



RUPTURING

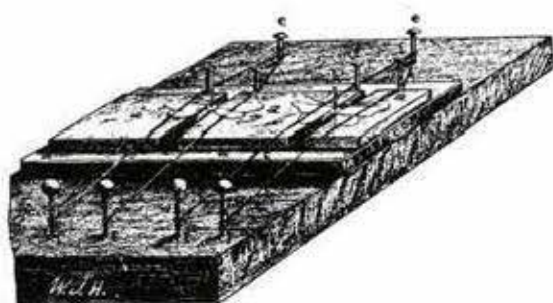
BEAUTY

Toward a New Definition of "Strange"

JAMES ELKINS

Sorry to be so contrarian, but I want to begin by saying why neither the *informe* nor beauty are operative concepts in this exhibition. The *informe* is an extremely tempting concept for an increasing number of artists: it seems to offer a way out of Greenbergian modernism, a way around the current fascination in cyberspace and unreflective multimedia installation, a strong antidote to current practices that still depend on romanticism and the sublime, an alternate to current concerns with kitsch and camp, and an improvement on theories of abjection, the body, and horror. It does those things: but it is also the very specific product of just two art historians (Rosalind Krauss, and to a much lesser degree Yve-Alain Bois), at a specific place in their careers (for Krauss, a moment in which it seemed important to resist readings of surrealism and Bataille proposed for example by Georges Didi-Huberman), responding to particular historical sources (Bataille's dictionary, and the newly-discovered women surrealist photographers), and reconfiguring particular disciplines (especially the intersection of art criticism with the art history of surrealism, an intersection that is put to work throughout the book *Formless*). So the *informe* needs to be used with caution, if it is to be applied outside the particular concerns of *Formless*. Can it really be a pass-key for current post-minimal practice?

Well, luckily I can't answer that in this essay. Given another 30,000 words I would want to argue that the *informe* is the theory *du jour*, which actually functions in an illogical manner to get all sorts of unrelated projects started. I like "ruptured beauty" better, except that the current renaissance of beauty is so utterly conceptually confused (Steiner, Hickey, Nehamas, Scarry, Beckley, Saint-Girons—the situation is entirely ridiculous). There is no theory of the emergence of beauty: even Hickey's theory is so riddled with contradictions (and his teaching shot through with inconsistent students) that it is more an inspiration to change than a coherent program. "Ruptured," on the other hand, seems exactly right.



Let me propose, provisionally, that the works in this exhibition share a sense that the immediate past is slightly but not irreparably broken, and needs to be repaired—not a postmodern alienation, or a nihilistic dismissal of history, but a feeling that the past has just fractured a bit, and therefore needs to be treated as if it were a broken limb or a machine that has recently stopped working. Needless to say "strangeness" as I'm going to define it isn't a Rosetta stone for this exhibition or for current art practice: but it is a concept that I think applies far more widely, and more closely, than the *informe* or beauty. Some brief examples:

1. Perhaps the closest to the *informe* is Jocelyn Nevel's work, but with an important (in fact, debilitating) caveat: Krauss and Bois explicitly deny that the *informe* is related to the abject, and Nevel's work belongs clearly in the latter tradition. It descends in interesting ways from minimalism, and it owes its themes both to Pop and to Eva Hesse: but it is just the kind of work that Krauss excluded from *Formless*. That move, in *Formless*, is perhaps historically implausible given the incremental closeness of the abject and the *informe*. In the present context, it's interesting that Nevel's work also asks for a rethinking of the utility of the older traditions—there's a dislocation, a "rupture," in the use of recent art history, which fits my theme.

2. Another of the "illegitimate" readings of the *informe* equates it with whatever is taken to be unrepresentable. Shane Huffman's installation includes all kinds of ordinary objects imagined as if they were the exotic and nearly invisible traces and notations of science. Ultimately, work of this kind (including, for example, the overtly domestic images made by Marco Breuer) owes its genealogy not to Bataille but to Jean-François Lyotard, especially the seminal exhibition *Les Immatériaux* which posited a postmodern sublime understood as immanent presence without signification. (A recent continuation, in modernist mode, is Alain Besson's book *The Forbidden Image*.) The more mysterious the traces, the deeper the advance into the unrepresentable: such is the proposal made by this kind of art, which I find very promising. It's also the case that the past—in this case, the past of art that worked with science—is in need of extensive rethinking.

