

ex.cat.

An exhibition about Catholicism
Curated by **CHRISTINE MORROW**
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4-23 September 1998

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CURATOR
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ARTISTS

Dauida Allen

Rachel Apelt

Thierry Auriac

Gloria Beckett

Leonard Brown

Eugene Carchesio

Donna Confetti

Marcel Debien

Sebastian Di Mauro

Judith Floyd

Susie Hansen

John Harris

Thomas Justice

Brona Keenan

Loani Lee

Bernadette Mollison

Phyllis Paterson

Colin Reaney

Raquel Redmond

Michael Reilly

Luke Roberts

Madonna Staunton

Christine Turner

Thomas Vale-Slattery

ESSAYS

Christine Morrow

Lynne Seear

Beth Jackson

ESSAYS

ex. cat.

ex. cat. is an exhibition featuring works by twenty-four Queensland artists. Each of the works is about Catholicism or can be understood in light of knowledge that the artist comes from a Catholic background. In a sense, this is a very appropriate period in time to present an exhibition which is religious in theme. It is typically thought that religion and spirituality become popular subjects in a *fin-de-siecle* period because this is the historical era associated with a kind of personal and societal stock-taking - a time for reflecting on recent history, for examining the achievements and mistakes of the previous century, and considering and evaluating our present situation. Furthermore, as we near the final year of the millennium we approach a date of particular religious significance for Christians, as the year 2000 represents the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ.

The exhibition includes work not only which engages theological ideas but which reflect as a broad a conception of Catholicism as possible. The concern of this exhibition is not only with Catholicism as a belief system or a group of doctrines, but also as a community of shared knowledge, ritual, and experience and a common group identity. The works are extremely diverse. Some engage with the notion of spirituality, or specific metaphysical propositions. Others investigate motifs or themes in religion or engage with institutional aspects of the church. Nearly none of the work in the show purports to be religious art in the sense that its primary aim is to aid the viewer's understanding or comprehension of religious truths. An exception, however, would be the gospel text works of Thomas Justice which are for liturgical purposes.

It would be a mistake to suggest that all of the works in this exhibition are overtly, primarily and self-consciously "Catholic" (whatever that might mean). Many of the works which feature in this exhibition are about a number of other concerns, beyond those relating to Catholicism and have previously been exhibited in very different contexts to that of this show. Their inclusion here in the show will by necessity emphasise certain meanings in the work (connected with religion, for example) at the expense of other meanings of theirs which might achieve a freer play in a different exhibition.

Perhaps the most perverse aspect of the exhibition is that it brings together the works of artists whose

practices differ so greatly from one another. For one artist, Michael Reilly, this will be a first exhibition, while other artists in the show have exhibited regularly for decades. Incidentally, the decision to include excerpts from the artists' *curricula vitae* in the catalogue was made not to emphasise the differences in experience between the artists but to give some background for their work. This is very important in the case of artists such as Bernadette Mollison and Thomas Justice whose work is not designed for the insides of galleries and whose practices are not defined by the pursuit of the same expected career trajectory as that of some of the other artists.

Works by Thomas Vale-Slattery and Brona Keenan refer to the traditions or institutions of sainthood and martyrdom in Catholicism. Vale-Slattery's small works present painted narratives which bring together various (improbable) tableaux of saints and martyrs. These historical and mythical figures are treated as stock theatrical roles which are available to be adopted or even manipulated at will. In his use of these, Vale-Slattery refers to the common heritage of stories, histories and myths which is the legacy of his background in Catholicism. Brona Keenan's references are imbued with deadpan humour. Their sense of comedy relies on human errors, foibles or discrepancies in stories of sainthood and martyrdom, which firmly anchors them in the realm of the human rather than the divine. When Keenan rhetorically asks "What do you pray to the patron saint of artillery?" and then surmises that it can be only one of two things, either "Please don't hit" or "Please don't miss" we find ourselves at an impasse that is less to do with divine power than human frailty.

A binary opposition between the human and the sacred is also at work in the two gospel text pieces by Thomas Justice. By using photographs of the male torso, Justice reinstates a bodily presence for Christ, at the same time referring to the history of homoeroticism in portrayals of Christ and some of the saints in the West. Through the distance that photomechanical reproduction sets up between the viewer and what is represented (the male figure), the work is able to give play to a sense of the sacred or divine. The crookedness and awkwardness of the composition of each panel communicates some of the vulnerability and awkwardness that must be present when, for example, Christ asks "Do you love me Peter?" as the Gospel records. However, at the same time, this very crookedness, photomechanical blurriness and

awkwardness of the manner in which these works are rendered is what also makes the work evoke cheap and grubby mass-produced images (at the very extreme of which lies cheap porn and gutter press). Additionally, the ambiguity of the texts makes us think that they could be referring to human relationships, suggesting a concern with both sacred and profane love. The strength and complexity of this work is that the visual devices which it uses allows it to communicate the sacred, yet simultaneously keep it hovering on the edge of sacrilege.

Luke Roberts' work which regularly uses the symbols of Christianity and more specifically Catholicism is in part motivated out of a concern that the West has lost belief in its own central myths. Roberts' work constantly redeems and or reinvests these central Christian stories. His persona of Pope Alice engages serious theological ideas together with humour in order to reflect on some of the things which are usually left out of depictions of the divine in the Christian church, specifically the feminine or a sense of balance between the feminine and masculine elements in religious figures. It is for this reason that the corpse and the child depicted in the photographs based on the Pietà and the Madonna and Child are resolutely feminine. In the figure of Pope Alice, Roberts presents a kind of inversion of the patriarchy which underpins Catholicism. Additionally, in his photograph depicting Charlie, Roberts questions the division and anguish caused by the church by its condemnation of homosexuality and uncovers the contradiction of a church which promotes 'family values' yet by its exclusion of homosexuals makes it impossible to achieve family unity.

