly corresponding to a key – “believers”, “atheists”, “agnostics”, “undecided” – whose random dispersal sets up a little chatter of individualism in the severe serialism of the niches.

Every afternoon pilgrims from all countries stream in to Santiago with their blisters and backpacks, continuing the decades-long *camino* boom triggered partly by Paulo Coelho’s 1987 new-age novel *The Pilgrimage*. David Lodge’s novel *Therapy* (1995), or the 2010 film *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen, also centre on the Santiago route as a balm for modern-day exhaustion and alienation.



Francis Alÿs' 'Albert's Way' (2014) in Palacio de Gelmírez

On The Road, then, will not lack a global audience. The show is a chance to reposition the city as a fusion of history, spirituality and something more hip, and yet its sheer scale and grandiloquence are sometimes at odds with the thirst for simplicity and scaling back at the heart of this new pilgrimage. For all that Barbi’s final work signs off on a meditative note, it does not quite dispel an overall feeling that less might well be more.

'On The Road', Santiago de Compostela, Spain, until November 30

Photograph: AFP

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