3. Michael Kiresuk's paintings belong more systematically to the same post-minimalist field, where "systematic" denotes an absence of references outside the immediate domain of painting (as it's defined, in particular, by Stephen Melville's very important catalogue *As Painting*). His multiply-layered paintings also refuse to display the fastidious and labor-intensive manner in which they were produced, unless—as he says—a viewer happens to notice the thickness of the paint in cross-section. That reticence is extreme, but it could be made even more so: it could be absolutely disguised, and at the moment there is nothing in the logic of the paintings themselves that would argue against such a move, unless it is a sense that the way forward cannot be any simple extension of minimalist and support/surface methods—and in that case, again, history is just a bit dislocated. The quandary over history's health is part of the field of ambitious painting after minimalism.

4. Marie Krane Bergman's paintings are informed by the same history—a history, as Melville says, in which painting can no longer go on being counted as it has been in the past, as a succession of individual exemplars or masterpieces. Instead painting has to remember that history, and acknowledge its impossibility (that is, it's no longer possible for any single painting to exemplify Painting for any given moment), while at the same time working in such a way that "counting," as Melville puts it, can continue as a possibility. Bergman's paintings do that in an exemplary fashion, engaging the history of minimalism and also painting's illusionistic past. They work "as painting" (Melville's term again): as examples of what painting's ambition can do, and what it has to leave behind. Bergman systematizes illusion as if it were a child who has misbehaved—regimenting, quantifying, and measuring out how illusion can work, and dispersing it (in an ultra-rational but private fashion) across several canvases and numbered projects. This is illusionism remembered as a machine, and minimalism practiced as a code.



a very promising direction for painting, one with parallels to Duchamp's utterly unbelievable but deeply professed interest in science.

The artists in this exhibition are skeptical about particular elements of the history of modernism: in Nevel's and Huffman's work there are multiple objects of skepticism (science, reason, Pop, the abject, adequate representation); for Kiresuk and Bergman it's painting as method, or method as painting. One of the affects of such work is strangeness, which I'll define here provisionally as a sense that history has become either unreliable or dysfunctional, and therefore in need of artificial regimentation and protracted study. Strangeness in this sense is different both from surrealist *unheimlichkeit* and from postmodern alienation or appropriation. This is work that takes history seriously (otherwise I wouldn't be writing this catalogue); but a common thread is the oddity of the operations that seem necessary to reconfigure the broken machinery of the past into some kind of working order.

5. Frances Whitehead's work is dense with the kind of strangeness I have in mind. Her sculpture is from a late-romantic classic, Holland's *Moth Book*, which is full of poetic apostrophes about the luscious and sensual (and anti-social) business of moth collecting in places like China. It's also full of Victorian seriousness about natural history, and replete with Latin names and dry descriptions. So what does an enormous version of an early twentieth-century spreading board (a disused kind of board, itself an antique) have to say about sculpture, about natural history, about the bodies of the collector and the moth, about the environment, and even about late romanticism? Lots of things, but let me close by mentioning just one, which has resonance with all the works in this show: let me propose that the sheer size of the object is a lovely way of proposing the enormous conceptual machinery that is needed—that would be needed—to bring these themes into the twenty-first century. Cultural dislocation, as in a broken hip that needs an artificial joint: that is a principal form of art history at the moment.

Five Footnotes to An Essay Conceived While Lying on a Philosopher's Couch

JEREMY BILES

FOR DANNY HOFFMAN

The other morning, after a late night out dancing with a philosopher friend of mine, I awoke to find myself sprawled on a couch in this friend's apartment. I tried, but failed, to get up, so instead reached out for a book of Chinese philosophy that happened to be sitting on the nearby coffee table. I opened the book and, by chance, my eyes fell upon the words of Hui Shih: "Heaven is as low as earth. Mountains and marshes are on the same level. The sun at noon is the sun setting. The thing born is the thing dying."