Michael Reilly's drawings of *Angels* and *Lost Souls* attempt to express two extreme moral positions which humans can strive toward through their decisions and actions. In this work, angels can be seen as exemplars of human perfection while the lost souls as symbols of utter human wretchedness. Within these two tendencies, each individual angel or lost soul communicates an individual problem or series of ideas. These drawings are very much based on a contradiction. As images of moral positions or patterns for those who are saved and damned, they communicate grand narratives concerning good and evil which structure human life, yet as portraits, they convey the personal, particular and contingent aspects of individuals, with all their myriad differences. They do not attempt to portray good and evil in black-and-white terms, for as the artist himself points out, although the

lost souls are darker in tone than the angels, they are still full of colour and life, and glimpses of beauty.

Leonard Brown's painting *Seven Hills* makes a connection between the two places of Brisbane and Rome. The work incorporates memory and local history, referring as it does to the suburb in Brisbane where his sister and brother-in law lived. The painting makes symbolic use of numbers. The number of hills portrayed (seven) corresponds with the number of lights of the body (chakra) and also with the seven lights which burn on an Orthodox altar. Additionally, there are trinitarian groupings in the way that the hills are composed in the painting. The poem which accompanies the painting and forms part of its title suggests that the work is about the problems of translation and interpretation. In its claim that what a person seeks can be found within rather than in some external place (Rome) the poem, and hence the work, refers to the mystical state.

Sebastian Di Mauro's work *Nine Books of Silence* can be seen in the context of spirituality and mysticism. In many of Di Mauro's works, the book often refers to alchemists texts, but in this piece, it may equally refer to a holy text. The book could contain sacred and/or arcane knowledge. The reference to silence in the title suggests contemplative religion amongst other things. Silence is often connected to mysticism because it is connected with meditation and prayer and provides a kind of threshold for a spiritual transcendence.

Some of the artists in the exhibition whose work expresses metaphysical concerns include John Harris, Eugene Carchesio, Marcel Debien and Phyllis Paterson. Harris' piece *The Parable of Experience* reflects on the inability of language to communicate actual experience and touches on the notion of entertaining doubt. By recreating a pair of punctuation brackets in neon tubing, Harris' work attempts to communicate a sense of the ineffable while aware that it is only possible to do so through indirect representation. In viewing the work, it makes no sense to look at the individual brackets. We can only look between them, as it were, into a void. Debien's, Paterson's and Carchesio's works all make use of disruptions to the expected use of Western perspective in order to introduce into the picture plane a foreign element that is spatially impossible and can signify the non-physical realm co-existing with the physical one. Carchesio's drawings bring together depictions of angels without heads and geometric figures. The angel without a head may be seen as representing spirit (minus what the

head represents, namely, personality/intellect/ego) while the geometric form may be seen as representing matter (although at the same time geometry is, of course, an abstract idea). These are two created objects or beings from different realms but they are forced into a relationship with one another that seems impossible. Considered together, the series of images seem to be about a metaphysical puzzle surrounding concept/matter/body/spirit. Debien's oil painting also engages ideas of the metaphysical. With its row of shells depicted hovering above and in front of the landscape, it features the natural and supernatural together in the same space. Some kind of material transformation even seems to be taking place in the image. The painting may be seen to represent the spiritual co-existing with the material. In its use of elements entirely from the natural world it perhaps ushers in an element of pantheism also, and a reference to the spirituality that adherents of the romantic movement found in the natural world - the idea that God can be seen in the beauty or marvel of nature and creation. In *To See at Night*, Patterson has created a painting which operates like an apparition or mirage. The arm is rendered so that it seems to be appearing or disappearing and the razor blade beside it is simply hovering in space. Because it places a sharp instrument in counterpoint with an image of human flesh, the work seems to refer to suicide or a latent threat of some other kind of physical harm. The work involves a complex interplay between notions of mortality/immortality, a belief in independent human action versus fatalism, temporality and immateriality. In its deliberate reference to the stigmata, the painting connects Christ's suffering with human suffering and reflects on the vulnerability and mortality of human flesh.

Other works in the exhibition which refer to suffering and death are those of Davida Allen, Judith Floyd, Christine Turner and Donna Confetti. Allen's two paintings *My Father is Dead* and *Death of My Father with Halo* from her much larger series *The Death of My Father* are works which express her grief at the death of her father in the early 1980s. In viewing these paintings, one is struck by the inadequacy of the usual rituals of mourning and the suggestion that it was perhaps only by working through these disturbing images that the artist was able to properly mourn her father's death. In the sketchbook which Allen published containing a series of drawings also relating to the death of her father, she portrayed the death not as a single cataclysmic event but as a gradual and transformative process made up of a sequence of steps, variously por-

