

# DOG & PONY

Morgan Mandalay | Chloe Seibert

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THE RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY in European painting was developed, in part, to convey biblical stories to the illiterate laity who did not understand the Latin of their own Masses. That same iconography now serves not to deliver meaning to viewers, but to hide it inside a thousand semiotic puzzles. These puzzles only become more *recherché* as time goes on. European religious painting already lives mainly in the realm of the secular. Christian cultural artifacts, once the impetus for mass pilgrimages—even war—now only concern hyper-educated art historians, oblivious middlebrow tourists, and the collector class of the global one percent, who, even if devout, mediate their relationship to artwork materially and historically before they regard it spiritually. As Walter Benjamin observed, no artwork has been displaced further from its origins than the cultic has been by mechanical reproduction, industrial capitalism, and secular humanism. But, paradoxically, religious experience retains the potential of its historical power only for the secular, and not for the observant. It's the secular who have built walls around religion to contain it, who keep it alive in their imaginary only to serve as their great Other, while the observant routinize religion, integrating it into their daily life and decoupling it from its once transportive power.

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WHATEVER YOUR HOT TAKE, pro or con, the ubiquity of *Idpol* as the primary way of processing social reality has locked all of us ever more tightly into the subject positionalities capitalism has imposed upon us. This has produced an ambient cultural desire to escape the prison of the body, to alleviate our self-claustrophobia, by seeking out the transcendent, whether in religious ecstasy, the euphoria of opioids and club drugs, or the release of the self in sadomasochism and the *petite mort* of orgasm. A related tack has been to lose one's self in avatars of nature, to return to Eden by becoming a furry or by sublimating one's humanity in pup play. If not lost in nature, then in emotional attachments to inanimate objects, like the objectum-sexuals in long-term romantic relationships with bridges and buildings. The popularity of this perverse anthropomorphizing of the non-human is a response to the lack of human possibility under capital. We seek any way to avoid being implicated in our species's omniscidal tendencies at the height of the capitalocene.

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WHEN I SEE A PILL OF MDMA—or even think of one—a chill goes through my body. This physiological reaction is due to powerful, imprinted memories of taking the drug. So, too, have objects imbued with the cultural resonance of the Holy, like a saint's pinkie bone kept in a reliquary, been known, in the past, to send followers into ecstatic spasms and tongues. Fetish gear, cult artifacts, and the drug flashback all point us toward the possibility of being outside ourselves. For the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, *outsideness* was essential for understanding the potentialities implicit in an object, in one's self, in one's society. But attaining an outsideness in relation to one's self can only be temporarily experienced while one is still alive. To transfix that transporting moment of outsideness into an object, to attempt to make what is ecstatic permanent, is to pin down the phenomenological like a butterfly—yes, it's to kill it, but something beautiful and instructive remains for us to regard at will. The only way into or out of ecstasy and agony is through it. But art allows a metaphorical approach to these otherwise unapproachable, withdrawn concepts. One can describe the ecstatic in literal terms—*it feels good, it is transporting*, etc—and never properly convey the sensation to another. But in the metaphorical objects of Mandalay and Seibert, this visionary dog and pony show of pup play and painted exegesis, one can, if weakly, if momentarily, access the inaccessible.

— James Payne

*Dog & Pony* is curated by James McDevitt-Stredney

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