

Garden of Eden exhibit takes artists back to where it all began

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NEW YORK (RNS) If the story of the Garden of Eden is such a common cultural reference point, what more can be said about it?

Plenty, at least judging by a new exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art, which is affiliated with the American Bible Society.

The famed narrative of Eden in the Book of Genesis has been the subject of “*New Yorker* cartoon after *New Yorker* cartoon,” said guest curator Jennifer Scanlan, noting the enduring power of the Eden narrative.

Couples solely wearing fig leaves remain “instantly recognizable as Adam and Eve and fruit trees inhabited by snakes as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil with the serpent,” she writes in the exhibit catalog.

Yet even with archetypes that are so well-known, the themes contained in Genesis about the storied paradise where it all began can still capture the imagination of contemporary artists, who find in it new echoes, meanings and insights.

These can be about innocence and longing, earthly paradise and the challenges of being human, or the need to protect the earth from environmental disaster.

Environmental themes are particularly prominent in “Back to Eden: Contemporary Artists Wander the Garden,” which is on view at the museum through September 28. The nearly two dozen pieces on display include paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and installations containing video elements.

Of particular interest to the environmentally minded, and those who like large-scale paintings, is Alexis Rockman’s striking and dystopian *Gowanus*, a 2013 work depicting the Gowanus Canal, a long-polluted Brooklyn site that, as museum notes

describe it, is notorious among New Yorkers as a “toxic wasteland” reflecting “the disastrous potential for the destruction of nature” by humanity.

This “wandering” through the metaphorical garden has a new element for a museum that, up until now, has not commissioned works of art. Six of the works exhibited are products of MOBIA’s first-ever commissions. That is a fresh approach for a museum committed to art that, even if it is modern or contemporary, is rooted in a religious and narrative tradition.

“It shows a new direction,” said Scanlan, noting the new pieces have changed perspectives “about what a museum of biblical art can be.”

Richard Townsend, the museum’s director, agreed. He said the commissions had paid off by “opening up new avenues for the museum’s exploration of the Bible’s enduring influence on the visual and cultural landscape today,” as well as revealing “the influence of biblical narratives in today’s culture and society.”

“The story of Eden is a framework that gives contemporary artists access to universal themes,” he added, “speaking to age-old human desires and potential.”

Not long ago, during a previous MOBIA exhibit, Bibles and biblical literature developed during two centuries of American wars filled one exhibit space. Now, that space is the site of an arresting video installation by artist Sean Capone, who created one of the commissioned pieces. With its shifting colors and images, Capone’s work suggests different connections to the Book of Genesis—from blank nothingness comes a video “garden” of constant flow, regeneration and change.

More concrete, but perhaps even more provocative, is Mark Dion’s diorama of a key player in the Eden tale: the serpent. This work, also a commissioned piece, gives the viewer a new take on the creature. Looking alert and adroit (and not to mention creepy), Dion’s serpent is depicted as it might have appeared before meeting its eternal fate as a creature forever slithering away on its belly.

The idea of Eden, Scanlan said, means different things to different people. It can be a place to return to; an enclosed space of harmony; a place of origin; or, more tragically, the birthplace of original sin. To many, “it just becomes a symbol of humanity at its most innocent,” she said.

And yet, there lies the serpent, too, the very antithesis of innocence.