

Christine Tarkowski

By [Susan Snodgrass](#)  September 11, 2010 12:11pm



Christine Tarkowski set out to construct her own system of belief in “Last Things Will Be First and First Things Will Be Last,” the 42-year-old’s largest, most ambitious exhibition to date. Prompted by an encounter with an Amish woman whose attempts to convert the artist to Christianity failed, Tarkowski began her quest to understand the steadfast doctrines that guide those who have faith. That search led to the works on view—encompassing installation, sculpture, prints and an audio recording—which are connected by themes of journey, conquest and salvation.

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Whatever her subject, Tarkowski often incorporates print technologies from textiles and the decorative arts with archetypal structures to expose the sociopolitical dimensions of her subjects. Commanding the first gallery was a massive cardboard-and-bamboo version of the mast and sail of an old whaling ship. Rising 24 feet, the mast took the form of a giant vertical double helix that was broken midway and bent at an angle. A cloth curtain that covered the back wall was screenprinted with images of the interior of the Pantheon’s dome and a small bridge near the San Diego-Tijuana border. Collectively called *The Things Which So Nearly Concern Our Temporal Salvation* (2010; the title is a quote from colonial statesman Patrick Henry), these elements address the wreckage left in the wake of Western expansion.

Issues of imperialism imbue other works that draw connections between religious faith and the search for fuel sources. Situated in the second room, *Imitatio Dei* (2006), comprising a portion of a wood-and-concrete geodesic dome and a wooden bench, served as a makeshift cathedral. The geodesic dome recurs throughout Tarkowski’s work, often used, as here, as a symbol of failed utopia. Embedded in the structure are shards of colored glass and a network of energy-saving lightbulbs offering “illumination.” On a nearby turntable, a punk-gospel hymn Tarkowski created with musician Jon Langford spun environmental and evangelical messages (“whale oil/slave ships/burning martyrs”), whose protests and warnings of damnation were echoed in a series of broadsheets that papered the gallery walls.

Works in the final room were united by their use of various circular motifs, including nine photoetchings depicting orbiting satellites, a racetrack, Stonehenge and a spiral staircase, as well as *Methods of Egress* (2008), several small cast-iron parking garages based on the double-helix form employed in the ship piece. Like Borges’s labyrinth, Tarkowski’s double helix denotes a symbolic form of passage. She does not offer transcendence or definitive answers, but rather delivers one firmly back where one began.

Photo: View of Christine Tarkowski’s installation The Things Which So Nearly Concern Our Temporal Salvation, 2010, screenprint on cardboard, bamboo, hardware and rope; at the [Chicago Cultural Center](#).