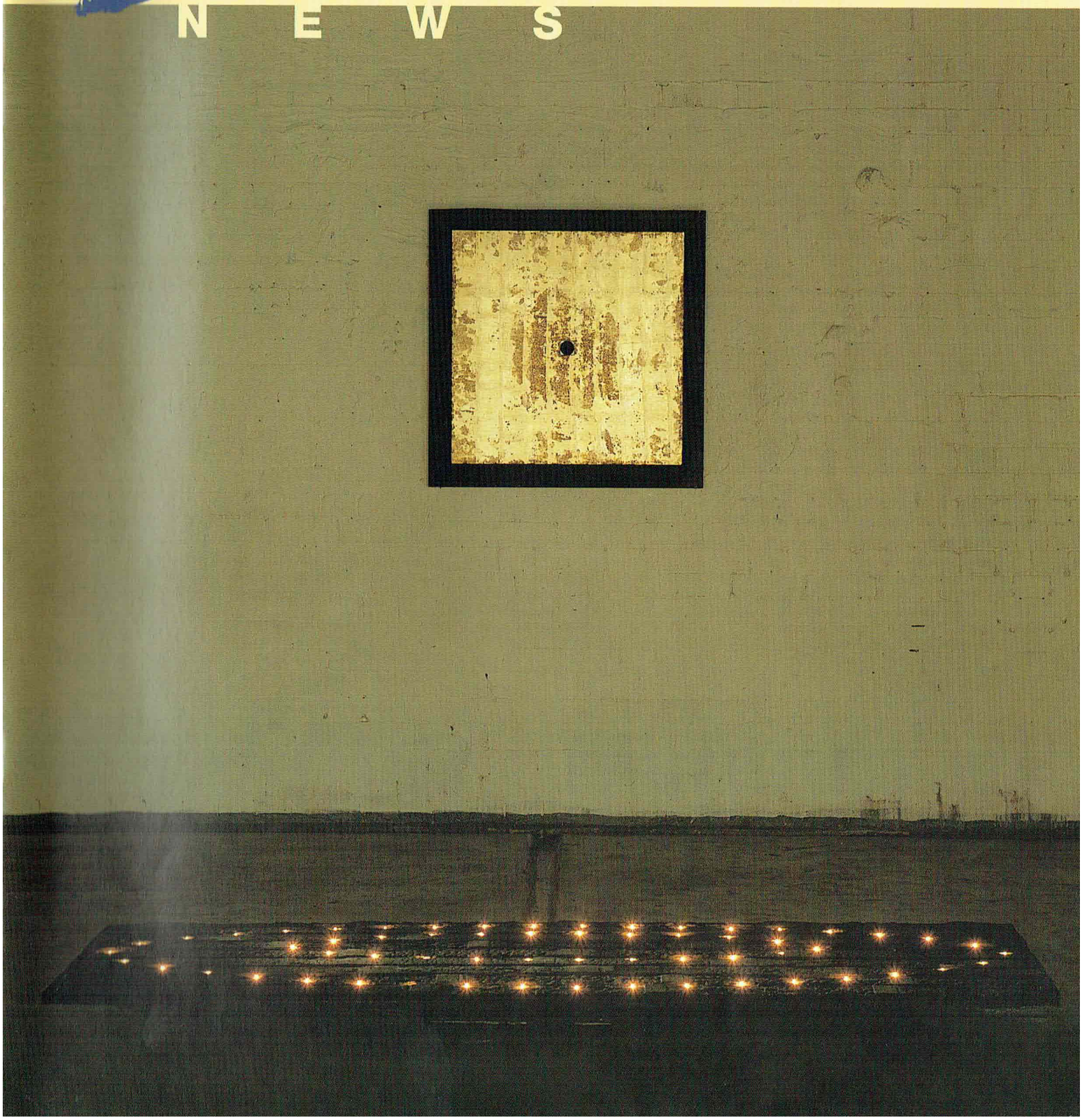
Liturgy NEWS

VOLUME 30-2

JUNE 2000

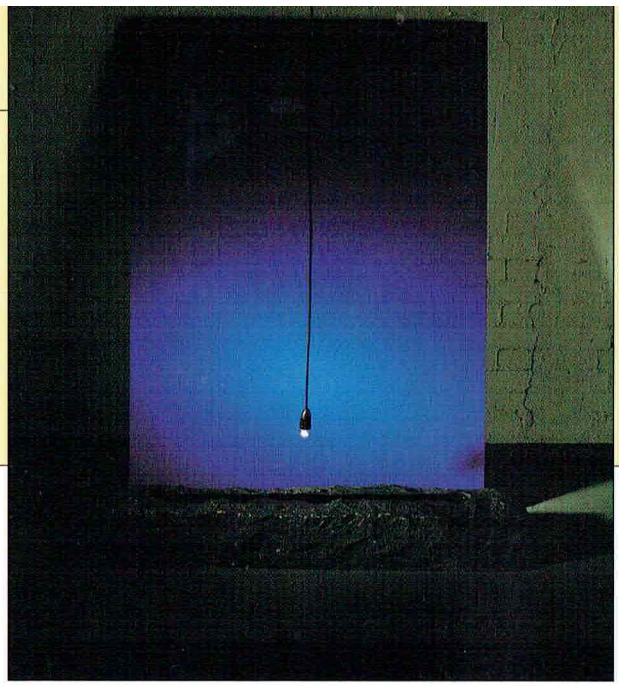


SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

FRONT COVER *Synthesis*
(Steel, gold leaf, silver leaf, 1993)
Energy Circles
(Burnt Timber, lights, 1993)

