

# The Limits of Taste: Politics, Aesthetics, and Christ in Contemporary Australia

**Zoe Alderton**

## **Introduction**

This article argues that there is a tacit system of social values operating around the reception of mainstream, normative Christianity in Australian art. Christianity, although a revolutionary movement at its start, has been tied to notions of decency, respect, tradition, and stability since its institutionalisation by the Roman Empire. Additionally, religious imagery has always been of concern in this faith as it stands in relation to a commandment that warns against graven images. Religious art and Christianity have clashed wildly and radically at various times in the life of the Church, the iconoclastic period of the Byzantine Empire being one startling example amongst many of how much religious iconography matters. Similarly, religious art today, especially that which challenges institutionalised Christianity, is taken by many to be not only art bordering on blasphemy, but as an affront to dominant cultural values. This article employs examples from the Blake Prize for Religious Art (1951 to the present) as a case study for the increasingly common fear that contemporary Australian art is a site of declining morality. Focusing on recent artworks by Rodney Pople, Adam Cullen, and Luke Roberts, the boundaries of permissible Christian imagery will be explored. Art that is perceived as sexually deviant, too broadly 'spiritual,' or ugly, appears to fail the test of acceptability. Headlines are guaranteed as religious commentators and outraged journalists lampoon and deride what is perceived to be irreligious art. Under the present spirit of reactionary journalism, the intended (and often fairly obvious) meaning behind contentious artworks is dismissed in favour of moral outrage at any image of Christianity that is deemed unorthodox.<sup>1</sup> Jocular, shock, and satirical elements are unfairly read as blasphemous whilst genuine social commentary and messages of compassion in the artworks are often ignored. As specifically explained by their creators, none of the artworks featured in this article are intended as an attack on the Christian religion. Nevertheless, they are all taken as objects of affront and social upheaval, and become a stimulus

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<sup>1</sup> There is, of course, an interesting tension here between Christ as a representation of social justice versus Christ as a representation of the establishment.

for discussion of the ‘threat’ of Islam and a perceived lack of protection or respect for Christianity in Australia. This excitement generally overshadows an informed and critical approach to the art object.

In order to account for political dimensions that have shaped the prevailing viewpoints on modern art in Australia, this article draws upon the work of religion and politics scholar Marion Maddox in order to explore the *nominal* Christianity that has come to represent mainstream Australian values. Even though Christian church attendance (especially in its traditional forms) may be on the decline within Australia, this belief system is still associated with notions of familiarity and security. This is sharply emphasised by xenophobic reactions to ‘foreign’ cultural systems such as Islam, which are often used to engender a sense of fear or looming social upheaval. In this sense, ‘safe’ art reaffirms normative culture whilst ‘unsafe’ art destabilises or delegitimises hegemonic values. Through this lens, one may observe a shift between the religiously discreet period of the Hawke-Keating government and the almost retrospective and nostalgic aura that religion takes on under the Liberal Party Prime Ministership of John Howard (1996-2007). This change is something that has been well documented by Maddox, and methodologically this article will return to her research as a way of comparing art controversies and religious atmospheres towards its conclusion. Under the leadership of Howard, Australia experienced the celebration of vaguely Christian ‘values,’ a new level of censorship, and an intense focus on the dignity and centrality of the nuclear family. The subsequent Labour government under Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard chose to uphold many of these social inheritances. In 2008, the Bill Henson scandal served as a serious marking point in the aesthetic atmospherics of Australia under its modern-day political tone.<sup>2</sup> While this article does not address the Henson affair directly, issues pertaining to this scandal exemplify the thematic of suspicion and fear surrounding the modern Australian artist and raise questions as to what limitations exist on visual representation.

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<sup>2</sup> The opening night of Henson’s 2008 show at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Paddington was shut down after numerous complaints to the police. These centred on Henson’s photographic depiction of a nude thirteen-year-old girl. A national outcry and debate over censorship of artworks ensued, including comments of disgust from the then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Outrage on both sides of the debate is yet to cease, and no firm resolution on censorship legislation has been reached. For a detailed account of this event see David Marr, *The Henson Case* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2008).