The collapse of the ethereal beauty of mountains into the murky squalor of marshes — no less seething with life than fulminating with decay — is an image dear to the French writer Georges Bataille. Indeed, this very sentiment is expressed with acerbic clarity in his 1929 essay "Formless," where he claims that

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world (*déclasser*), generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit (*Visions of Excess*).

The task, the job, the *action* of the formless is to bring things low, to declass and declassify.¹ Moreover, it is, as Rosalind Krauss has made clear, not best thought as the opposite of form, but as an operation, a "possibility working at the heart of form, to erode it from within. Working, that is, structurally, precisely, geometrically, like clockwork" (*The Optical Unconscious*).

As it relates to art, the operation of the formless is perhaps most unsettling in works of apparent formal elegance and beauty. Such a claim resonates with Bataille, who states that "the more equilibrium an object has, the more complete it is; . . . the greater the disequilibrium of sacrifice that can result" (*Guilty*).

Equilibrium, stability, completion, and integral form are defining characteristics of classical

beauty as it derives from the Platonic idea.² But while Bataille values these qualities, he does so precisely because they set the stage (or prepare the altar) for the thrill of transgression, the agonized ecstasy of rupture, the heated joy of sacrifice.

The formless is indeed an operation—a *sacrificial* operation. In art, it can even be thought of as a method, akin to technique in sacrifice. It is a way of doing violence to any aesthetic idealism that would legislate beauty, confining it within the strictures of philosophical stability and the rigors of habit.

To say that the formless is a sacrificial operation, however, is to suggest that its effects are not only observable in works of art, but extend, contagiously, to those who encounter them. Like sacrifice, the work of the formless in art demands a risk from those who would witness it. As Bataille never tires of telling us, the victim of a sacrifice is the witness who identifies with the sacrificial object, and the joy of the celebration is available to those of us who engage in a "conscious refusal to limit ourselves within our individual personalities," our secured and integral selves, our personal forms (*Erotism*).

Sacrifice, in other words, delivers the victim from the world of reasoned order and calculated utility. It kills what is a mere thing in the object and returns it to a sacred realm of "unintelligible caprice," beyond all "ties of subordination" (*Theory of Religion*). In the domain of art, it is beauty conceived of as a mere *thing*, a regulatory template, that the formless corrupts, whether it be by the blatant facticity of base matter and heterogenous material,³ or by working structurally to fissure or corrode structure.

The formless is thus analogous to sacrifice insofar as it makes things sacred. "Sacred," it is well known, means both holy and cursed; it denotes an ambivalence, even a coincidence, between high and low, attraction and repulsion. To sacrifice, to make sacred, is therefore to dissolve, in a moment as dangerous to formal beauty as it is to the witness, the limits separating high and low, to give death to that which isolates us in our hermetic forms. To witness the formless is thus to put yourself at risk, to be altered, to allow it to "break the habitual homogeneity" of your person, to be wounded for a time by a ruptured and rupturing beauty. It is to be fascinated unto exhaustion—as Bataille says, like the light of a star annihilating the star itself.⁴ It is to spend it all, to experience a little death, to fall up or down—it hardly matters which—to dance with toxic joy, and to collapse, again and again, like a spider or spittle, onto a philosopher's shapeless couch.

¹*The language of flowers.* Bataille was fascinated by Van Gogh's choice to paint his sunflowers not at the height of their brilliance, but rather after they had fallen from their apexes, wilted by the sun. Bataille also made much of the fact that while the exterior aspect of the flower corresponds to a human ideal of beauty, what the lovely petals hide is the "sordid tuft" of the sexual organs. That *Marie Bergman* paints the dismantled petals of wilting flowers within the structure of a grid says less about the organizational capacity of the grid than it does about the corrosive function of the organs that these petals had once concealed. Is it thus any wonder that the petals that had formed the flower's symmetrical corolla have fallen from their former height into a heap—a heap that remains, like a glaring affront to any categorical imperative, at the level of the groin?

