

DOMINUS VOBISCUM *The Lord Be With You*

The sixth and final exhibition in the series *Journey of Light: Art, Creativity and the Sacred* celebrating 2000 years of Christianity. Global Arts Link, Ipswich.

After the clutter and bric-a-brac of the entry spaces at Global Arts Link, Ipswich, *Dominus Vobiscum* stuns the visitor with a quiet, austere and profoundly spiritual experience. On the stage of what used to be the Town Hall, in a corner which has been used throughout 2000 for the *Journey of Light* exhibitions, there are two contemporary works, *Soak* by Sebastian Di Mauro and *In Ecstasy* by Thomas Justice.

At first sight, Di Mauro and Justice are very different artists. Sebastian works with a limited range of inanimate objects to create installations of metaphysical and cosmic significance. Thomas takes images of the human body and through the flesh uncovers the soul; the physical lays bare the spiritual. In this case, the work of these two artists together creates a sacred space as demanding and engaging as any candle-lit medieval shrine.

Thomas Justice references Bernini's famous sculpture of the Ecstasy of St Teresa. He has prepared twelve large images, photographic stills taken from video, which he has printed in lush black and white onto drafting film. The fragile, semi-transparent sheets are simply pinned to the dark gallery wall. Patterns of watered silk overlay the magnified pointillism of the television screen.

The sensuous images evoke questions. How can you tell if this is the gasp of orgasm or the swoon of mystical rapture? What is the difference anyway for, in the human being, flesh and spirit are seamlessly interwoven? So Thomas tackles a perennial problem in Western theology and rejects a dualism in human nature. This allows him to affirm the body as a window to the soul. The physical and the spiritual collide. In his notes on the work, he quotes St Teresa upon whose ecstasy he is reflecting: *We are not angels but have bodies... The soul's bliss and repose is so great that even the body shares in its joy and delight...*

The lighting in the space is kept at a very low level, so that it appears as if both works are lit by the suspended lights in Sebastian Di Mauro's *Soak*. Using the floor space in front of *In Ecstasy*, Sebastian has set twenty enamel basins in a pointed oval. Each bowl contains olive oil and over each hangs a light bulb suspended on black flex. The bulbs not only make the oil glow with circles of refracted light, but are reflected in the surface of the polished floor. The vertical lines of the flex define a cylindrical space and form a kind of curtain. The work is accompanied by a sound track of washing.

Decoding the work reveals layers of meaning to do with ritual and the persistence of symbolism in religious ceremony. The twenty basins represent twenty centuries of Christian culture. The arrangement of the oil and the light suggest the oil lamps which devotees place at sacred shrines. Each element brings myriad associations in both family and church contexts: olive oil burns to give light and warmth, anoints and moisturises, cleanses and nourishes, and evokes a multicultural society; the enamel basins and the sound of water call to mind domestic ablutions and rituals of baptism and purification; the electric light evokes not only the universal theme of light and darkness but also energy, power and transformation; the shape of the pointed oval combines the continuity of the circle (symbol of eternity) with connotations of a boat and journey, the vagina and rebirth; the transparent curtain of flex speaks of perception and the revelation of mystery. Contemplation of *Soak* opens up a complex web of associations where personal and communal, domestic and religious meanings intersect.

Both works, each in its own way, affirm the fundamental sacramental principle that the Spirit and spiritual insight is mediated through the physical world, whether our own bodies or the objects that are familiar to us. *Soak* and *In Ecstasy* show how all human life and experience is caught up in God's good creation. The icons of the mystics gaze upon the holy circle of light, and the votive lamps of twenty centuries venerate the God-given gift of Ecstasy.

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700 words

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