BACK COVER *Sublimate*
(Indian granite, water, acrylic paint, light bulb, timber, 1993)

OUR COVER



These three works were part of a 1993 exhibition *Praeparatio Physica* installed in a dark basement at the Omniscient Gallery in Brisbane (see below). Several years earlier, Sebastian Di Mauro had dealt with his mother's death in works such as *Transition* and *Void/Remembrance*, combining his painting on canvas with rusted steel and burnt timber. The processes of rusting and burning spoke of transformation and became a metaphor for change, dying and regeneration. In *Praeparatio Physica* he broadened these concepts, using the physical qualities of his materials to articulate spiritual or metaphysical meaning.

One critic described the exhibition as an *arena of magic, ritual and mystery*. The eerie and claustrophobic cellar seemed to be a site for tribal ceremonies or alchemic experiments. The space included rings of small lights, ochre paintings, panels of gold leaf, a suspended clay-covered vessel dripping olive oil over a dead tree which thrust up through a ladder, a stone trough of water, and vessels of sulphur, salt and mercury. These works and their interaction is complex (his more recent work simplifies and distils his message). The objects function rather like sacraments where simple physical things (bread, wine, water, oil...) are imbued with transcendent meaning.

The panel *Synthesis* (front cover) addresses the double mystery of transfiguration and transformation. It refers on the one hand to the ancient geometrical conundrum of 'squaring the circle'. This insoluble problem of classical Greek geometry sought to construct a square equal in area to a given circle. How opposite shapes relate to each other evokes deeper questions of reconciling opposites – living and dying, dying and rising. At another level, the materials (gold and silver leaf on rusting steel) refer to the ancient alchemist's dream of changing base metal into gold. Even the rusting surface of the work itself is in a state of constant transformation. Thus the work speaks not only of the processes of change and transformation but also of the possibility of a transformation into something more glorious and splendid. These notions are fundamental to Christian beliefs in resurrection.

In *Energy Circles* (front cover), the 'live' electric lights reinvigorate the surface of burnt timber, seeming to make it glow again with live coals – different materials but another metaphor for decay, change, and regeneration. An interviewer, speaking to Sebastian Di Mauro, remarked that this work was entrancing because it seemed to hover above the floor, making it impossible to discern where floor ended and artwork began. Sebastian replied, *I used energy in the form of electricity which ran through a lifeless material, illuminating a circle of light. The significance of the circle has been realised by many cultures. It's the simplest and most primordial of forms. It's a symbol of the self.*

The circle is a universal symbol. In the 'dot' paintings of aborigines from central Australia, it designates a sacred meeting place. In Buddhist art, the circular mandala focuses on the deity and spiritual power which the devotee can appropriate through meditation and ritual ceremony. Ritual dance moves in circles. A circle has no beginning or end, top or bottom, and so expresses the perfection of the infinite.

Sublimate (above) again juxtaposes contrasting materials: water and hewn stone, electricity and timber, light and paint. For the Christian this work has a clear reference to baptism, and not only because of the symbol of water. The hewn stone evokes the tomb of Christ (*When we were baptised, we went into the tomb with Christ...* Rom 6:4). The electric light evokes not only the light of Christ but the power of the Holy Spirit. The infinite blue evokes the heavens and the mystery of our transformation from earthly creatures into children of God. Adopting a Christian perspective will lead a viewer to a particular interpretation of an art work but, if the approach is perceptive, it will nonetheless be faithful to the work itself and to the artist

Sebastian described his work as follows: *'Sublimate' relates to the concept of transition from a physical to a metaphysical state. Water contained in a stone trough acted as an important ingredient in the ritual of transformation. Water is a primal substance. A blue rectangle in the work represented the void, which I see as potential space – not an empty space. Electric light signified the transmission of energy.*

In addition to his work as an artist, Sebastian Di Mauro is the creative director of *Liveworm,* the professional graphic design studio of the Queensland College of Art at Griffith University. For further reference, see *Between Material: Sebastian Di Mauro* (1998) containing an essay by Timothy Morrell, 24 colour plates and a catalogue of works, and an interview with the artist by Jane Magon. ($35 from the artist: PO Box 253, Kelvin Grove 4059.)

Tom Elich

The Liturgical Commission $6