traying the man in his chair and in the coffin, inside and outside the coffin, as a doubled figure - both alive and dead at the same time, as a dead figure among living ones, with his arms out at right angles from his body suggesting the image of the crucifixion. The drawings in the sketchbook also situates his death within the continuation of life around the event, many featuring drawings of babies, referring to the fact that the artist was pregnant while her father was dying. Turner's work, *Toybox*, also makes a connection between death and continued life. It resembles an altar, a reliquary and also a sarcophagus. The work seems to make reference to that fact that the community of the church is composed of both the living and the dead and that the continuing tradition arises from and is built on its historical roots. The piece is literally a toybox because of the way in which it operates as a receptacle for plastic dolls parts, but these also represent human bones and skeletons which the box can alternatively house or stand on top of. The fact that these are piled on the floor underneath the box seems to refer to the fact that the superstructure of the box is built up on this dead matter, these human remains. Judith Floyd's work *Unless the Grain of Wheat Dies..* also situates death within a cycle of transformation, rebirth and transcendence. In the assemblage, Floyd's use of the motif of the red ribbon, symbolising World AIDS Day can be seen as a kind of accusation, pointing to the compassionless stance which the Church has taken in effectively ignoring the phenomenon of Aids and excluding homosexuals from its congregation. But the incorporation into this work of references to the beauty and transcendence which exists in death, suggests that the work is a hopeful one which is able to see positive outcomes of death and suffering. Additionally, her work is based on the notion that the production of art, as a creative act, is essentially life-giving and life-affirming. Donna Confetti's series of jewellery assemblages is based on 'Mother' brooches on which she has removed or obscured the letter 'm' so that they now read 'other'. This work refers to the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic church and the way in which it colours our conception of the (ordinary) mother. Confetti's work rejects the sentimental view of motherhood propagated by Victorian 'Mother' brooches and by much of the way in which the Madonna is portrayed within the church. Arguably, the two most powerful images of Mary in the Catholic Church's iconography are the Madonna and Child, and the Pieta. The image of the Pieta, or the sorrowing mother, can operate as uni-

versal image relating to grief, and forms the precursor for these works of Confetti's which engage notions of what it means to be a mother, and the way this is affected by the death of a child. With the death of her only son, Confetti's role as a mother has been fundamentally changed, or as this work suggests by turning the 'mother' into something 'other', negated or overturned.

The meal that makes up the Mass is the theme of works by Bernadette Mollison, Colin Reaney and Susie Hansen. The installation Reaney has set up in the gallery, *Deciphering Corporal Space*, presents what is both an altar and a table featuring a still-life arrangement. The 'corporal' of its title or more correctly, the *corporale pallium* is the white linen cloth on which the bread and wine are placed during the Eucharist of the Mass. Reaney traces his now regular use of starched linen in his art work to his experience of using it as an altar boy, where during the course of the Mass, what begins as crisply starched cloth becomes crumpled and used by the end of the service. In his work, a connection is made between the elements which have symbolic meanings both within artistic and religious contexts. The apple is both the apple from the Garden of Eden, and one of Cezanne's apples; the paintings are like tablets which bear inscriptions; the linen refers to the altar, but also to the drapery of classical sculpture. In Mollison's work, the mass-produced host is replaced on the table by paintings on breadboards of hands absorbed in different types of labour which includes both 'women's work' and prayer. It replaces a sense of passive participation in the Mass with community preparation of a shared meal. It recreates not the altar but the offertory table which is round, making equals of those who approach it. Hansen's ceramic piece also uses the symbol of the meal as a metaphor for sharing and community. Her *Mother's Best Tea Service* is at one and the same time a group of tea cups but also chalices. Hansen's work links the institutional and highly symbolic ritual of the Mass to an everyday ritual - that of preparing and sharing a meal between ordinary people. The work makes the connection between the two as both serving to bind family and community and both having symbolic and ritual value.

Susie Hansen and Raquel Redmond's works both reflect on the theme of the cult of the Mother in the Catholic church. In *Mother's Best Tea Service* and in the other work of Hansen's which is included in this exhibition, *Above and Beyond*, the artist investigates the way in which the portrayal of the Virgin Mary in the

Catholic church colours our conception of the ordinary mother and even acts as a model for motherhood. *Above and Beyond* is a ceramic "Madonna and child" sculpture. In it, the more conventional static and benign image of a woman holding an infant has been transformed into an image of a struggle. The child is on the woman's shoulders and appears like a monster or an ogre, battling with the woman and sapping her strength. This work emphasises the view of motherhood as being a mental and physical struggle, and not the blissful passive state that is sometimes portrayed in images of the Madonna and infant Christ. Redmond's print, *Our Mother* replaces the reference to 'Father' in the Lord's Prayer with that of 'Mother'. In the series of works that this image comes from, Redmond investigates the way in which woman is portrayed in the Catholic church as the figure of Eve (who has parallels with the mythical Pandora and also the Magdalen) and thus as the perpetrator of a betrayal or as the figure of the Virgin Mary (who redeems Eve). Redmond's image disrupts some of the usual conventions of representing the mother in the Catholic church, conflating as it does the figure of an ordinary woman (wearing curlers) with God and also associating power with the figure of the Mother.

Madonna Staunton's collage work, *Vocation* relates the way that religion helped to define women's roles in the past to the binary opposition between representations of the Madonna and the Magdalen. The word 'vocation' in the title refers obviously with a career or lifestyle path, an option or plan around which a life can be modelled or organised. The work apron which makes up the background for the assemblage is straightforward, no nonsense and sober. Superimposed on it is two copies of a prayer book. Together these elements suggest hard work, virtue, and the moral path. But emerging from the bottom is a pair of black stockings. The work is made up of the domestic and virtuous but also the sexual. In this case, the apron and stockings suggest two ways of viewing a woman's role. On the one hand is the mother and wife wearing the apron, on the other is the overtly sexualised woman. The work seems to engage with the dichotomy of Madonna/ Magdalen or virgin/whore which is one of the most powerful binary oppositions to come out of Catholicism historical representation of women.

