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BELIEFS

## An Artist Brings Religion Into His Work, in Big, Bold Style

By [PETER STEINFELS](#)

Archie Rand is standing in a Brooklyn warehouse and surveying “The 613,” a vast artwork it has taken him five years to complete.

The wall in front of him is 100 feet long and 22 feet high — over a third the length of a football field and more than twice the height of most people’s living rooms. It is almost entirely covered with 613 separate paintings, each approximately the size of the “Mona Lisa” and each illustrating one of the 613 mitzvot or commandments of traditional Judaism.

Mr. Rand is discussing the image representing “To know there is a God,” the first commandment in the list as compiled by Maimonides. It is of an astronaut floating in space, “a bit untethered and unsure of his fate and of his reason for being there,” Mr. Rand explains, and soon he is talking about Einstein’s view of a finite universe and about the book of Genesis and Judaism’s wariness about images and Clement Greenberg’s art criticism and [John Coltrane](#)’s liner notes declaring, “All praise be to God.”

Meanwhile, the observer, overpowered by the sheer scope and impact of this wall of paintings, can barely track these explanations, except to catch a dead-on appropriate phrase from, of all places, the novel “Spartacus” by Howard Fast: “the insolent enormity of it.”

The 614 individual paintings — an introductory “title painting” pictures a man in a fedora, presumably taking orders from God on a 1930s-style wall phone — are rendered in the style of comics and pulp fiction book jackets, a dash of Mad Magazine, a spoonful of Tales of the Crypt, some grotesques, some superheroes, always action, emotion, drama.

The palette runs to lurid blues, greens, yellows, purples and rose, “vulgar, discomfoting colors,” Mr. Rand says, suitable for the acrylic paints but also “to steer away from an accepted aesthetic.” The wall of images is held together not only by the style and the palette but also the formal gold edging of each painting with the Hebrew number of the commandment.

Mr. Rand, who moves with ease from Einstein to “Spartacus” and discourses as readily on EC Comics as on Goya, Cezanne and Kandinsky, is presidential professor of art at [Brooklyn College](#). Now 58, he emerged as something of a prodigy in the 1960s art world, and his work has been displayed in numerous exhibitions and major museums in this country, Europe and Israel.

After gaining notice with two series of paintings memorializing his personal pantheon of jazz and rhythm and blues artists, he began exploring Jewish themes. He covered the 13,000-square-foot interior of B’nai Yosef Synagogue in Brooklyn — now known as the Painted Shul — with murals, and most recently used comic-book style in “The Nineteen Diaspora Paintings,” juxtaposing biblical scenes with passages from the 19 blessings of the Amidah, a prayer recited several times a day by observant Jews. “As much Tintoretto as Jerry Siegel,” one critic wrote of this series.

Mr. Rand consults rabbinic commentaries aplenty, but his images are never literal illustrations of the text, as indicated by the floating astronaut or the egg featured in #454 (“Observe the laws of menstrual impurity”) or two knights sword fighting in #596 (“Destroy the seven Canaanite nations”) or the moose in #442 (“Not to change consecrated animals from one type of offering to another”).

These constitute his own artistic, nonrabbinic commentary. Whether metaphorical or humorous or melodramatic, the individual image is meant to provoke reflection, and the sheer size of the project ultimately to stir wonder at the very audacity of such an enumeration of religious duties and the tradition that has maintained it.

Unlike many pop art riffs on sacred themes, the last thing Mr. Rand has in mind is ironic comment. “After 50 years of irony and cynicism,” he says, “it would be good to tackle gratitude.”

“The 613” is Mr. Rand’s latest and biggest salvo in a decades-long campaign against the barriers dividing religion and contemporary art. Sometimes the barriers are thrown up by religious authorities. Religious objections halted Mr. Rand’s murals at B’nai Yosef until one of the world’s leading Talmudic scholars formally ruled that they did not violate Jewish law.

But Mr. Rand is equally adamant about the way the art world marginalizes the explicitly religious or spiritual — unless, of course, it is ironic or transgressive.

He notes that Cezanne’s instruction to a protégé, “Deal with nature as cylinders, spheres, cones,” is practically chiseled in stone over the entrances to art schools as a founding principle of the modern aesthetic, but that no one quotes the following sentence in which Cezanne, a regular churchgoer, refers to this approach as conveying “the spectacle the Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus [God the Almighty, Eternal Father] offers to our eyes.”

Mr. Rand is prepared to argue that every artist who made an impact in the West in the last century, from [Picasso](#) to Warhol, was in a deep sense a religious artist.

Mr. Rand is Jewish but “not religious, not observant by any stretch of the imagination,” he says — and then proceeds to speak of the artist’s need to serve somebody or something that has “got to be bigger than you are in that studio.” He talks of God as “a location to which we can direct our gratitude” and of art as “affection made manifest.”

He admits that spending five years on “The 613” was wacky and crazy, given that he had no commission or idea of where such a huge work could be exhibited. Mr. Rand himself had never seen the work in its entirety until the last-minute idea of hanging the paintings for a few weeks in May in the warehouse, which Mr. Rand bought and is about to have demolished. Where and when the work will be seen next are unknown.

“The amount of necessity, almost desperate necessity, that went into it — I didn’t know why I was doing it,” he says. “I still don’t, but I was convinced it had to be done.”

Part of the explanation might be found in something Mr. Rand said at an art symposium last year: “Trying to introduce religiously based work into the secular or modernist art world is not a piece of cake. I figure I’ve got the rest of my life to do this. It’s going to be big fun.” Underline “big.”