### **Boundary Management and the Blake Prize**

The question of how art interacts with social values is complex and far beyond the scope of a single article to discuss in full. A useful lens with which to approach the issue is that of art as ‘boundary management,’ presented in the discourse of current Blake Prize chair Rod Pattenden. In his research ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality: Boundary Management and the Life of Images,’ Pattenden defines contemporary art as a separate category to art produced by religious or spiritual organisations, a distinction that this article shall employ.<sup>3</sup> He also aptly describes this kind of art as one that becomes a public platform for the discussion of spirituality, as it frequently moves out of the confines of the gallery or art world and into popular media and public discussion.<sup>4</sup> Pattenden explains that art, in the sense that it sits on the boundaries of society, can be embraced as innovation that “leads to new practices and healthy integration.” Alternatively, boundary-riding images may lead “to accusations of blasphemy where innovation is rejected and boundaries reinforced.”<sup>5</sup> Pattenden seems to have a generally optimistic attitude in regards to the reception of controversial spiritual images. He believes that religion is returning as an important socio-cultural force in Australia, and may be used to maintain ‘tribal’ differences. He hopes that it may also be used as “a resource for dissolving false boundaries,” which is something he presently works towards as the chair of the Blake Prize.<sup>6</sup> Pattenden believes that “[c]ontroversy is not the end point but it spurs a process of coming to terms with new information that allows innovation, mediation, and change to occur within an accepted range of spiritual practices.”<sup>7</sup>

While none of this is inherently untrue, this article will demonstrate that an angry, shocked, or disgusted attitude is far more likely than one of acceptance when faced with challenging Christian imagery in the Blake Prize. This is because the maintenance of normative Christianity has become a tenet of Australian culture, and one that is linked to the idea of familiarity, safety, and values. The Blake Prize has been a site of recurrent scandal and embrace

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<sup>3</sup> Rod Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality: Boundary Management and the Life of Images,’ in *The Brill Volume of New Religious Movements and Cultural Production*, eds Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 756.

<sup>4</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 756.

<sup>5</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 756.

<sup>6</sup> Rod Pattenden, ‘Foreword,’ in Rosemary Crumlin, *The Blake Book: Art, Religion and Spirituality in Australia* (Victoria: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 754.

since its debut in 1951. Named after the highly controversial William Blake,<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Crumlin believes that the prize has asked the same question throughout its history: “What is it that makes a work religious?”<sup>9</sup> Clearly this was a contentious question, even in the early years of the prize. Co-founder Fr Michael Scott believed that, from the Church’s point of view, religious artworks “are intended firstly as an aid to man in his progress towards God and to spiritual things – and secondly as a means of praising God through beauty.”<sup>10</sup> This implies that religious art should be a serious tool of interaction with the divine and be rendered in a beautiful manner. (This belief in the necessity of affirmative and attractive imagery is especially important to consider when examining the case studies contained within this article). Pattenden believes that differences in opinion between the public, submitting artists, and the judging panel, were present from the start. He states, “[f]or artists, it was an invitation to move away from the confines of religious representation and to explore what most inspired them, annoyed them, or spurred on their practice of investigation and innovation. This was at odds with the organisers’ hopes, and at times the general public, who had more settled ideas of what religious art should look like.”<sup>11</sup> The shocking content and appearance of many submissions meant that few works were commissioned or purchased for churches as a result of being shown in or winning the Blake Prize, despite the fact that this was the original intent of the competition.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> William Blake is known for his shocking behaviour and literature criticising some of the Christian institutions of his day. For example, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ from *Songs of Experience* (1794) concludes with: “And because I am happy and dance and sing,/ They think they have done me no injury,/ And are gone to praise God and his priest and king,/ Who make up a heaven of our misery.” This text aims to illuminate the violation and mistreatment of children, comparable to the aims of Pople’s works featured in this article. Interestingly, many outraged respondents to the Blake Prize’s contentious entries complain that incendiary imagery is offensive to Blake and his legacy. For example, see a comment on a Catholic news website that reads “[p]lease tell us again what the aim of the Blake Prize for Religious art is?... What link is there between the art of the artist Blake and the outcomes we have been seeing in recent years in the Blake Prize?... Blake must be turning in his grave over and over again.” ‘Marg,’ comment on ‘Brisbane Artist’s Provocative Crucifixions,’ *CathNews* (8 August 2011), at <http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=27541>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>9</sup> Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Scott [18 October 1950] in Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 757.

