

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# A Radiant Spirit at Home in Quiet Geometries

By ROBERTA SMITH

"God is in the details" may be a hackneyed phrase, but it freshens up considerably in front of Clara Gutsche's photographs of the interiors of Canadian convents and the nuns who live there. Fifty-four of these images, in both black and white and color, form Ms. Gutsche's show at the Americas Society, her first solo in New York City.

They are imbued with a sense of pristine, almost radiant precision, a clarity that seems to extend to their farthest corners. Ms. Gutsche's images are at once quietly factual and possessed of an understated passion. They document a community unfamiliar to most people, and in this sense they might almost be anthropological.

But they also strike repeated emotional chords, conveying a great measure of the selflessness and devotion and the delicate balance of conformity and individuality that are the foundation of this community. And, perhaps in spite of themselves, they arrive at a position close to art, insinuating themselves into the history of portraiture, religious art and the recent art world development of setup photography.

Ms. Gutsche, who was born in St. Louis in 1949 and has lived in Montreal since 1970, began photographing in convents in the mid-1980's. When she first got permission to do so, her interest was architectural; she wanted to take pictures only of their interiors. Several of these earlier images are included here, each presenting a series of gleaming surfaces suffused with an otherworldly sense of calm.

Immaculate to the point of being antiseptic, they indicate universal organizational similarities; all convents have community rooms, meeting rooms, refectories, libraries or reading rooms, choirs and grand parlors for receiving visitors. But they also suggest diversity of viewpoint, sensibility and style among convents. Some occupy old buildings rich with polished wood; others are in new structures where cinderblock and linoleum prevail.

The Community Room of Le Monastère des Soeurs Dominicaines

"Clara Gutsche: The Convent Series," organized by the Joliette Museum of Art in Joliette in Quebec, Canada, remains at the Americas Society, 680 Park Avenue, at 68th Street, (212) 249-8950, through July 25.



Americas Society Art Gallery

"Les Soeurs de la Visitation, Lévis" (1991), by Clara Gutsche.

Moniales suggests counterculture sympathies. It has a carpeted floor dotted with pillows and stools made of tree stumps and a guitar case resting in one corner. While many community rooms display images of the Savior or the Virgin Mary on their walls, that in Le Monastère des Soeurs Visitandines is considerably more ambitious and includes an Ascension of the Virgin portrayed in polychrome life-size figurative sculptures.

These unpopulated pictures show crypts where nuns are buried; refectories readied for a meal, their long tables set with rolled cloth napkins placed beneath an inverted bowl, and a grand parlor with its handsome grid of metal grillwork, the permeable yet unyielding membrane through which cloistered nuns communicate with the outside world. One large color image of chairs at smallish tables-for-one on a blue-and-white checkered linoleum floor beneath a sloping ceiling, identified as a reading room, has the strange scale and solitude of a doll house or a children's nursery and evokes the work of numerous contemporary setup photographers.

Looking at these pictures, you understand why Ms. Gutsche would want to photograph the inhabitants of these places as a way of animating their quiet geometry and explaining their restraint and mysteries; you also appreciate the growing trust between the photographer and her subjects that made this possible. The pictures come to life when the nuns enter, shown in groups or individually, with their stark, flowing habits, and kind, contented faces.

Although hardly outgoing, the sisters display a surprising tolerance for the camera. It may be a lack of vanity that makes them look at it so directly and openly or allow it into private moments. One of the most startling in this regard is a close-up three-quarters portrait of a nun with her hands tucked in her sleeves, her head slightly bent and her eyes closed, her brow slightly furled, deep in thought or prayer. In its composition and emotional tone, it evokes the paintings of Zurbarán.

The images, taken during visits to 20 different orders across Canada, show the sisters lined up in hallways outside the doors of their rooms; seated in rows of desks in a big

bright library; again at separate desks, reading, or praying together, and sitting in a row of six on a bench under five small icons in one instance. They attend services, sitting in facing benches of choirs that range from grand to plain, while other sisters conduct services.

In some of the most imposing, they gaze at the camera from behind the grille in the grand parlors of their convents, with the regal bearing we associate with the mother superiors of Hollywood movies. There are moments of differentiation; one photograph shows three novitiates with young faces, white habits and an air of contained eagerness. We see something like pride in a picture of a nun sitting next to her easel, on which sits a portrait painting of a haloed nun in a habit identical to the artist's.

There are odd echoes of life and art: in one refectory, five nuns sit down to lunch beneath a reproduction of "The Last Supper." The habits vary a great deal: from the traditional black habits and white wimples of Les Soeurs de la Visitation, to the brown robes of the Carmelite order, to the almost blindingly bright ones of the Les Soeurs Adoratrices du Precieux-Sang who, fittingly, wear pure red tunics over white robes. Their similarly bright community room, which has a floor and ceiling of aqua blue, walls of sharp green and yellow, shutters of white and a single pillar painted red, feels like a resort, a mood enhanced by the fact that several of the sisters are shown playing cards.

Most of the artworks visible in these photographs are sentimental dilutions based on Renaissance models. But the photographs themselves can heighten one's appreciation of the real thing. The nuns' serene gazes suggest that the expressions painted on the faces of legions of Renaissance saints and Madonnas have some basis in reality. And the orderly geometries of these clean, well-lighted spaces underscore the power that both Renaissance art and the Roman Catholic Church gained when artists grasped the principles of one-point perspective and directed light.

God may have been in the details, but as Ms. Gutsche's reverent, sharp-eyed photographs remind us, He was just as much in the clear, crisp four-cornered renderings of light and space.

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