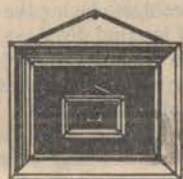


Ludicrous Leonardo

CHARLES Le Brun, the chief painter of Louis XIV, was once commissioned to paint a *Descent of the Holy Spirit* for M. Olier, the prior of Saint Sulpice. He had to work fast, for M. Olier was very ill and wanted to see the picture before he died. As soon as it was finished, Le Brun brought the painting to the old man's room. M. Olier, it is said, stared at the picture intently, becoming totally absorbed in the subject, until he seemed to be in a kind of ecstasy; and in this state he passed away.

None of the pictures in this year's Blake Prize, unfortunately, is likely to induce any such transcendent experience in visitors to the Blaxland Gallery.



GALLERIES

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

The great narrative subjects of Christianity are in the minority, and are rarely handled with conviction. Eric Smith, the winner of many Blake Prizes, has chosen the most terrible episode of Christ's life, the Crucifixion, and of that episode the most terrible moment, the Last Words. But his three heavy, rigid forms are flat and wooden and the whole image, which aspires to stark expressiveness, remains irredeemably inert.

The Last Supper inevitably evokes poor old Leonardo, who is used by Stephen Kaldor in a dreadful painting called (even more dreadfully) *Suddenly Last Supper*. A group of Central American guerillas lounges around outside a building of which one wall has been destroyed, revealing the famous fresco inside. Still more ludicrous is Susan Dorothea White's *The First Supper*, in which all the figures of Leonardo's composition have been replaced by women of various ages and races, with an Aboriginal woman in the place of Christ. How this excruciating piece of kitsch could even have been hung is a mystery.

For thought and for economy of expression, Fiona Hall's two scenes from Dante stand out. They are assemblages of cut-out photographs, painted paper, sardine cans, barbed wire and other materials, all arranged



Lisa Floistad's winning entry entitled *This sign is a hidden treasure which desires to be known*.

in a shallow frieze, and further flattened by being photographed. And yet in these images, which do not allude to a pictorial third dimension, the real third dimension of the materials survives, adding a sensuous animation to the narrative in much the same way that Dante's notations of human experience animate his allegorical purpose.

With this exception, however, it seems that the great theological subjects have become impossible to paint today. This is not entirely surprising if we look at the history of the genre. Religious

painting has moved steadily from the objective portrayal of sacred history to the subjective representation of religious feeling. In the Middle Ages, sculptures, mosaics and paintings told the biblical stories in simple, economical language. With the Franciscan movement, and a new emphasis on the personal experience of God, came the tendency to think of Christ, Mary and other figures as human beings. The Renaissance concern for the humanity of religious stories established a balance between the picture as objective

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narration, on the one hand, and as aid to meditation on the other. The baroque emphasis on the miraculous and on the paradoxes of grace tipped the scales towards the picture as occasion of religious experience. And when, after the scepticism of the 18th century, the spiritual returned with the Romantic divinisation of nature, the true subject of religious art (with artists such as Friedrich) became the sense of wonder before the Creation.

This also meant that the "religious" in a specifically Christian sense was rapidly becoming the "spiritual" in a generic sense. And this was a development that continued with 20th-century painters such as Kandinsky or Klee, in their very different ways. The logical conclusion of this process was the work of Rothko, which evokes the pure subjective state of religious or spiritual feeling.

But it is not this sensibility, either, that we find in the most successful works in the exhibition. In a time obsessed with signs and artefacts, it is not surprising to find that the focus of the spiritual is found in iconic objects. Thus Lisa Floistad's winning entry is a large cross in three panels, covered in gold leaf and spattered with brilliant red — the paradoxical conjunction of fresh blood and the timeless reliquary. That the focus of the spiritual is not the subjective experience but the mysterious object is made clear by her title: *This sign is a hidden treasure which desires to be known*.

Similarly, Janet Laurence's *Sufferance, Symmetry and the Blinded Dream* is an iconic form which exists not only as image but as a composition of textures and materials. The central cross motif is surrounded above and below by bundles of twigs that suggest the crown of thorns and the flagellation, but which also turn the cross into an eye; the eye of God, perhaps, but also the way the icon looks at us "desiring to be known". The eye floats in a background that could be read as clouds, but which the dribbles of pigment remind us is also made of paint.

The spiritual sensibility of these works is reminiscent of Le Groumellec, with his crosses and dolmens, or Aleks Danko's work at Watters' earlier this year. These artists are concerned neither with the representation of a transcendent reality, nor with the evocation of the subjective experience of the spiritual, but with the *sign* as crystallisation of human spiritual aspiration. The object of spiritual experience is therefore the sign of spiritual desire; which is not without a danger of solipsism.