Some works which make overt use of political commentary include those of Rachel Apelt, Thierry Auriac, Gloria Beckett and Thomas Justice. In *Legion of Mary*, Justice uses humour to expose the inherently conser-

vative and conformist nature of groups within the Church by portraying an army of Marys all conforming in a clone-like manner. Thierry Auriac's work involves a commentary on the political uses which organised religion can be put. The artist says of the work *Vietnam / The Irony of the Christmas Truce* that it describes the event which made him question his own faith as a young man while living in France. A ceasefire was called by the US on Christmas day during one year of the Vietnam War. The following day, Boxing Day, saw the Americans return to dropping bombs. This seemingly arbitrary and token decision to hold off from bombing during Christmas Day was seen by Auriac as hypocrisy. It appeared to be motivated more by the need of the decision-makers to assuage their own conscience rather than any real sense of compassion toward the enemy.

Gloria Beckett's painting *Trapped* is based on her experience growing up in a mission at Cherbourg. Beckett explains that the Catholic Church was one of a group of organisations which operated missions there. Others included the Government, the Salvation Army and the Anglican Church, which operated the mission where Beckett and her sister grew up. The Catholic Church is one of the organisations which has since admitted its responsibility for the phenomenon of the Stolen Generation and apologised for its role in raising Aboriginal children at missions. The painting, *Trapped*, is structured to communicate a sense of physical and psychological entrapment that living at the mission represented. It depicts the two beds which Beckett and her sister slept in. Surrounding these is a diagrammatical painting of the floor plan of the dormitory which depicts it as a box or cage-like structure. A depiction of a snake - the totem for Gloria and her sister - encircles all the elements in the centre of the painting. The depiction of the snake as protector and of the hand print as the signature of Aboriginality suggests that the suppression of Beckett's traditional spirituality was not complete.

Miraculous Sheet by Rachel Apelt is an installation which combines a painting of the Virgin Mary over a large stain on a bed sheet. The way that the image appears on the sheet makes the work seem as if it is recreating a religious apparition. The fact that the sheet is worn and darned gives it the connotations of a holy relic that has been touched by many. By representing Mary on the sheet with its old faded stain, the artist is associating her with the physicality of the body and its residual traces, with weariness and with suffering. Coupled with the fact that the sacred heart which

Apelt has painted on the pillow has fallopian tubes, this serves to humanise the Madonna, crack open patriarchal images of the divine and empower the abject feminine.

Loani Lee's piece *Mea Culpa* is an installation which spatially recreates aspects of the confessional. The work introduces nostalgia through its appeal to our sense of smell. Facing into a corner as it does, it suggests an enclosed and/or claustrophobic feeling and recreates in the physical space a suggestion of an oppressive mental state. The other work which Lee presents in this exhibition is *Lavendered*. Its motif acts only as an indistinct trace of the photograph it originates from. The original source image was a snapshot Lee took of the contents of an open linen cupboard at the monastery at New Norcia in Western Australia, which Lee claims has been implicated in allegations of the abuse of children. The smell of lavender accompanies the image. Lavender is traditionally associated with laundering and is often used on linen to mask a smell. In fact our word to "launder" is a corrupt spelling of the word to "lavender". In one sense of the word, to lavender or launder means to make something seemly (as in the expression 'money laundering'). The linen refers to washing and cleansing but also is something that is hidden away (in the cupboard, behind close doors). Hence the work is about a cover-up. It comments on the Church's role in failing to combat child abuse by some of its members. In considering *Mea Culpa*, together with Loani's other work *Lavendered*, we may be tempted to compare personal guilt and institutional guilt.

The fact that all of these artists have produced works which engage with various ideas relating to Catholicism, and more importantly, that they have been willing to participate in an exhibition which is expressly focused on this subject suggests that, regardless of whether they are currently practising Catholics, have lapsed or have left the Church as a more deliberate choice, all have been motivated to continue or renew a dialogue with, or instigate a fresh examination of, some of the implications or current relevance to them of their experience of Catholicism.

Christine Morrow

the problem of suffering:

notes from a practising Catholic

My father is going straight to Hell. Sister Angela says so. He is an unbeliever and there is no hope for him.

I am writing this essay on a laptop in my son's hospital room. He is six years old, and he is dying. I know this place well. In another room just down the hall, almost five years ago, I held my little girl as she took one long, last breath.

In the other part of my life, outside these walls, I deal with art and its systems. One of the tricks I use to go on living is to persuade myself (and it often takes some persuading) that the work I do is significant. Occasionally, I don't have to search too far.

Look at Holbein's *Dead Christ*. He's dead all right. No doubt about it. And it wasn't an easy death. His suffering and defeat are recorded in every mottled, post-agonal inch of flesh. Holbein seals the bright promise of the resurrection out of the tomb. What courage it must have taken, to picture Christ in this way, when he is at the end, when there is nothing left to make beautiful and when there is nothing recognisable except existential nakedness. The mystery of the enfleshing of Christ is incontrovertible in this image of absolute decay. Belief is forced to take aim at the lower depths.

I was set up for this response by a resolutely Catholic childhood, full of music and art (however vulgar) that told tales of a sacramental universe. Marina Warner calls it 'the old magic' and even now it exerts its pull. How strange then that I am less comforted by faith than by art. Not long after the death of my daughter, I asked the priest who buried her, and whom I have known for thirty years, to say something, anything, that would stem my rising doubt. "Well", he offered, "if she's not in Heaven, then where the Hell is she?" Granted, a mother's new grief is unassuageable. But I would still rather pin my hopes on Holbein and his unflinching, loving touch.

Each Monday morning the Parish Priest comes trawling through the classrooms, looking for sinners. I'm convinced he can see right into my black heart.

The disease which killed my daughter, and which will also take my son from me, was probably inherited, along with the colour of their eyes, and their stubborn-

ness, from me. Needless to say, it is very humbling to know that inherent in one's DNA is something which nature does not want reproduced. I had been an anomaly (the medical term is 'sport') at St Joseph's Primary School as well-an only child, in a demographic made up of large Italian and Irish clans. My mother invented horrible stories of childbed torture and subsequent barrenness to conceal the fact that she was using birth control. But I'm sure Sister Angela knew.

