

The Aesthetics of Faith

In his solo exhibition «Reven tenkjer ikkje på Gud», Trondheim-based artist Markus Lantto explores the mysticism and expressions of religion. Presented at Trøndelag Centre for Contemporary Art, the exhibition is the most extensive presentation of Lantto's artistic practice to date.

Markus Lantto is a versatile artist. He works with installation, photography, sculpture, text, and embroidery, often using wood and recycled materials as central elements. He is a visual artist, author, instrument maker, and coffin builder, and has also built the house he lives in himself as part of a self-build housing project in Svartlamon. Wonder, material knowledge, and an interest in the relationship between form and space recur throughout his work.

The exhibition, bearing the understated and suggestive title «Reven tenkjer ikkje på Gud» (The Fox Does Not Think About God), is imbued with mysticism and an inviting sense of inquiry. It features a monumental installation, sculptures, embroidery, drawings, and a poetic sound work. In addition, a commissioned performance, *A Stranger Moving In*, by musician and artist Kristine Marie Aasvang, is presented at the exhibition opening. Together, these works enter into an open, investigative dialogue with religious aesthetics and sacred mysticism.

Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer is met by a monumental sculptural ceiling installation composed of voluminous, ornamental forms made from wooden slats. The installation covers the entire ceiling of the main hall, leaving floors and walls bare, apart from the shifting play of shadows that fills the room with an intensified sense of mystique. The undulating forms of the wooden slats may evoke associations with a medieval cathedral. *Himling* establishes an architectural space within the space, recalling the monumentality, ornamented interiors, and hierarchical structures of religious architecture. It is a sacred ceiling that does not belong to any single religion, yet still carries a resonance and recognisable signs of something greater. Through this installation, Lantto appears to distill the essence of the aesthetics of faith, articulating a general sacred form by examining the aesthetic structures of religious architecture.

In the wooden sculpture *Accept the Miracles*, the absurdity of religious logic is brought to the surface, along with what people have historically been expected to accept as meaningful. The sculpture takes the form of a table with sixteen legs, though its weight rests only on the four outermost ones, each topped with gilded domes. The tabletop is partially charred. Are these traces of sulphurous sermons burned into the surface? This raises further questions: How many legs can a table have before it ceases to function? And similarly, how many finger bones, knuckles, or body parts can a saint possess before the sacred slips into the grotesque? The sculpture points to the relic as a form of religious currency: the physical presence of saints' remains has functioned, in both Catholic and Buddhist traditions, as a reinforcement of belief in the abstract divine. Where, then, is the boundary drawn between miracle and absurdity?

This sense of inquiry continues in the exhibition's four embroidered works. In *Aunt Jorun's Temple*, a floor plan inspired by Solomon's Temple is embroidered onto a lace cloth from the 1950s. Historically, embroidery has played a significant role in religious practice, often used to adorn sacred textiles with protective symbolism and iconographic imagery. Here, Aunt Jorun is given her own temple, as domestic decoration and sacred textile merge. The companion work *God's Floor Plan* is likewise a fictional blueprint of a holy building. On a linen cloth reminiscent of Christ's shroud, the words *Hocus Pocus* are embroidered in ornate Gothic script. The magical phrase *hocus pocus* is thought to derive from the Latin Eucharistic formula *hoc est corpus meum* –

“this is my body” – illustrating how the priest’s performative words during Mass, through popular distortion, have become detached from their original meaning and transformed into magic.

In the final embroidery, stitched onto a small floral lace cloth, the phrase *Gud er på mi side* (God Is on My Side) is rendered with delicate precision. While transcending the ego is a central aim in many religious traditions, the ego remains powerfully present in this self-righteous assertion. With Old Testament fury – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – people have gone to war convinced that God is on their side. Through simple means, the work points to religion’s inherent double standards.

On one wall, an inset framed door appears – a portal between this life and the next. The work’s title, *In the Next Life I Will Dance and Ride a Harley Davidson*, is a quotation from the artist’s own mother. The statement conveys both longing and resignation, bearing witness to all that has been renounced in this life. It points to the constraints that religious beliefs can impose on the individual, particularly where bodily expression, desire, and freedom are subordinated to moral ideals.

The work is in dialogue with a sound piece in the basement, where Anton Raukola reads Lantto’s personal narrative about his upbringing in Kiruna, memories, and his mother’s life and death. The text blends fiction and reality. The cold, darkened room reinforces the account of a demanding life in the far north of Sweden, and the notion of having been a priest in another life. Lantto’s upbringing in an environment shaped by a distinctive combination of communism and Laestadianism, along with a strong Kven affiliation, forms an unspoken backdrop. Here, the artist’s need to understand – and to come to terms with faith, identity, and inheritance – becomes clearly apparent.

In a museum display case in a darkened corner stands a mysterious cube made of lacquered dark wood. The sculpture *Untitled* is a closed form that resembles a relic or a treasure from a cultural history museum. Throughout history, the cube has been a charged symbol of perfection, stability, and the delimited sacred space. The object’s inaccessibility prompts questions: If it were possible to open it, what would be inside? Is it a kind of Pandora’s box, where the promise of revelation also entails risk? The form also recalls sacred architectural structures such as the Kaaba in Mecca, the destination of the Muslim pilgrimage, or the Kaaba-ye Zartosht in Iran. Through these references, the cube emerges as an image of the closed and unspoken in religious practice: an object whose meaning lies not in access, but in distance, ritual, and the notion of a concentrated sacred presence.

The exhibition raises one of the most fundamental existential questions: How does belief in God arise? Perhaps faith does not emerge in a vacuum, but within specific existential, social, and aesthetic contexts. Among others, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how meaning arises through sensation before reflection. It may therefore be through bodily and emotional experience – or through participation in faith-like practices – that we come to be shaped as believers.

The works presented in the exhibition reflect in different ways on how we understand and experience the sacred today. Lantto approaches his materials with both precision and curiosity, balancing respect and distance with a sense of humour that emerges when cultural heritage collides with the contemporary. The exhibition title *The Fox Does Not Think About God* points to an external perspective: the fox, nature itself, has no concept of the sacred. The sacred is something humans project through architecture, symbols, and rituals. In this way, the sacred can be understood as form, space, and experience – even when detached from religious belief.

Text by Margrete Abelsen, Exhibition Producer at Trøndelag Centre for Contemporary Art.