

# Art in America

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Gary Monroe at CUE

Gary Monroe's first New York solo show consisted of work on paper concerned with a group of evangelical Christians who handle snakes as part of their devotional practice. Monroe lives in Knoxville, Tenn., not far from southern Appalachia, home to the snake handlers. The snake-handling rituals is based on a passage from the Bible (Mark 16:17) that states, "They shall take up serpents." The sect was founded by George Went Hensley in 1880 (he later died of a snakebite) as a new form of religious expression based on local rural culture at a time when the industrial revolution had forced these communities to give up much of their land. Many handlers have fallen victim to deadly snakebites; medical treatment is generally refused and death attributed to the victims' lack of fate.

Monroe commemorates epiphanic moments of the sect's past, using tableaux, poses and costumes freely lifted from Western art history, Titian to Pollock. By reworking paintings such as Michelangelo's *The Brazen Serpent* (1511), he firmly places himself in the tradition of allegorical snake painting, a surprisingly robust form stretching back centuries. In the show's seven earlier works (1997-2002), each 60 by 48 inches, Monroe's sharp contrast of charcoal and chalk heightens the drama and sense of danger in these scenes, reminding us of the potential consequences of investing oneself wholly in religion. In *Shorty Takes Up Serpents*, charcoal describes shadows cast by the central figure's thick, bulging forearms and knitted brow. Shorty is keenly watched by a grimacing audience as he grapples with serpents that writhe and twist about his body. In his epiphany, his eyes roll back, while the onlookers lean in enthusiastically, chalk illuminating their clenched, white knuckles. One onlooker sports a shirt emblazoned with "Mark... Take Up Serpents." Dressed in work boots or barefoot, these pale-faced characters, with their stocky physiques clad in white robes, suggest the ghosts of Courbet's rural peasants.

While Monroe's earlier works are full of drama, his later efforts (2004-06), four chalk-and-pastel pieces, present a quieter, more surreal, almost romantic look at the sect by means of vibrant, expressive color. The blue figure of Sherman Lawson, an evangelical preacher, is struck down by a vision in which three red serpent handlers dance around him. Their arms reach out in a fashion reminiscent of the figures in Matisse's *The Dance* (1910), while God appears as a



Gary Monroe: *Shorty Takes Up Serpents*, 1998, chalk and charcoal on paper, 60 by 48 inches; at CUE

shimmering, multi-colored apparition created by Monroe's technique of rubbing chalk over pegboard. Mary Brown, a snake handler from Parrottsville, Tenn., died of a snakebite after refusing medical help. Monroe depicts her much like a Renaissance Virgin Mary in a glorious blue robe, rising heavenwards on a cloud of red, winged cherubs.

These works caution us of the power of religious conviction and the often bizarre forms it can take. By painting the marginalized snake handlers in classic Renaissance poses, Monroe brings the sect closer to the traditional, more familiar depictions of Christianity and succeeds in challenging our preconceived ideas about Christian art.

- *Constance Wyndham*