When you enter the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art you are met by the distant but hovering presence of a monumental triptych by Michael Tracy, *Triptych: 11th, 12th, and 13th Stations of the Cross for Latin America: La Pasión*. The panels are abstract in form made with acrylic on tarpaulin that is mounted on wood and includes the use of glass, pottery, and hair. The work pulls the viewer into a world of mystery yet presence that invites conversation and meditation. The longer you look at its three surfaces with their movements of light, texture, and colour, the more the Passion is revealed. Created between 1981 and 1988, the work was the artist’s response to the political turmoil and suffering of Latin America within the larger meaning of the passion of Christ. It is, in almost iconic fashion, reflective of the museum’s own commitment to provide contemporary religious artworks that are provocative as well as sustaining, prophetic as well as reconciling.
MOCRA was formally opened in 1993 at St. Louis University in a redesigned chapel that had been formerly used by Jesuit theological students at the University. Its director, The Reverend Doctor Terrence Dempsey, S.J., a major leader in the field of theology and the arts, provided the vision and the leadership for the museum’s creation. At the time of its opening, it was celebrated as the world’s first interfaith museum of contemporary art, and, since that beginning, it has been recognized both nationally and internationally as a museum whose works probe both the social and cultural issues of our time with the religious imagery of artists who engage those issues.

Over its 18 years of exhibitions and educational programs, the museum developed a constituency of diverse groups and received a well deserved press for its substantive and, at times, provocative shows. A show that represents well the type of exhibitions that it provides is a relatively recent exhibition from 2009. For the season of Lent and Easter, Dempsey created an exhibition entitled Good Friday. (The exhibit would also be shown, again, in 2010). It included works drawn from the museum’s collection as well as from private collectors and works on loan from the artists. And it included works ranging from pieces of established 20th century artists such as Georges Rouault, James Ensor, and Salvador Dali to more recent artists working out of revolutionary settings. One such work was Douglas DePice’s Jesus in Central America—The First Station of the Cross with its realistic portrayal of the police arresting Jesus who is portrayed as a working class figure surrounded by sorrowing protest followers. A second work was Sister Helen David Brancato’s Crucifixion—Haiti portraying a crucified Haitian figure above a boat of fleeing Haitian boat people. Still other works invited reflections on the theological meanings of the Lenten season including Steven Heilmer’s sculpture Pieta Stone: Meditation on the Last Temptations and Adrian Kellard’s Prayer of the Faithful in Ordinary Time. (In the Spring/Fall issue of arts (22.3/23.1), Terry Dempsey has written an essay that provides images and discussion of the works in this exhibition. (See www.artsmag.org to subscribe and to view the backlist).

New institutional ventures such as MOCRA require figures who have the vision for what a museum could be and the skills to institutionally and politically bring it into being. Dempsey did this with consummate skill over the past 18 years. Having done his doctoral work in the religion and arts program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he worked closely with Jane Daggett Dillenberger, John Dillenberger, and Doug Adams, he became an important figure for later scholars working in religion and the arts and a leader, more broadly, in the field of theology and the arts. In a recent discussion with him, I raised a number of questions about his experiences with the museum.

WY: You have written of the interfaith character of the museum stating that it is “dedicated to the ongoing dialogue between contemporary artists and the world’s faith traditions, (and is committed to) serving as a forum for interfaith
understanding.” In setting forth this part of your vision, you commit yourself to interfaith work. Over these years, how have your realized this goal?

TD: Our museum is an interfaith museum, exhibiting works by artists from many faith traditions as well as artists who are not practicing members of any faith tradition but who, nevertheless, feel that their art possesses a deep spirituality.

Our group exhibitions have allowed us to bring together artists from a variety of traditions. In our 1993 opening exhibition, Sanctuaries: Recovering the Holy in Contemporary Art, we set the stage for what we hoped MOCRA would do by showcasing the diversity of spiritual and religious expressions of 30 contemporary artists.

Our programming also has helped to create special dialogues. For instance, in conjunction with our 2003 exhibition, Avoda: Objects of the Spirit, an exhibition of ceremonial art by New York artist Tobi Kahn, we brought together not only the artist but also representatives of four major faith traditions--Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam--for a fascinating and enlightening conference on the role of ceremonial objects in the faith life of each of these traditions.

In our 1999 exhibition of the work of contemporary calligrapher/painter Bernard Maisner, we brought together ethno-biologist/anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake and Islamic scholar John Renard for a discussion of the role of art in all cultures and the particular place of manuscripts and calligraphy in several faith traditions.

In 2002, in conjunction with the exhibition, The Greater Good: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, we organized a forum for dialogue that included art, religion, and ethics that included representatives from the medical and legal communities as well as a professor of African-American studies--the son of one of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment victims. It was a powerful conference.

WY: Who is the constituency of MOCRA?

