



ART REVIEW

Seeking the Sacred In the Adirondacks

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

TOURING from the Lake Placid (N.Y.) Institute for the Arts and Humanities, "Places of the Spirit: Sacred Sites of the Adirondacks" at the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport is a missed opportunity. This is not because the idea of photographing sacred places in the ruggedly chic Adirondacks isn't sound, but because the theme has been interpreted narrowly. Mostly, this exhibition contains front-and-center photographs of churches.

Although conflicting definitions of the word "spirit" abound, we tend to use it to describe those qualities regarded as forming the typical elements in the character of a person, group, nation, or historical period, or to refer to a supernatural being of some kind. Consequently, "places of the spirit" might justifiably include anything from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington to a remote mountaintop.

Some effort has been made to include less conventional sacred sites — graves, gardens and one or two spots of natural and artistic inspiration. But these are few and far between, with the invited photographers, four in all, concentrating on religious buildings erected by the region's early European settlers. Even the Mohawk Indians, longtime residents of the Adirondacks, are relegated to references in the exhibition catalog.

Thematic quibbles aside, the exhibition reveals that the Adirondack region contains an extraordinary variety of historical religious structures. Most are fairly simple buildings built of wood, stone, brick or, more recently, concrete, but there are also more ornate structures designed in various architectural styles, including Federal, Greek

Revival, Italianate, Gothic Revival and Queen Anne.

The diversity of religious faiths and houses of worship established in the region reflects different waves of settlers. For instance, we learn from a short essay by Steven Engelhart in the catalog that Protestant settlers arriving after the Revolutionary War built the region's first churches. Few of those traditional, white clapboard buildings remain, although the photographs document many similar, 19th-century examples.

Later, economic change in the region, in particular mining and iron production, led to a demand for labor. This brought an influx of new migrants and, with them, new religious affiliations. "Catholic immigrants from Quebec, Spain, Portugal and Eastern Europe were the largest new group," we learn, leading, over time, to the construction of a variety of churches. There was also a small Jewish population, many of them Russians.

More recently, the rise of tourism in the late 19th century led to the construction of "summer churches and chapels" for the growing seasonal population. Among the more interesting structures is the "Church of the Transfiguration," a rustic-looking log building at Blue Mountain Lake, designed "by New York architect Manly N. Cutter and built by Thomas Wallace in 1885." Barry Lobdell's photograph nicely captures its charm.

Most places shown in the photographs lack people — a fairly clichéd visual device meant to evoke a sense of mystery or a sacred, spiritual aura. It works sometimes, admittedly, but in other cases results in flat,



documentary-style images of limited appeal. Unless, that is, viewing visual research into early church architecture in upstate New York is your idea of a good time.

Fortunately, a bunch of photographs manage to inch their way into aesthetic territory.

Mr. Lobdell's "Teahouse, White Pine Camp, Paul Smiths" is a really wonderful photograph, capturing an early morning ca-

Photographs in the "Places of the Spirit" show at the Housatonic Museum in Bridgeport include Tibetan prayer flags, top left, and a teahouse at White Pine Camp, above, both by Barry Lobdell, and Chapel Island on Upper Saranac Lake by Romaine Orthwein.

noe rider on a foggy lake. This hazy lakeside image, printed in cool blue tones, alludes openly to Chinese and Japanese painting, while marshaling an awareness of nature's profound, mysterious beauty.

Turning to the other artists, Shellburne Thurber's photographs of small groups of old gravesites have a touching poignancy. Many of the gravestones are sinking, taking with them all memory of the people buried

in these plots. Everything is impermanent in this world, these photographs seem to be saying, returning eventually to nature.

Romaine Orthwein's "Private Chapel, Tapawingo" is one of the few photographs here that includes people. More precisely, it shows the artist, in a white dress, faintly visible through the front window of a little multi-faith chapel in the woods near Lake Placid. Her presence is "enigmatic," as the exhibition's curator, Mara Miller, suggests in the catalog, leaving us "uncertain if she is praying or even if she is a real figure."

Finally, Heather MacLeod makes square, black and white silver gelatin prints of historic churches. She likes to photograph her subjects head-on, frequently centered both vertically and horizontally. At first I found these no-frills pictures a bit snooze inducing, but later realized they evoked a kind of ideological purity. More than just photographs of olden day churches, they are snapshots of the past.

"Places of the Spirit: Sacred Sites of the Adirondacks" is at the Housatonic Museum of Art, 900 Lafayette Boulevard, Bridgeport, through July 23. Information (203) 332-5052 or www.HousatonicMuseum.org.