²*Horizontality/declassification.* The etymology of "entomology": *F entomologie*, fr. *Gk entomon* insect (fr. neut. of *entomos* cut up, fr. *en-* + *temnein* to cut). There is a side of entomology that dedicates itself to classification. It is this side of the science that Bataille, whose notion of the formless functions to *declassify*, would have disdained. One finds an expression of this disdain in *Frances Whitehead's* setting board, modeled after those used for insects, but dis-proportioned to human size. Hardly an accommodating piece, however, this rack is one that undercuts the erect posture of humans, and functions to cut away at the vertical (one might say "phallic") columns to which classification is married. One imagines these columns toppling like agitated obelisks at the very moment that a person lies upon the rack as on an altar. The remnant of such a sacrifice would be only a frock coat—moth-eaten, riddled with holes, devoured by the hungry mouths of a thousand insects that are no longer a class, but a swarm.

³*Insubordination.* In elaborating the notion of a *dialectic of forms*, Bataille cites a study in which a series of exposures of different human faces onto photographic film reveals a composite image of a formally perfect countenance—a Platonic, ideally beautiful face. This kind of beauty, he notes, remains under the aesthetic thumb of a classical, common measure. But each individual face, deviating from the standard of the composite, is to some degree monstrous. *Michael Kiresuk's* works operate on a similar logic, but in the opposite direction, a direction in which Bataille would have delighted. Layering screened acrylic on a plexiglass

support, the artist develops a thick accumulation of superimposed grids. The layering has the effect of supuration, with the excesses of the medium causing deviations from the typological perfection of the screen. This insubordination of material facts, to use Bataille's terminology, swerves from the formal pattern, issuing in a *moiré*, a delirium of trembling crosses—structure sent wavering by the forces of its own medium. A single grid may appear as Platonic perfection, but the accumulation of many gives birth to monsters.

⁴*Desublimation.* Bataille once wrote: "I think like a girl taking off her dress." *Jocelyn Nevel* evidently thinks like a woman taking off not only her dress, but her bra and pantyhose, as well. The bras which, one imagines, might once have been used to keep certain things in their proper place, now lay on the floor in a limp and elegantly reticulated weave, like a spider web which, having succumbed to gravity, can no longer trap anything. And one can hardly help but think of Freud when coming face to face with the crotches of pantyhose that span the embroidery hoops like a series of blank, ecstatic eyes. Freud will tell you that civilization is possible because of an upward displacement of the genitals in the guise of the eyes: sublimation. But what if the eyes themselves appear paradoxically, as these ocular swatches which have erupted from below? Return of the repressed — as a return of the undressed.

⁵*Centrifugality.* The tattoo on *Shane Huffman's* arm . . . a lunar cycle . . . affirming Bataille's pronouncement: . . . "there are no vibrations that are not conjugated with a continuous circular movement" . . . tears in the form of scatterblown glyphs . . . a vertiginous fall toward the sky . . . dirt on the ground a parody of the planets . . . rubble of "planetary systems that turn in space like rapid disks, and whose centers also move, describing an infinitely large circle, . . . away continuously from their own position in order to return to it, completing their rotation" . . . an eclipse . . . "a subterfuge of memory" . . . as high as your feet, as low as the sky . . . stars strewn like pages torn from a book . . . a dizzy clutter in clockwork ebb and flow . . . "the simplest image of organic life united with rotation is the tide" . . . swimming in an onanistic sea . . . words flung in ever widening circles . . . a spiral . . . "the two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement" . . . the earth eroded beneath a vault of forgetting . . . "beings only die to be born" . . . again . . .

Rupturing Beauty

In contemporary painting, the search for that which most ruptures the highest elevation, and for a blinding brilliance, has a share in the elaboration or decomposition of forms.

Georges Bataille, from *Rotten Sun*, 1930

While works in Rupturing Beauty hold varying dialogues with Georges Bataille's ideas, the artists have created exceptional art independent of this association. We chose the artists because of their nontraditional ideas about beauty or form. These include either beauty ("the highest elevation") erupting or rising out of something low, or beauty itself being ruptured, broken, or sacrificed. For the catalogue, two scholars, Jeremy Biles and James Elkins, have produced radically different interpretations of Bataille's influence on the conception of the exhibition. We celebrate this rupture and perceive it as an integral part of an ongoing inquiry in contemporary art. Françoise Meltzer and Amy Hollywood of the University of Chicago will further this conversation in lectures on February 6 and 20.