Mary, virgin and mother - she was supposed to be my model of womanhood. We sang about her, celebrated the biological milestones of her life, invoked her intercession in our own. ("Please, Holy Mother, don't let me be pregnant.") What an impossible touchstone - motherhood and sexlessness. And yet, something in this narrative called forth the *Pietà* from stone.

Pietà. Pity. Piety. Compassion. The root of all these words is the Latin, *pius*, meaning dutiful to one's gods and one's parents. Next to the Cross, this is one of the central images of Catholicism: Jesus, well and truly dead, lying in the arms of his bereft mother. The splendour and isolation of the representation is intended to induce the receptive mind to prayerful regard. In the Catholic tradition, it is felt that images rather than just words serve such a function. The institution itself is based on a judgement about the efficacy of images and their inevitable power. So beautiful and cherished is the Virgin of Michelangelo's *Pietà* that in 1972 a deranged Australian tried to disfigure her. Not to worry. According to post-modern theologians, sacrilege directs us to the sacred. Christianity itself emerged during the Roman Empire as a sacrilegious religion, to scorn the divinity of the Emperor. Transgression is therefore integral to the very notion of Christian truth. All this augurs well, I suppose, for Andres Serrano on Judgement Day.

I'm projecting. Artistic languages have their own histories, their own formal demands, their own socially constructed roles, their own transgressive potentials. Projection substitutes other things for these languages, spinning a web of the viewer's own making around the works in question. Art history, as it has evolved over the last twenty years, would tell us therefore that projection is the least promising phenomenon on which to build an aesthetic position. Too bad. In this piece of writing, projection is the centre-piece.

My baby cousin is stillborn. He wasn't baptised so he has to live in Limbo, a nothing kind of place for unsaved souls.

There was no mistaking what the nuns were on about. The Holy Family were as real as the people next door, except they knew everything and could do anything. This life was brief and we were being prepared for the next. I learned how to sing the complete Easter liturgy. At the beginning of the school term, we spent hours scribing AMDG (All My Deeds For God - at least that's what they told us it meant) on the top line of each page of every school exercise book. On Fridays, we sank to our knees at noon as the bells tolled the Angelus. It was never dull. There was passion in every gesture, in the vestments and white lace, the sweet smell of incense, the candlelight and the careful rhythms of the Rosary.

Outside our Church, there was a cement grotto. It contained a nativity scene, a combination of painted setting, plaster sculptures with bright blue glass eyes, real hair and humble furnishings adorned with plastic roses. A grille prevented the passer-by from moving among the figures in the tableaux. Inside the Church itself, everything shone with polish and gilt.

In his book *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg takes five hundred pages to conflate the religious and the aesthetic imaginations. We live in a culture which often imbues works of art with transcendent qualities. When we survey the history of art, Freedberg claims, we survey the history of consecration. Art poses the

biggest question - how should human beings face to face with God and their fellow travellers act?

The artist makes a world in each artwork which is at once strange to us, because it seems to exist wholly visibly, and yet, when it succeeds, is apposite in ways that reach our deepest experience. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls this quality 'thisness', a miraculous attribute of being, 'because all that's here, so fleeting, seems to require us and strangely concerns us.'

In her series of drawings and prints on maternal grief (tragically fulfilled for the artist herself by the First World War) Kathe Kollwitz borrowed the pose of the sorrowing Holy Mother. She earths her thought; she wails with human pain and clutches her dead boy as if he were still part of her, not the dead, divine weight of marble. Kollwitz wilfully refutes the promise of the Gospels and refuses to 'boast' about suffering. ('These sufferings bring patience, as we know, and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts,' Romans 5:3-5) There is such conviction - 'thisness' - in these images. But that doesn't stop the yearning for metaphysical reassurance. You see, if Saint Paul can convince me, then my children will not be lost. Sister Angela would be delighted to know I'm still listening.

Lynne Seear

Felix Culpa

I am invited to write, to create a piece of writing which will accompany the works of art in the exhibition *ex.cat*. I am invited because I am a writer and a Catholic (or ex-Catholic or lapsed Catholic). Thus the space which I occupy at this moment of writing is an intersection between Catholicism, writing, and autobiography. In these next words I wish to trace this space and find its balance, a fulcrum of thought, which is its relationship to art. But primarily and fundamentally it is a question of language and of that no-place that laps at the shores of language and the limits of my subjectivity - namely abjection. This is a true story for it is what I necessarily believe to be the case at this point in time. Think of it as a confession. Or don't. Think of it as an anti-confession, a work of art.

I was sixteen - living at that time with my father, my mother was dead. I had been visiting this family at their home on a weekday evening as part of a Catholic education program about marriage, but on this particular occasion I had been invited to the house on a different weekday evening. There was a gathering of adults from the local parish, including the former parish priest, giving readings from various texts, mostly poetry. It was not a religious gathering, but more like some kind of English society or intellectual group, and there was plenty of alcohol being consumed. I was treated as a fellow adult, indeed I was probably given special treatment in some ways because not only did I read poetry but I also wrote it (as did a few of the others). It was the second time I had met the priest, the first being earlier that afternoon after school. It was a very happy evening. I got rather drunk and I remember, in that crowded gathering around the kitchen table, sitting in the priest's lap in my typical, provocative manner. Later, I read him a couple of quickly scribbled poems in private, and we walked outside together to say goodbye, and he kissed me in an overly passionate manner. I assumed he was drunker than I, but was later told that he didn't drink - or not there anyway. It was an inspiring night - a bright flame of life in what was a desolate landscape at that time for me.