<sup>12</sup> Rod Pattenden on ABC Television, ‘COMPASS: Chasing the Blake,’ *Compass* (1 June 2008), at <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s2262581.htm>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

Controversy has never been rare in regards to the Blake Prize, though the nature of problematic and 'irreligious' imagery has changed. In 1961, Stanislaus Rapotec's win with *Meditating on a Good Friday* garnered criticism over its use of abstraction to discuss the Easter story and the artist's own ruminations on faith.<sup>13</sup> Fifty years later, Roberts' 'drag queen Christ' continued on the debate over what makes an image religious and what makes a religious sentiment appropriate for public display. In 2007, the management of the Blake Prize passed to Pattenden and Stefanie Lewis. As Crumlin explains, this has involved a shift towards the broadly 'spiritual' as opposed to the strictly 'religious.' Christianity is no longer presumed as the dominant culture or practice upon which Australian artists will draw.<sup>14</sup> Although the Blake Prize may have an embracing philosophy in its current incarnation, this does not have congruence with mainstream media and political viewpoints. Pattenden believes the media controversy over the 2007 Blake Prize epitomises numerous problematic dimensions of its public, and especially mass media, reception. In order to contextualise the forthcoming case studies, this article will draw on, and add to, Pattenden's recent research concerning the Blake Prize.

The *Daily Telegraph* of 30 August, 2007, criticised the work of Luke Sullivan and Priscilla Bracks, both of whom merged imagery popularly connected to Christianity and Islam within their entries. Then-Prime Minister Howard was also quoted as condemning the artworks.<sup>15</sup> This front page report, titled 'For God's Sake!', reflects the wilful ignorance towards contentious images common in media reactions to the Blake Prize. Pattenden aptly observes the fact that national and international media reports on the problematic images were more concerned with repetition of the accusations found in the *Daily Telegraph* than they were in researching the artists' own statement or interviews.<sup>16</sup> He believes that the complexity of these artworks

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<sup>13</sup> See Gary Catalano, *The Years of Hope: Australian Art Criticism 1959-1968* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), especially p. 77ff.

<sup>14</sup> Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> See Pattenden, 'Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,' p. 757ff., for a more detailed account of this article and the artworks contained therein. Howard's comment reads, "[t]he choice of such artwork is gratuitously offensive to the religious beliefs of many Australians."

<sup>16</sup> Had they done so, the reporters dealing with artworks such as Bracks' *Bearded Orientals (Making the Empire Cross)* would have easily found a comprehensive and clear statement of intent on the main page of the website <http://priscillabracks.com>. Accessed 31/07/2011. Here, Bracks explains her work as a "cautionary tale about our fixation with crime, violence and catastrophe." She worries that religiously motivated

was overridden by the media storm surrounding them.<sup>17</sup> Pattenden argues that the media “preferred” a perception of the contentious works as an attack on “the pious meanings surrounding the images held dear by those of Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup> He received many angry ‘phone calls after the *Daily Telegraph* report including anti-Islamic sentiments and a woman who explained that Sullivan’s *The Fourth Secret of Fatima* (a burqa-clad Virgin Mary) was like a punch to her stomach.<sup>19</sup> Conservative commentator Andrew Bolt has criticised both the 2007 Blake Prize and Pattenden himself for what he perceives to be an attack on Christianity. He believes that Bracks has launched an attack on a peaceful faith. Bolt writes, “[s]afer to crucify Christ again for the sins of others. How easy it is to slander the guy whose followers don’t shoot back.”<sup>20</sup> He points the finger of blame at the government, mentioning that the venue of the Blake Prize, the National Art School, is taxpayer funded. Bolt sees Pattenden as a symbol of the Uniting Church “in steepest decline.”<sup>21</sup> He believes that Christians are generally kinder and better citizens and deems Christianity “one of the few remaining civilising influences” on present-day society.<sup>22</sup> He eloquently represents the viewpoint that the Blake Prize is a means of attacking

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geopolitical events lead to spirituality “being confused with other more pragmatic concerns of human existence. If we read the religious texts carefully it is clear that God is on no-one’s side if they advocate violence and choose war over peace.” Despite the clear pacifist nature of her artwork, Bracks received numerous emails asking why she had no feelings for those lost to terrorist attacks or expressing concern that she could criticise a faith that had done nothing to her. The website priscillabracks.com is not presently functional, although the ongoing *Making the Empire Cross* series has its own website and explanation available at <http://making-the-empire-cross.com>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>17</sup> Rod Pattenden in Rosemary Neill, ‘Keeping the Faith,’ *The Australian* (27 August 2011), at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/keeping-the-faith/story-e6frg8n6-1226120547381>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>18</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 758.