The two painters, Marie Krane Bergman and Michael Kiresuk, demonstrate the dichotomy. They strip the act of painting of its typical elevated associations, but their final works achieve a subtle and new beauty. While maintaining the traditional rectangular form, they simultaneously mock it as arbitrary—capable of infinite expansion in any direction with no right side up or upside down.

Kiresuk's methods belie the impetuous moments when, dyeing Easter eggs as children, we poured all the colors together to produce the gray egg. In "Life Like," Kiresuk has trowelled 60 thin layers of acrylic through window screening onto Plexiglas. Four translucent layers of magenta, black, yellow, and cyan produce an earthy gray. As he spreads each layer, these pure, intense colors are corrupted or canceled—ending in the neutral shade. But unlike our childhood egg, the original colors are not obliterated, but radiate out of the surface and as quickly dissolve back into it. The telltale grid of the screen archives the artist's meticulous process and obsessive repetitions. This careful, controlled process ironically creates larger patterns that appear randomly across the surface. We see abstracted natural forms that seem life like.

Whereas Kiresuk starts with simple color layers and ends with abstracted landscapes, Bergman has shredded the genteel flower painting into an elemental color code. "Part of One Year (June/July)" results from two years of observing the flowers of a single hydrangea bush. Month after month as the flower heads formed, bloomed, withered, and finally collapsed, she has recorded the colors in small marks on a gridded ground—like a scrivener marking down gains and losses in a ledger book day after day. Bergman reduces the painter's entire repertoire to a single mark. She rejects traditional painterly expressiveness, and instead repeats the same motion over 22,000 times to create the painting. When complete it has no defined top or bottom. Its placement becomes our choice. Traditional flower painting has been transformed into a record of time and the artist's observation of the inevitable decay and collapse of beauty. But true to Georges Bataille, Bergman's observation of collapse and her simultaneous rejection of expressiveness produces a beauty that is radically new—serene, compelling, and moribund.

In contrast to Kiresuk's and Bergman's processes, Shane Huffman's cannot be contained within a rectangle. Instead, we feel as if we are seeing raw, unfinished works. His pieces explode from the image onto the surrounding paper and the walls. Photographic images are amplified with drawings, notes, and arrows. Neither can individual works be clearly delimited, but instead flow from one into the next as they are taped or pinned to the wall. The work appears as a snapshot of an artistic moment rather than as a concluded artistic product. But even that momentary stillness of the gallery installation is disrupted as people moving through the gallery eclipse projected images. In the same manner, the images transmute. On first impression the work is filled with heavenly bodies—phases of the moon, the night sky filled with stars, planets captured by a NASA camera ready for the next edition of National Geographic. But in reality they are bits of cement on exposed photo paper or photographs of floor or dirt. Great sweeping galaxies are simultaneously particular spots or places where personal pain, stimuli, or memories fester. They are embarrassing moments of childhood or interactions with family or intimates. For Huffman, there is no separation between the low and the high, the beautiful and the mundane.

The two sculptors in the exhibition, Frances Whitehead and Jocelyn Nevel, radically shift the context in which we perceive notions of beauty from popular culture.

Frances Whitehead's installation raises the specter of perversity inherent in some forms commonly thought to be beautiful—the mounted butterfly. She has juxtaposed a case of exotic moths with the instrument, the setting board, that was used to preserve them. Whitehead twists that juxtaposition by scaling the setting board to human size. We see the final torture instrument from the insect's perspective. The viewer becomes the insect—recalling the narrator in Eliot's *J. Alfred Prufrock* contemplating his future: "When I am pinned and wiggling on the wall, how shall I spit out all the butt ends of my days and ways?" Whitehead rhetorically asks the question, "Would we be as willing to pin, preserve, and enjoy these creatures if the members of the order of Lepidoptera were comparable to ourselves?" Our response may be banner-waving animal rights fervor or wry bemusement with such political stances. Our reaction may also be layered with awe at the scientific process of collecting and categorizing or even the sadomasochistic eroticism of being strapped and pinned to such a bed.



