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Douglas Campbell

George Fox University, dcampbel@georgefox.edu

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Response to Daniel A. Siedell's "Art and the Practice of Evangelical Faith—A Review Essay"

By Douglas G. Campbell

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My first response to Daniel A. Siedell's review of my book *Seeing: When Art and Faith Intersect* was anger. I thought his treatment of my book was unfair. Even now, after some amount of time has elapsed, I still believe his analysis of my book ignored context, was unkind, misleading and inaccurate. My allotted space for response is, however, inadequate to the task of countering his assertions point for point.

I drafted a number of responses to this review of my book in which I point out what I perceived to be flaws in his review, but none of these drafts ended up responding to it with any authentic gracefulness. I found that I could not sufficiently excise my anger from my response. In his review, Siedell misleads readers about my responses to Postmodernism and wants readers to believe that I advocate limiting art to "mechanical or utilitarian" roles. I invite readers to explore my book to see if Siedell's critique is accurate. No doubt readers will find issues with what I have written; they will discover that I have left out important information and viewpoints or I have, on occasion, given short shrift to points of view that I disagree with. It was my intention, through a series of brief essays, to bring to the attention of the Christian and the wider community a number of issues confronting artists of faith and those who wished to participate in the art made by artists who were also Christians.

In order to write these essays, I sought input from a variety of Christian sources. However, Siedell characterizes my perspective as springing solely from an "evangelical tradition." Many of my sources were written from the point of view of evangelical Christianity. But I did not limit my research to these sources; I read a great deal written by Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Anabaptists and mainline Protestants. My essays were influenced by all of the above. I did not limit my research to evangelical Christian sources or to Christian sources at all.

My art historical research and my perception of "mainstream art" as presented in my book are the results of art history courses connected with two graduate degrees. One of these courses, focusing on Modern Art, was taught by George McNeil,

an eminent Abstract Expressionist painter. Additional research has been connected to my teaching of twentieth century art in a variety of venues such as the Pacific Northwest College of Art, the Oregon College of Art and Craft, The Evergreen State University-Vancouver, and George Fox University. Two NEH grants, one of them focused on critical responses to Abstract Expressionism, provided additional research opportunities. I confess that I find very little convincing literature that extols Modernism as an aesthetic approach. This does not mean that all of us cannot learn from this literature. I intend to continue to read in this area, and I read with the hope that I will be confronted with errors in my own thinking. However, at this point I have concluded that though fine works of art have been produced under the banner of Modernism, its philosophical perspective is at odds with Christian belief.

Though I do discuss Modernism, the focus for my collection of essays is about how Christians from a variety of traditions have thought and could think about authenticity, originality, individualism, beauty and other topics from a point of view which places Christ at the center of life. I suggest that postmodernism, though it allows Christians an opportunity to participate in the artistic community that Modernism did not allow, is fraught with real and potential pitfalls. I suggest that there are many ways to respond to works of art, and that these responses or interactions are like a dialogue in some ways, so that as we change in response to all manner of input and to specific artworks, our responses to all artworks are altered, widened or expanded, and not just propositionally.

In closing I acknowledge that Daniel A. Siedell is an accomplished scholar with a highly respectable professional record. I respect his right to disagree with what I have written and to take me to task for the faults he attributes to my book, but I believe that he has too quickly dismissed my work, failing to appreciate an alternative perspective presented in an atypical way.