<sup>19</sup> Pattenden in Neill, ‘Keeping the Faith.’

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Bolt, ‘Osama, Where art Thou Hanging?,’ *The Herald Sun* (31 August 2007), at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/opinion/osama-where-art-thou-hanging/story-e6frfrfx-1111114306500>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>21</sup> Bolt, ‘Osama, Where art Thou Hanging?.’

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Bolt, ‘If Christianity is Bad, Why Are Christians Kinder?,’ *The Herald Sun Andrew Bolt Blog* (9 September 2011), at [http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/if\\_christianity\\_is\\_bad\\_why\\_are\\_christians\\_kinder](http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/if_christianity_is_bad_why_are_christians_kinder). Accessed 8/12/2011.

a faith that is pacifistic and unable to defend itself; an attitude that is remarkably common within reactions to the images presented in this article.

Another important element of the debate over problematic Blake Prize entries is the prominence given to the opinion of political figures, most of who have no training in the academic disciplines of studies in religion or visual arts, and who seem generally uninterested in researching (or even viewing) the images in question. Pattenden calls this a “unique phenomenon for Australia” in which “everyone had become an expert at looking at contemporary art, with a Prime Minister as guide.”<sup>23</sup> A follow-up report to the one mentioned by Pattenden quotes then-opposition leader Kevin Rudd who called Bracks’ *Bearded Orientals (Making the Empire Cross)* “off in the extreme,” although he tempered this with a concession that “I accept you know people can have artistic freedom.”<sup>24</sup> Then-Premier Morris Iemma backed Rudd and Howard, stating: “I haven’t seen either of these pieces but from what has been described to me, it’s a pity they were not stolen instead of the Dutch masterpiece.” (Here Iemma references a concurrent theft from the Art Gallery of New South Wales concerning a painting that he evidently found more valuable and beneficial to the people of Sydney).<sup>25</sup> This rare bipartisan attitude reveals the extent to which Australian political leaders have been united in their reaction to the threat of images that are seen to denigrate devotional figures. Providing editorial content to the *Daily Telegraph* article, journalists Elizabeth Fortescue and Heath Aston quipped “[t]he artworks are the latest in a string of offensive pieces that have infuriated Christians while their creators hide behind the veil of ‘art’.” They also reveal that the “majority of readers” in an online poll conducted by the newspaper “are also *disgusted* by the bin Laden holograph and a statue of the Virgin Mary shrouded by a Muslim burqa.”<sup>26</sup> Here we see a deeply-felt reaction to the images, culminating in a suspicion that ‘art’ is merely a defence for an attack on Christianity.

This idea of the art object as something aggressive is a prominent and enduring lens with which the public views the Blake Prize. As Pattenden explains, this kind of media coverage has reinforced the idea that “the image itself was able to incite violence, moreover that it contained the affective power

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<sup>23</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 758.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Rudd in Elizabeth Fortescue and Heath Aston, ‘Bin Laden Art “Not Offensive”,’ *The Daily Telegraph* (30 August 2007), at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/bin-laden-art-not-offensive/story-e6freuy9-111114298027>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>25</sup> Morris Iemma in Fortescue and Aston, ‘Bin Laden Art “Not Offensive”.’

<sup>26</sup> Fortescue and Aston, ‘Bin Laden Art “Not Offensive”,’ emphasis my own.

to attack or injure those who viewed it.”<sup>27</sup> When examining recent reactions to the Blake Prize it is important to consider prevailing attitudes toward modern art in Australia. Presently, artists are increasingly scrutinised as purveyors of dangerous and offensive material. After the Henson scandal, the Australian art world has been viewed with increasing scepticism and paranoia.<sup>28</sup> For example, when Rodney Pople’s show ‘Bellini 21c’ opened in 2010, the Australian Galleries in Paddington decided to install a warning sign due to offensive content.<sup>29</sup> Stuart Purves, gallery director, remarked “[w]e just don’t want a Bill Henson situation.”<sup>30</sup> The mingling of pornography and Catholicism, which shall be explored shortly, was perceived as a possible legal issue. Demonstrators spent three hours praying outside the gallery with images of the Virgin Mary, and gallery staff and the Woollahra Council fielded abusive telephone calls and written complaints. Henson’s controversial 2008 exhibition was repeatedly cited as a reason for extra pressure on the censorship and investigation of Pople.<sup>31</sup> Similar accusations of deviant sexuality have been applied to Pople’s Blake Prize submission. Pattenden himself has been accused of deviance. Bolt criticises Pattenden’s participation in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, explaining it as “a parade that not only ridicules Christianity, but celebrates a pagan riot of hearts-free sex.”<sup>32</sup> This accusation of non-Christian sexual promiscuity was part of his reflections upon the Blake Prize. There is a prevailing attitude, especially in popular media such as the

