

VISUAL ARTS: INTERVIEW

Thinking outside the pew

Ian Carr-Harris's new show gently dismantles Christian teachings

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You could be forgiven for taking Ian Carr-Harris as something of a heathen, albeit of a milder sort. In his Christianity-themed show at Susan Hobbs gallery, the 67-year-old Governor General's Award winner offers a gentle dismantling of the Christian myth.

Gentleness, of course, is the key. With the smell of drying acrylic still hanging in the air, Carr-Harris circles a small tabletop church he had built for his opening. And just in time, it should be noted.

"I've been busy," he shrugs, a little mischievously. Carr-Harris might have saved a little time by simply dipping into a crate on an adjacent table, into which the parts of an identical church – also glistening in shiny black paint – are neatly packed in a snap-together kit. But, then, that would miss the point, wouldn't it?

"Deconstruct" is perhaps too heady a term for the more literal action that's going on here, and too aggressive. Carr-Harris has never been didactic, preferring to elide edict or statement for subtle nudges that gnaw at institutional norms.

Part of his Paradigm Series, the churches, both assembled and not, sit as playful, tidy comments on the nature of immutable belief in a world where complexity is increasingly the order. What Carr-Harris reminds us is that, like any other set of information, those things we've come to take as unquestionable were, in fact, initiated by someone no less real than ourselves.

"It can certainly be seen as a reminder that icons are assembled and disassembled," says Carr-Harris, a quiet, thoughtful presence with a lifetime of art-making behind him. "When you turn it into a kit, you remove its commanding presence."

A senior teacher of sculpture at the Ontario College of Art and Design, Carr-Harris has built an international career as cerebrally iconoclastic, questioning works that seek to unravel conventional belief. If that sounds like a mouthful, then consider that the work is most always a warm invitation to consider, not an edict to apply.

Upstairs at Susan Hobbs, Carr-Harris is showing work from a 2005 piece *Ten Verbs/Ten Commandments*, in which he extracts the essential verb from each one and applies it, in perfectly curled lower-case schoolmarm script, to a precisely lined piece of chalkboard. Underneath the word, in yellow, a carefully drawn upper-case letter: "covet," for example, accompanied with "C" as though part of a writing exercise.

The suggestion of a sort of early educational programming toward conventional belief is clear, but this isn't angry chiding. Carr-Harris's pieces are, as objects, beautiful, small things; the tension they create between form and content – "kill" stands out, floating alone in curly-cute grade-school script, with a helpful instruction on how to draw the upper-case "K", should you need to – quietly pull the viewer into a fuller contemplation.

Read it how you want. Small and innocent, the 10 verbs assembled here seem entirely divorced from their imperatives, and that's surely part of the point – after all, the Commandments are nothing if not the ultimate pedantic expression. Carr-Harris looks to free them from their content – "I wanted the words to seem innocent," he says – but, of course, not entirely. Carr-Harris provides a departure point, but with multiple destinations.

And that's the point, really. Look inside the black church, fully built, and you'll see another, this one white, trapped inside. A suggestion of conflict within an institution that itself claims ultimate authority? Maybe.

Carr-Harris's work asks the questions. It's up to you to find the answers.

Susan Hobbs Gallery