TD: We are a part of Saint Louis University, so our first concern was for MOCRA to be an institution that might broaden and deepen the educational and faith experiences of our students, faculty, and staff. We also wanted to be a player in the greater St. Louis metropolitan arts community and a growing audience of St. Louisans gives testimony to our success. I also wanted MOCRA to be regional in its outreach and we have been helped in this effort by having appeared five times on the cover of the Art Now Midwest Gallery Guide. In our first national and international coverage, the February 1993 issue of ArtNews, the eminent art historian Peter Selz wrote a brief article about MOCRA that announced our arrival in the art world. We have been featured in articles in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Art in America, the Oakland Tribune, the Chronicle for Higher Education, America Magazine, the British Catholic magazine The Tablet,
and numerous other publications We have also taken advantage of the internet
with our website, our Facebook page, and the beginning of a series of podcasts
related to our exhibitions. Our constituency is broader and much more diverse
than it was in the beginning attracting, now, the interests of artists, art historians,
theologians, worshipping communities, social justice groups and the general
public.

WY: You say that you want the museum to “create a conversation” between the
viewer and the work of art – a conversation that implies a “dialogue”. What is the
character of that dialogue? What might be its contours?

A good conversation takes on a life of its own, and one cannot choreograph the
directions it might take. The same thing happens with art. With the art we have
exhibited at MOCRA, I am cautious to impose one exclusive meaning on the
work. We all have had the experience of great artworks speaking to each of us in
ways that often connect with what is going on in our own lives and when we
return to those artworks at another time, depending on what is happening to us,
we may gain new insights from the work. A student who worked for me a number
of years ago at the museum was a bit wild in her first years at Saint Louis
University. Something, however, happened to her in her senior year that changed
her—she never disclosed to me what that was, but she did point out one work
that was on display in our museum that changed her life—a work by James Rosen
entitled Homage to the Pieta d’Avignon. She said that when there were no visitors
in the museum, she would quietly sit in front of this painting and pray and that
those moments with the work influenced her to go to church once again.
I also think that the environment that we provide the works of art we exhibit helps
with that conversation. The museum used to function as a large chapel for Jesuit
students who were preparing for the priesthood or brotherhood. When we
turned the chapel into a museum, we worked hard to retain that sense of a sacred
space, and I think we did a reasonably good job. So when people enter our
space, they recognize immediately a sacred context in which to view, experience,
and dialogue with these works of art.

WY: There are now a number of “religion and art” galleries on seminary and
university campuses. I think of MOBIA—the Museum of the Bible in Art, of the
galleries at Wesley Theological Seminary and United Theological Seminary, of the
new Doug Adams Gallery created by CARE, the Center for the Arts in Religion
and Education at the GTU in Berkeley, and the Chicago Loyola University
Museum of Art (LUMA)—and there are a host of other schools that have
designated gallery space and exhibition programs. In a way you have provided
theological education an important model that has helped stimulate this work.
But the creation of these types of ventures as well as maintaining them is not
always easy. Do you have any insights for what needs to be done to further
implement schools’ commitments to developing and sustaining such galleries?
TD: I am greatly encouraged by the growth in these museums and galleries. I would hope that the schools with which most of institutions are affiliated continue to realize the uniqueness and importance of such exhibition spaces. Such museums and galleries are not money-makers but they provide a precious resource for which there is a growing hunger in the theological and artistic communities as well as within the general public. Most are understaffed. We certainly are—there are three of us who work 80% time (plus five work-study students), but we find that we are, in reality, often working 120% time. We work this hard because we believe in what we are doing, for we are showing our visitors how, in their own prayer lives, contemporary religious and spiritual art might become thresholds to the holy.

WY: What are your ongoing dreams for MOCRA?

TD: My first dream (and concern) is that MOCRA outlasts me. We all know stories of particular programs or institutions founded by one person and when that person is out of the picture, those institutions or programs die or become a shadow of their former selves. I am in my mid-sixties and I would like to see MOCRA continue to have a life beyond my association with it. We have done over 40 exhibitions at MOCRA, and they have covered a wide variety of themes and have incorporated many different artistic styles and media—from traditional painting and sculpture to inflatable sculptures and sculptures that incorporate human blood. People have asked me if after 40 exhibitions, am I running out of ideas for exhibitions? The exact opposite is true. If one is dealing with the religious and spiritual dimensions, the possibilities are endless as the artists of our time use the styles and media of our time to deal with timeless themes. I would like to see MOCRA continue to be an important presence in the dialogue between the religious traditions and the artists of our time. This is where the dream meets the financial realities with which any museum wishing to survive must deal. MOCRA receives most of its funding from its parent institution, Saint Louis University, and for that I am most grateful. To assure MOCRA’s survival, I need to do whatever I can to help develop an endowment for the museum. Then I can let go of this dream and let it take on a new life in the hands of whoever succeeds me—and I do have faith that this will happen, because the museum has become an important part of people’s religious and spiritual lives.