The fifth artist, Jocelyn Nevel, challenges our notions of beauty by transforming the underpinnings of feminine allure—brassieres and pantyhose. In the case of "Bras", the common foundation of female form, the brassieres become a flattened, lumpy, that is, formless, rug. Likewise the most intimate parts of panty hose are stretched and displayed like stained-glass windows in the series "Crotches." Nevel collapses and stretches and, in the process, warps our erotic associations with the original materials. We are confronted with a vista of wrinkled breasts at our feet or crotches larger than our heads hanging daintily in quilting hoops. These latter works also resonate with the social and racial issues of commercial culture's definition of beautiful skin and skin tone. As with Whitehead, Nevel takes commonplace forms of beauty and prods us into discomfort at the same time as she creates witty, engaging objects we can enjoy.

None of the five artists goes to the excesses or extremes that Georges Bataille craves in his exhortations for "rupturing beauty," but all illustrate the richness and variety that contemporary artists find when challenging and deconstructing that traditional tenet of art—form.

Chuck Thurow and Patricia Swanson, Curators
January, 2002

The curators would like to recommend, as well as recognize their indebtedness to, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss' *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

Artist's Biographies

Marie Krane Bergman received a BA in philosophy from Northwestern University and, in 2002, an MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Bergman's luminous paintings represent her practice of looking at one flower over a long period and recording the color she perceives as the flower deteriorates. Each painting consists of thousands of repetitive marks and addresses questions about the passage of time and other ephemeral qualities of life. In addition to her painting practice, Bergman operates The Showroom in Chicago and explores alternative modes of art production and presentation, often in collaboration with others. Her work has been exhibited in Chicago, Colorado and Amsterdam.

Shane Huffman, trained as a photographer, is a multimedia artist whose work reveals his fascination with astronomy and the laws of physics. He invests these scientific concepts with personal memories and intimate associations. In the last year, Huffman's work has been shown in two Chicago galleries. He received a BFA from John Herron School of Art in Indianapolis and will complete his MFA at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2002.

Painter **Michael Kiresuk** concerns himself with purely material explorations and the paradoxical move into illusion. Using many layers of pigment to achieve a monochrome, Kiresuk creates work that is both perceptible and elusive. His BFA in painting is from the University of Minnesota and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Jocelyn Nevel is a photographer and sculptor whose works have been shown throughout the country. Using the material of everyday life, such as clothing, hair, tea bags and dryer lint, she creates works of unusual beauty and tactility. Nevel took her BFA at Ohio State and earned her MFA at Columbia College Chicago. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

A sculptor, printmaker, and installation artist, **Frances Whitehead**'s work has been exhibited internationally. Bringing the issues and images of science to the world of art, the artist focuses our attention on the intricacy, beauty and utility of unseen objects. The recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Fellowship Award, Whitehead has also received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation, among others. She is Professor of Sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Director there of the School's Sculptural Practices Initiative.

The Hyde Park Art Center is a non-for-profit organization that presents innovative exhibitions—primarily work by Chicago-area artists—and educational programs in the visual arts for children and adults of diverse backgrounds. The Center is funded in part by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; the Illinois FIRST Fund; The National Endowment for the Arts; the Sara Lee Foundation; the Polk Bros. Foundation; WPWR-TV Channel 50 Foundation; the Orbit Fund; the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; Arie & Ida Crown Memorial; Kraft Foods North America, Inc., part of the Philip Morris Family of Companies; Regent Park by the Clinton Companies and the generosity of its members and individual donors.

Acknowledgements

The Hyde Park Art Center would like to thank the following individuals and institutions for their contributions to *Rupturing Beauty*.

The Field Museum of Natural History:

Division of Insects,
Lepidoptera

Paul Z. Goldstein, Ph.D.,
Assistant Curator of Insects

The Oriental Institute:

Joe Scott, Installation Coordinator

The University of Chicago:

Divinity School

The Religion and Literature Congress

The Religion and the Arts Club

Françoise Meltzer, Professor

Amy Hollywood, Visiting Associate
Professor

Scott Chambers

Eric Elstain

Christine Hume

Devin Johnston

Christopher Pusateri

Lisa Samuels