

**Gary Monroe**

**Curated by Eleanor Heartney**

April 27 – June 3, 2006

(Opening Reception: Thursday, April 27, 6-8pm)

“Blurring the line between art and religion, Monroe reminds us that both hold out the promise of spiritual transcendence, and both may cost their practitioners more than they expected.”

— Eleanor Heartney

The controversial practice of snake handling performed by small sects of Pentecostal Christians in Southern Appalachia is the subject for Gary Monroe’s selection of more than 10 chalk, charcoal, and pastel drawings on view. The drawings reflect the Tennessee-based artist’s long-standing interest in the folk life of Appalachia and his recent fascination with a 100-year-old religious rite largely based on literal interpretations of the bible concerning the taking up of serpents. It is also frequently a family tradition, passed on and performed by self-described sign-followers in order to demonstrate religious fortitude with repeated immunity from venomous snake bites serving as a sign of God’s blessing.

By portraying contemporary serpent handlers as realist figures in classical poses and Renaissance settings, the artist’s monumental drawings pay homage to the many serpent-laden narratives found throughout Christianity and Greek mythology. Among the recurring motifs in Monroe’s baroque compositions are figures adapted from Michelangelo’s depictions of *The Brazen Serpent* and *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*. The artist also frequently references the contorted mythological figures of Laocoon and his two sons bracing themselves from attack by monstrous sea serpents. Allusions to classical works by Michelangelo, Rubens, Titian, Bronzino, and Caravaggio are also joined with sly references to more contemporary iconographic symbols such as Kasimir Malevich’s crosses, and the faces of Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock.

While paying homage to the figurative traditions of Western art, Monroe’s narratives are also steeped in the lore of snake handlers as latter-day martyrs.

According to exhibition curator, Eleanor Heartney, *The Death of Sister Melinda Brown of Parotsville, TN* (2006), draws on Renaissance representations of the death and assumption of the Virgin to depict the death and subsequent deification of a practitioner who died of a serpent bite after refusing medical care. *The Vision of Free Pentecostal Sherman Lawson of Path Fork, KY* (2004-06) blends elements from El Greco’s version of Laocoon with figure composition evocative of Matisse’s dancers to suggest Lawson’s ecstatic vision. Legend has it that the evangelist preacher, upon being blessed with a vision of serpent handlers, became an initiate apparently unaware that the ritual had already been in practice for 20 years. More ominously, *The Assault of Sister Glenda Darlene Collins of Scottsboro, AL* (2006) quotes from Rubens’ *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* to tell the true story of a member of the sect who attempted to kill his wife by forcing her to thrust her hand into a box full of venomous serpents.

In order to further heighten the sense of spectacle, Monroe may clad certain figures in contemporary clothing while choosing to drape other subjects within the same painting in classical garments traditionally found in Old Master allegorical paintings. At other times, he may add elements associated with Renaissance architecture or landscape to works depicting the countryside and interiors of present-day Appalachia. By juxtaposing modern with traditional elements and figures, Monroe’s drawings present a spiritual practice filtered through the entire historical canon of western art.

*The Mystic Marriage of Saint Barbara Elkins of Jolo, WV, 2006*  
Chalk and pastel on paper, 76” x 49” Photo credit: Gary Heatherly.



*The Death of Sister Melinda Brown of Parotsville TN, 2006*  
Chalk and pastel on paper, 82” x 47” Photo credit: Gary Heatherly

(Cont.)

**Artist Bio:** Gary Monroe was born in Enterprise, AL, in 1956. He attended Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, KY, from 1975-1978 and currently lives and works in his hometown of Knoxville, TN. In the eighties, Monroe was an active member of the 500X Gallery in Dallas, TX, and frequently exhibited at various galleries and institutions throughout Texas. After several years as a predominately abstract artist and at mid-career, Monroe began a group of figurative drawings based on Southern narratives, of which the subject of Appalachian Serpent Handlers became the focus.

Recent exhibitions include *Serpent Handlers and Other Saints* at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, Knoxville, TN, in 2002, and *New Drawings* at the Rodman Townsend Sr. Memorial Gallery in the Knoxville Museum of Art Annex in 1999. His work was also exhibited in the group show *Thresholds: Expressions of Art & Spiritual Life* curated by Eleanor Heartney at The Green Hill Center for North Carolina Art in Greensboro, NC; The McColl Center for Visual Art in Charlotte, NC; Transylvania University in Lexington, KY, in 2005; The State Museum of South Carolina in Columbia, SC, and Owensboro Museum of Fine Art in Owensboro, KY, in 2004 as well as City Museum of Charleston, SC, in 2003. The exhibition at CUE represents his first solo show in New York.

This exhibition is supported in part by **Accademia Charitable Foundation, Ltd.**

**Related Public Program:** Eleanor Heartney & Irving Sandler Book Signings  
**Thursday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 7:00-8:30pm at CUE**

**Exhibition Curator Eleanor Heartney**

***Defending Complexity: Art, Politics and the New World Order, 2006 (Hard Press Editions).***

Examining the question of whether art has affected social consciousness over the last ten years, Heartney's essays deal with the failures and successes of art committed to social change. Taken together, they present a plea for complexity in Contemporary Art and in our understanding of that art.

Eleanor Heartney is an internationally published art critic and cultural commentator. She is the author of *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*; *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*; and *Postmodernism (Movements in Modern Art)*. Her essays appear regularly in such publications as *Art in America*, *Artpress*, and the *New York Times*.

**CUE Advisory Board Member Irving Sandler**

***From Avant Garde to Pluralism: An On-The-Spot History, 2006 (Hard Press Editions)***

This collection of Sandler's seminal writings, from 1950 to the present, chronicle the sweeping changes in Modern Art, from Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism of 1950's and 60's—to Pluralism, which has dominated the art world for the last thirty years.

Irving Sandler's influential career within the field of visual arts for over the last fifty years has included serving as a champion of emerging artists; art critic; professor of art history and criticism; and arts administrator. Emerging as a critical voice in the 50s and 60s, Mr. Sandler's published writings have encompassed a broad spectrum of contemporary art, including ground-breaking monographs on Alex Katz and Mark Di Suvero. Recent publication includes, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir* (Thames & Hudson, 2003).

**ABOUT CUE:** CUE Art Foundation, a non-profit 501(c) (3) organization, provides educational and professional development programs in the visual arts. These include student internships, stipends, exhibitions, public lectures, and an in-gallery studio program, all of which draw from the talents and experience of the diverse community of artists, art critics, and teachers that the Foundation brings together.

CUE's exhibition season gives unknown or under-recognized artists public and professional exposure comparable to that offered by neighboring commercial galleries, without the usual financial restraints. The Advisory Council, an honorary group of artists and leading figures from the arts education, applied arts, art history, and literary communities, has the responsibility of selecting exhibition curators. The curators, in turn, nominate artists to exhibit at CUE, and continue to play a role throughout the exhibition process. Both the Advisory Council and the exhibition curators actively participate in the public lectures and educational programs.

CUE Art Foundation is supported in part by public funds from the New York Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York State Council on the Arts through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Experimental Television Center.

For additional information, please contact Beatrice Wolert-Weese, Programs Coordinator, CUE Art Foundation, 212 206-3583, or email [beatrice.wolert@cueartfoundation.org](mailto:beatrice.wolert@cueartfoundation.org). Gallery hours: Tues. – Sat., 10am – 6pm.