"The cold smell of sacred stone called him. He trod the worn steps, pushed the swing door and entered softly by the rere.

Something going on: some sodality. Pity so empty. Nice discreet space to be next some girl. Who is my neighbour? Jammed by the hour to slow music. That woman at midnight mass. Seventh heaven. Women

kneel in the benches with crimson halters round their necks, heads bowed. A batch knelt at the altar rails. The priest went along by them, murmuring, holding the thing in his hands. He stopped at each, took out a communion, shook a drop or two (are they in water?) off it and put it neatly into her mouth. Her hat and head sank. Then the next one: a small old woman. The priest bent down to put it into her mouth. What? Corpus. Body. Corpse. Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first. Hospice for the dying. They don't seem to chew it; only swallow it down. Rum idea: eating bits of a corpse why the cannibals cotton to it."¹

Is it possible to chart the discursive spaces of writing and Catholicism, their intersection and limits, without invoking James Joyce or more precisely his fictitious character Leopold Bloom with his sacrilegious observations? A Jew in Dublin at the turn of the century. The story of the outsider and its space of fascination and voyeurism - Leopold is Joyce of course - Joyce as a voyeur/writer upon himself and his society. At sixteen I was not a Catholic, but an outsider-becoming-insider member of a Catholic community. Catholicism was a space I travelled through and now, as outsider once again, I write about it. Ex-Catholic / exhibition catalogue - a word play, a slippage of language and meaning.

Joyce as artist and poet, as master of language "not a language of the desiring exchange of messages ... but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges. The one who tries to utter this 'not yet a place', this no-grounds, can obviously only do so backwards, starting from an overmastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code. ... the writer is permanently confronted with such a language. The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorising in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs."² What Joyce and the writer/artist phobically tries to confront is the foundational fetishism of language - that even though language constitutes us as speaking/writing beings, it is a foundational substitute or fetish for "the thing itself" which we speak of. And if language is approached, phobically, as some essential material of being, an emptiness opens all around which is a space of non-being, of fear, of abjection. If Christ as Word is bound to us as our (impossible) ideal, then we are necessarily abject, shadowed subjects of sin and love.

The couple that I had been visiting suggested that I go and visit the priest for a weekend at his invitation. I

would stay at the presbytery. I thought to myself, "I don't think this is what he has in mind" but didn't quite know how to verbalise this or even if I wanted to. I journeyed down by bus and after his warm sunlit greeting, he drove me straight to a private apartment which he had somehow managed to rent for the occasion. He didn't bother to explain or debate the situation, not then or ever. Before I let him undress me I did make some lengthy speech about my sexual history and other people's interpretations of that history - as if in the third person. I remember him asking me "but what do you think?" and after that I knew I was always a thinker/writer of myself in his presence and it was that aspect of myself among others that made him want to fuck me. Even though I was barely of legal age, even though I was out of my depth and frightened, even though I was thrilled with the perfect naughtiness and utter secrecy of what I was doing ... and continued to do for another year or more.

I had been fucked many times and had sucked a few cocks by then, but no one had ever licked my cunt. No one had ever knelt down between my legs and tongued my clitoris. And this was mostly all he ever did with me. This was because his cock rarely got stiff enough to fuck with. He was fifty-six years old at that time, but he would also drink too much whenever we were together. He would always drown himself in alcohol and I'd suck his limp cock dry. And we'd go to dinner. I called it the apartment of fear. It was ecstatic with sexual energy and guilt and self-abuse and mutual respect and intelligence and poetry - a combination only Catholicism can create - supremely addictive, we loved one another. I felt so at home because, in many ways, he reminded me of my mother who had only been dead a short time then. She was an alcoholic who used to like to sit up all night on the verandah and stare at the ocean just like him.

" "Now listen to Punk Boy's words:

" "I found my father fucking my sister. I stopped that one. After I had sliced off his head, not his dick, I became more alone.

" "His head fell into my hands and remains there to this day. I call the two halves of this egg-shaped skull heaven and hell."

" "Punk Boy's words got his girlfriend hot; everything that existed also turned her on."

...

"Punk Boy agreed, for his own punk purposes, to fight against the demons; he used the earth as his vehicle to travel over the ground of his mind; he defeated his own.

"Afterwards the demon city was drowning and burning up; the body was drowning and burning up.

"Ratty wanted to go out and watch all this destruction. As if she had never seen it before. Watching the world turn into a grave, from where she was standing, she saw a big, fat rat.

"It sat on her lap.

"Who's this?" asked rat.

"The stupid girl didn't recognise her own child, who, because Punk Boy wouldn't give her a child, was Punk Boy himself, dripping with all the blood and guts of all the demons he had just killed.

"If there were going to be possibilities again, there had to be nothingness."³

I call upon my own litany of secular prophets for speaking this space between Catholicism, self, and writing. If Joyce is the master observer and voyeur - the objective, the abject proper - then Kathy Acker is the immersed subject, the already spoken - abjection. She is the user and discarder of texts in her own ecstatic, defiling manner. Acker the reclamer, determined to go anywhere, incapable of politeness - her language skills relentlessly put to the bluntest and toughest of purposes. She vomits up, she exhales, she comes poetry. "One of the insights of Christianity, and not the least one, is to have gathered in a single move perversion and beauty as the lining and cloth of one and the same economy."⁴

I cooked omelettes - at sixteen, it was the only thing I could cook. He drank gin. I walked on the beach. He rarely risked being seen with me in public. He said my year twelve graduation Mass, and my stepmother saw the way he looked at me with adoration. She knew about us I think though I never told her. I remember him reading me a poem of Gwen Harwood's which contained the Latin phrase *felix culpa* which he translated as 'happy fault' or 'fortunate sin'. This was a central mystery for him - that and the moment of crucifixion. I asked him once if he went to confession, the answer was yes. Did he confess us? "No. It's all in that cross. Beth, in the mystery that is the cross."

