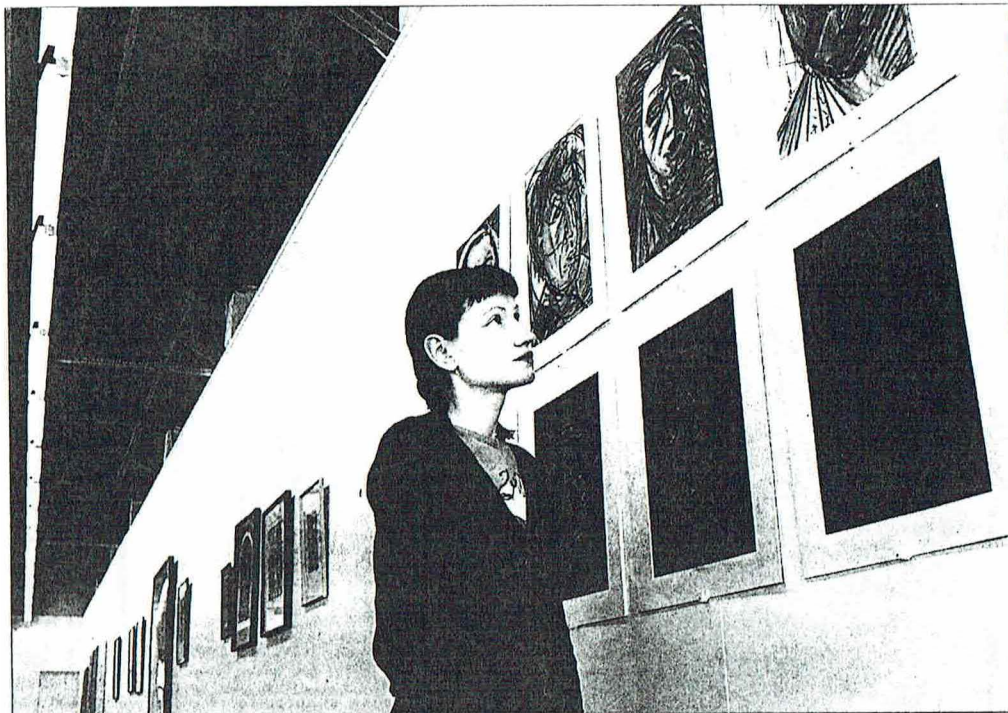


# Revelations of art and soul



ARTIST and curator Christine Morrow inspects the *ex.cat* religious art exhibition.

Picture: BOB FENNEY

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**Esanda**

By SUE SMITH

**T**HE show is called *ex.cat*, and it is at Brisbane's Smith + Stoneley gallery, which has become a launching pad for young artists making cool, cerebral experimental art.

Organised by artist and independent curator, Christine Morrow, *ex.cat* is about Catholicism. It features 24 well-known and emerging Queensland artists who are Catholic or have a Catholic background — from Davida Allen and Leonard Brown to Luke Roberts and Thomas Vale-Slatery — and whose responses to their faith vary from humour and critique to expressions of doubt or faith.

For some, Catholicism might seem an unusual topic for an art show, particularly because it's often said that Australia has no great tradition of religious art.

Yet themes of religion and spirituality do crop up periodically on the art scene, and sometimes ignite tremendous public interest — even passion — as was shown last October in the dramatic events surrounding the Melbourne exhibition of works by American artist Andres Serrano, whose photograph, *Piss Christ*, was attacked by two youths with a hammer. Just three days before the closure, the Supreme Court of Victoria had refused an injunction to the Catholic Church, which sought to prevent the show opening on the grounds that *Piss Christ* was blasphemous.

Morrow winces a little when the Serrano debacle is brought up. Causing offence and generating explosive controversy, is not — repeat not — what she had in mind when she selected the works for *ex.cat*. But she is also well aware that to curate meaningful exhibitions, it behoves curators to have the courage to present art that raises uncomfortable issues and feelings.

In short, as Morrow acknowledges, the curator's role in putting together a show like *ex.cat* is like treading on eggshells.

"I've tried to select a show which is not watered-down; it tries to be polemical, with works that are thoughtful and even political," she says.

"There are some works critical of aspects of the church, but there is

nothing malicious or sacrilegious in the show.

"There could be something in the show that a conservative Catholic person may be offended by, but it is not a show that sets out to take cheap shots at religion, or to be tacky."

Instead, the show seeks to build a rhetorical, fully fleshed, yet ambiguous view of Catholicism. Visually and emotionally, says Morrow, the works selected have tremendous range.

There are colourful, adorned objects referring to rituals and ceremonies; while some artists use the everyday and the motifs of the Last Supper, the chalice and altar to make a connection between the ties that bind families and friends and those that unite religious communities (Susie Hansen, Bernadette Mollison, Colin Reaney).

There are emotionally charged pieces that refer to rituals of death, suffering and grieving (Luke Roberts and Christine Turner).

Some works, such as Brona Keenan's linocuts, use humour to examine the oddities of some beliefs or narrative of saints and martyrs (did you know there are *male* saints of childbirth? And there's a patron saint of artillery, St Barbara?) Others take such gentle critique into more ambiguous areas, hovering at the edge of sacrilege: Thomas Justice depicts a male torso, with a blurred text "Do you love me, Peter?" which suggests an ad in a Personal Column as much as Jesus and His disciples.

And there are also some abstract works that explore metaphysical ideas, such as John Harris's wall-piece, which consists of a blank panel surmounted by a pair of neon brackets — an attempt to express the ineffable, or to frame a limitless, unnameable void.

It is, as Morrow points out, a very timely exhibition. "At the end of the century, and the end of the millennium, there's an intense focus on spirituality, and interest in the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ, which for Christians is an important date."

● *ex.cat*: An exhibition of work about Catholicism, Smith + Stoneley, 11 Stratton St, Newstead until September 23.