Richard Grayson: The Golden Space City of God

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Reviewed by Leon Marvell

Richard Grayson’s work has come a long way from when he was cutting old love letters into gallery walls in the early 1990s. The Golden Space City of God has ‘production value’ written all over it, from the large film production crew (director, D.O.P., soundperson, jib operators, grip, gaffer, production co-ordinator, etc) to the location in San Antonio, Texas. This most recent work is an extension of the form explored in his Messiah of 2004. In that work Grayson took Handel’s libretto and filmed the text as interpreted and performed by a country and western band. In this latest large-scale video installation Grayson has created a libretto by abstracting texts from the website of the 1960s fundamentalist cult, the Children of God. Condensed and thus quintessentialised by Grayson from what must have once been an elaborate ‘Rapture’ mythology, the libretto is broken up into 10 ‘songs’ each explaining the events that lead up to the end of the world.

The most remarkable aspect of the songs is the way that science fictional tropes have been adopted by the Children of God in their view of Armageddon. The false messiah is assisted by UFOs and builds a giant robot. The faithful will have the “ability to appear and disappear, to change [their] appearance into inscrutable disguises to spy on rebels and invade their most secret hide-outs and their very thoughts, with new mind-reading abilities and x-ray eyes.” Knowing Grayson’s fondness for the work of Philip K. Dick, with its intertwining of science fiction, mystical illumination and drug-fuelled paranoia, one can easily see why he was drawn to these particular texts.

The video installation itself was set up like a film night in a church or community hall. The gallery space was darkened by theatre draperies and the audience sat on plastic stacking chairs. The Golden Space City of God was shot in wide-screen, HD digital format, and the image quality is superb. The video begins with the choir entering, followed by the conductor, Kristin Roach, Assistant Director of Music at St Mark’s Episcopal Church in San Antonio. The performance begins.

The camera slowly moves across the faces of the choir. A deliberate, steady rhythm of slow, sweeping camera movements interspersed with close-ups and mid-shots of the choir is occasionally augmented by cutaway shots of the conductor doing her thing. And that’s about it. Nothing fancy; no jittery jump-cuts, no split-screen, no VJ tricks; just the choir singing Grayson’s libretto to composer Lee Chadburn’s work. The affect of this is at once enthralling, mystifying and hilarious.

It is also a spot-on reminder of the realities (so-called) of contemporary world politics. Viewing Grayson’s The Golden Space City of God we are inevitably reminded of revelations that George W. Bush had told the Palestinian foreign minister in 2002 that he was on “a mission from God” when he launched the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and had received direct commands from God to combat Gog and Magog. As Grayson’s libretto has it:

“These rebels... will again follow Satan in open rebellion. They will come from all corners of the nations Gog and Magog to massacre the millennial believers...”

Some may say that Grayson has pulled off a Jeff Koons or a Factory-era Andy Warhol here. Essentially he has gathered together a very talented group of singers, filmmakers and a composer to realise his libretto, itself a select congeries of Internet texts. The ‘craftskills’ of the individual artist have been removed from the mix. The rejoinder to this is of course that no one would think of accusing Howard Hawks or Hitchcock of such a thing. And even Leonardo had his studio help.

No matter how it was accomplished, Grayson’s The Golden Space City of God is timely, strange and compelling.