"... Fortunate sin [*felix culpa*] provides an anchorage for the art that will be found resplendent, under all the cupolas. Even during the most odious times of the Inquisition, art provided sinners with the opportunity to live, openly and inwardly apart, the joy of their dissipation set into signs: painting, music, words...

On this peak of discourse, power no longer belongs to the Judge-God who preserves humanity from abjection while setting aside for himself alone the preroga-

tive of violence - the violence of separation as well as of punishment. Power henceforth belongs to discourse itself, or rather to the act of judgement expressed in speech and, in less orthodox and much more implicit fashion, in all the signs (poetry, painting, music, sculpture) that are contingent upon it. If such signs do not do away with the necessity for confession, they do spread out the logic of speech even to the most inaccessible folds of significance."⁵

This piece of writing is offered as my *felix culpa* for this exhibition of art. *Ex.cot.* - describing a space which exists both within and without Catholicism: a confession without an Inquisition; an anti-confession (an abjection) for the Inquisition that is language - the complex and careful ordering of signs. As writer, as written subject, I am faced with the fear of words failing me even as I crave and seek that moment. The moment of judgement perhaps.

At eighteen, I went to England for a year and during this time became a Catholic. I craved that communion food. The Church and its teachings tortured me and when I returned I went to his church for Mass. He gave me communion for the first time, placing the wafer on my tongue - for some reason I felt I owed him that. After Mass I went to see him and as he tried to kiss me passionately I tried to tell him I wanted him to hear a confession. As unsurprised as ever he heard my confession. His reply (my penance? his absolution?): "Beth, go ahead and fuck whoever you want to." Catholic / non-Catholic, where lies the difference?

"The spirit was never anything but the parasite of man, the ringworm of his worthy body when the body was no more than an animalcule swimming around and having no desire about having to be worthy of existing.

But how, by what filthy trickery, did it one day decide to be god?

That is the never-revealed story.

And I say: shit to the spirit."⁶

Antonin Artaud - perhaps the greatest blasphemer (and thus the most religious?) writer/artist of all. Artaud's words are in continual revolt - within the being of language. Where Joyce seduces the reader into an interiority like a dream, and Acker continually refuses the reader any comfort zone as if placing writing between herself and the reader like a front line, Artaud addresses the reader head-on. Artaud writes through a process of continually rejecting language

and then reconstructing it. He thus locates abjection as a moment within language and writes it. Thus all his work is autobiography, a writing of himself, spoken to 'you', the reader. Not a confession (there is no story to tell, no truth to be revealed, no sin to punish). But an anti-confession - a process of being within language. A work of art.

I tortured myself for the next few years with Catholicism. He tortured himself for the next few years with alcoholism on and off and eventually died of it - like my mother. The last time I took communion (and I suppose it will be the last) was at his funeral. I hadn't seen him in such a long time. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye (again, just like Mum). I felt tortured. Until, two days after his death, I woke in the morning to see the sunlight pouring through the window and felt his spirit descend upon me. I don't know if spirits have more than one resting place but I know he came home to me.

Beth Jackson

1 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London: Penguin, 1984, pp.81-82

2 Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p.38

3 Kathy Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Sydney: Picador, 1996, pp.157-158

4 Kristeva, *op.cit.*, p.125

5 *ibid.*, pp.131-132

6 Antonin Artaud: *Anthology*, Ed: Jack Hirschman, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965, p.111

ARTISTS



Sebastian Di Mauro

b. Innisfail, Queensland

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1998 *Manifestations* Smith+Stoneley, Brisbane
- 1996 *Slippage* Beatty Gallery, Sydney
- 1996 *Skin* Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
- 1996 *Pagine dal Libro Muto* Grahame Galleries and Editions, Brisbane
- 1994 *Underlay* Beatty Gallery, Sydney

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1998 *Suite* Smith+Stoneley, Brisbane
- 1997 *Wachs* Soapbox, Brisbane
- 1996 *das object* Whitebox, Brisbane
- 1995 *Have a Look* University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane
- 1994 *FOI - Festival of Installation* Noosa Regional Art Gallery, Queensland

Selected Bibliography

- Drury, N. 1997 *Images 3 Contemporary Australian Painting* North Ryde: Craftsman House p 159, 175
- Drury, N and Voigt, A. 1996 *Fire and Shadow: Spirituality in Australian Contemporary Art*, Roseville East: Craftsman House. pp 163-71
- Smith, T. 1996 *Skin* Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
- Zurbrugg, N. 1994 "Sebastian Di Mauro Praeparation Physica" in *Agenda* #35 p 20.
- Magon, J. 1993 "Entrances, Exits and Immortality" in *Eyeline* 22/23, Summer p30-33

Selected Collections

Queensland Art Gallery; James Hardy Collection, State Library of Queensland; Art Bank; Brisbane City Gallery; Art Gallery of Western Australia; University of Southern Queensland; Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery; Global Arts Link, Ipswich; Downslands College, Toowoomba

***Nine Books of Silence* 1996**

photograph: Erik Williamson

LIST OF WORKS

David Allen

Death of My Father with Halo from The Death of my Father c.1993
89.0 x 78.5 x 5.0

My Father is Dead from The Death of My Father c.1993
106.5 x 92.5 x 5.0
oil on canvas
(held in the Griffith University Art Collection)

