Liturgy NEWS

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Nine Books of Silence
Sebastian Di Mauro
(Carpet underlay, 1996)

OUR COVER

Carpet underlay is one of the favourite materials of Brisbane artist Sebastian Di Mauro. He makes this pedestrian stuff into a vehicle for contemplation. *Nine Books of Silence* is a good example. Sometimes they have been displayed closed, sometimes open. On one occasion, in the centre of the page of the centre book, was inscribed the single word, *SILENZIO.* Like any powerful symbol, the work can be approached from many angles.

Words on a page are mute. Like dried flowers pressed between the pages of a book, ideas are pressed to death in a closed book on a library shelf. But when the human eye falls upon the words and sparks light up the mind, the text begins to live. When the human body is engaged and the words are proclaimed, then the ideas are communicated from mind to mind, from heart to heart. Such an act creates a communion between human beings. Thus the celebration of liturgy incorporates the proclamation of the word. The affirmation, *This is the Word of the Lord,* does not refer to the mute pages of the book, but to the living word, spoken and heard.

The very material Sebastian uses, industrial felt, evokes silence. It deadens sound, absorbs noise. The big blank felt pages of the *Nine Books* challenge us to think of the silence into which the word is spoken, and the silence which rings with the memory of the word which has just been spoken. The spaces between words and sentences make writing and speech intelligible. *Nine Books of Silence* invites us to read between the lines. The work calls us not just hear the words with our ears but to listen to the echoes of the word with our heart. Ultimately, the great mystery of God in our world, the mystery of eternal life, lies beyond the reach of any words or stories and can be grasped only in silent contemplation. The whole world could not contain the books that would be needed to write it all down *(See John 21:25).*

The collection of nine books evokes the idea of a library, repository of human wisdom. Indeed it may suggest that collection of sacred books we call the Bible – divine revelation enshrined in texts of many different kinds, composed at different times and places. It reminds us that, although the mystery is one, the understandings of it are many. Multiple 'readings' of a text or symbol reveal the ambiguity in which we gradually arrive at the certainty of faith.

Much of our religious imagery gives us something to look at, but often it yields up its meaning quickly and we easily stay on the surface. Sebastian Di Mauro explores the deep relationships between the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the mystical. Like the symbolic actions of the liturgy itself, his work summons the viewer to participation, sometimes quite directly, in the execution of the artwork itself. For example, in another 1996 work, *Pulse*, Sebastian used chalk to write on the floor of the Whitebox Gallery in Brisbane. Then he covered the writing with ash, an oval of yellow ash in the centre surrounded by grey ash. When people walked over the ash, the colours were mixed together, blurring the boundaries and revealing the text. Sebastian said, *I wanted people to activate this volatile surface and to connect living and dead matter. For me, this is one of the strongest pieces I've done.* The theme resonates with that of the *Nine Books of Silence:* writing is dead (dust to dust, ashes to ashes) until it is brought to life through the participation of living human beings.

The four covers of *Liturgy News* during 2000 will feature the work of Sebastian Di Mauro. We hope that it will broaden ideas of the place of art in our churches and of its possible links with the action of liturgy. We hope to discover new insights into the way the paint and canvas, the stone, timber or felt underlay of a good work of art provide a window to the sacred. We believe that church art can encompass more than the traditional images which usually grace our shrines.

The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as its very own but has admitted styles from every period, according to the proper genius and circumstances of peoples and the requirements of the many different rites in the Church… The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church on condition that it serves the places of worship and sacred rites with the reverence and honour due to them. In this way contemporary art can add its own voice to that wonderful chorus of praise sung by the great masters of past ages of Catholic faith. (Vatican II, SC 123)

Sebastian Di Mauro, born in Innisfail in 1955, has a BA from Queensland College of Art and an MA in visual arts from Monash University in Victoria. He lectures in art at Griffith University. He has held solo exhibitions every year since 1987 in Brisbane, Sydney, Ipswich and Cairns and is represented in state, regional and city galleries throughout Australia as well as private and corporate collection here and overseas. His current exhibition *floccus* at Brisbane City Gallery comprises huge natural shapes covered in woolly carpet underlay.

Tom Elich

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