Rachel Apelt

Miraculous Sheet 1996
Bed sheet, pillow slip,
acrylic paint, Catholic medals
250.0 x 200.0
(courtesy of the Museum of Nuestra Señora Della Justicia, Manila Brisbane Habana)

Thierry Auric

Vietnam/ The Irony of the Christmas Truce 1999
Acrylic and enamel on cardboard,
cans of coca-cola
135.0 x 400.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Gloria Beckett

Trapped 1999
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
94.0 x 120.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Leonard Brown

Seven Hills 1993
Oil on Belgian linen
six panels, each 92.0 x 64.0
(courtesy of the artist and Bellas Gallery)

Eugene Carchesio

Impossible Architecture of the Holy Ghost 1985
Watercolour and pencil on paper
7 drawings, each 28.0 x 22.0
(courtesy of the artist and Bellas Gallery)

Donna Confetti

'tis never done
(continuing series) commenced in 1993
Assemblages of jewellery and trinkets
3.0 x 5.0 x 2.0, average size of each
(courtesy of the artist)

Marcel Debieu

5 Shells from Karragarra 1998
Oil on canvas
90.0 x 100.0
(courtesy of the artist and Valerie Just Town Gallery)

Sebastian Di Mauro

Nine Books of Silence 1996
Carpet underlay, acrylic paint
9 components, each 12.0 x 63.0 x 66.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Sister Judith Floyd

Unless the Grain of Wheat Dies... 1998
mixed media assemblage
30.0 x 21.0 x 8.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Susie Hansen

Mother's Best Tea Service 1991
Clay, slip, underglaze, glaze
3 pieces, each 40.0 x 15.0 x 13.0

Above and Beyond 1997
Terracotta, underglaze, glaze
45.0 x 15.0 x 15.0
(courtesy of the artist)

John Harris

The Parable of Experience 1998
Neon tubing
120.0 x 120.0 x 10.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Thomas Justice

(i) **John 21:1 5-17** 1997
(ii) **John 13: 22-25** 1997
Screenprint on canvas over board
1 panel 66.0 x 82.0
1 panel 61.0 x 109.0

Legion of Mary 1997
Bisque-fired, slip-cast figures on
plaster block
155.0 x 26.0 x 34.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Brona Keenan

Visitation 1996
Hand-coloured lino print
39.5 x 29.0

Bombshell 1994
Hand-coloured lino print
23.0 x 14.0

Altar of Inequality 1992

Lino print
30.0 x 27.5

Miracle 1994
Hand-coloured lino print
22.0 x 15.0
(all works are courtesy of the artist,
except for Miracle which is courtesy
of Leigh Dale and Anninette Bauer)

Loani Lee

Lavendered 1995
Photo-mechanical print and paint on
canvas, lavender flowers and oil
125.0 x 335.0

Mea Culpa 1995
Installation of church pwb,
photograph and photocopy
on tracing paper, furniture polish
dimensions variable
(courtesy of the artist)

Bernadette Mollison

...work of human hands... 1992
Oil and graphite on bread boards
80.0 x 70.0 x 70.0
(courtesy of the artist
and Mrs Geraldine Rodgers
and Mrs Alice Mollison)

Phyllis Paterson

The Grass is Greener 1993
Mixed-media on canvas
60.0 x 62.0
(courtesy of Beth Mahle
and Bob Burnet)

To See at Night 1993
Oil and enamel on plywood
93.0 x 43.0
(Courtesy of the artist)

Colin Reaney

Deciphering Corporal Space
1990/5
Damask, table, canvas, paint
100.0 x 100.0 x 60.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Raquel Redmond

Our Mother 1993
Colour reduction linocut
60.0 x 56.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Michael Reilly

Angels I-IV 1990
Pastel on paper
4 works, each 43.0 x 31.0

Lost Souls I-IV 1998
Pastel on paper
4 works, each 43.0 x 31.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Luke Roberts

Popepeople 081097 1997
(Quentin Crisp)
fifteen times
45.0 x 36.0
Photographic performance,
DIA Center for the Arts, New York
(courtesy of the artist and
Bellas Gallery)

Charlie twelve times 1998
46.5 x 40.0
Colour photograph
(courtesy of the artist
and Bellas Gallery)

**Pope Alice's Miracle Baby:
Pope Alice as Madonna
with Child** 1993

Photographic performance
performers: Pope Alice
and Rommy Sandison
camera: David Sandison
(courtesy of the artist
and Bellas Gallery)

Pieta 1993

Photographic performance
performers: Pope Alice
and Joanna Meighan
camera: Stephen Crowther
(courtesy of a private collector)

Madonna Staunton

Vocation 1998
Assemblage
103.0 x 82.0
(courtesy of the artist
and Bellas Gallery)

Christine Turner

Toybox 1997
Assemblage of stereo cabinet,
Christmas decorations, dolls,
marbles, toys, expandable foam
75.0 x 120.0 x 40.0
(courtesy of the artist)

Thomas Vale-Slatery

**Head of Saint John the Baptist
on a Golden Charger
Lucifer Whispering into the Ear
of Adam
Chastity Grappling with Lust
and Greed
Male in Fancy Dress: as
Joan of Arc
Seated Male Nude
St Francis Saluting the
Body of Poor Clare
Male Figure Dressed as the
Archangel Gabriel
Ignatius Loyola and Animus
Segment of the Passion
The Grand Duchess Elizabeth as
a Mendicant Nun (Her Final Role)**

**Salome Viewing the Head of
John the Baptist
The Burial Party**
series from 1998
Synthetic polymer paint and India ink
on wood, gold leaf on selected works
12 works, each 7.5 x 6.5 x 6.5
(courtesy of the artist and private
collectors)

*All measurements are in
centimetres, height before
width before depth*