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<sup>27</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 758.

<sup>28</sup> Annabel Carr provides an account of this contemporary ‘sex scandal,’ along with an argument against the associated public hysteria over ‘sexualised’ images of children, in Annabel Carr, ‘The Art of the Child: Turning the Lens on Lewis Carroll,’ *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 123-137.

<sup>29</sup> Matt Buchanan and Leesha McKenny, ‘Warning or Guaranteed Crowd-Puller?’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 September 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/the-diary/warning-or-guaranteed-crowdpuller-20100909-153b9.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Purves in Elizabeth Fortescue, ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ *The Daily Telegraph* (10 September 2010), at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/entertainment/whats-on/rodney-poples-art-is-erotic-exotic-and-designed-to-shock/story-e6frefxmi-1225916763431>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Taylor, ‘Cardinal Sin Triggers Alarm Bells at Australian Galleries,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (5 September 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/cardinal-sin-triggers-alarm-bells-at-art-gallery-20100904-14v6u.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>32</sup> Bolt, ‘Osama, Where art Thou Hanging?.’



*Daily Telegraph*, that an art object may function as an attack on social values and thus should be viewed as a possible danger to those who view it.

Another prominent criticism, and one that features in the reactions to artists such as Cullen, is an accusation of ugliness. There appears to be an enduring mode of visual representation that audience members expect when dealing with subjects such as the Madonna or the crucifixion. Artists who represent sacred characters or narratives (especially those connected to Christianity) in a naïve, ‘ugly,’ or unrefined manner are also accused of degenerate intentions and a lack of respect. Crumlin believes that the most outspoken critics of the recent Blake Prize are those who wish for “traditional, Renaissance-type images with an overlay of piety.” She adds that such a viewpoint ignores the changing face of Australian religiosity and the diverse cultural backgrounds of its citizens.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the correlation of religious imagery with the canon of Western Christian art (established due to colonisation from the United Kingdom) is a narrow and exclusive definition that privileges a particular cultural inheritance over all others. This viewpoint suggests that there is a single crucifixion narrative, a single message to be derived from it, and a particular style in which they may be visually represented. To deviate from this is to bring forth accusations of disrespect towards, and even violence against, Christianity. Interestingly, Pattenden uses his experiences as a Reverend to argue against repetition and familiarity in Biblical images. He believes renditions that become too familiar turn kitsch and lose their power.<sup>34</sup> This seems to be a minority viewpoint.

The final pre-eminent accusation this article will deal with is the notion of the Blake Prize as too broadly spiritual. Here we see a schism between the popular perception of what religion is and should be versus the academic treatment of this human cultural product. Familiar with an academy in which the existence of ‘religion’ itself is debated, Pattenden has an open-minded approach to the extraordinarily difficult task of defining the ‘spiritual.’ This was epitomised in his praise for the 2009 winner, Angelica Mesiti, and her video of the Sydney Big Day Out Festival titled *Rapture (Silent Anthem)*. Pattenden praised the “dark shadows of tribal behaviour” in this silent film of young people at a concert. He opined “I think it shows where religion comes

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<sup>33</sup> Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 183.

<sup>34</sup> Rod Pattenden in Andrew Taylor, ‘The Shock of the Old,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (28 August 2011), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-shock-of-the-old-20110827-1jfav.html#ixzz1lf6St2Fc>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

from – this thing about the longing, being excited, pushed to the edges.”<sup>35</sup> Pattenden confesses, “there doesn’t seem to be anything that’s beyond what we could consider the religious imagination.”<sup>36</sup> His definition of the boundaries of different traditions is also contentious. Pattenden argues that Christians and Christian institutions are not the sole owners of concepts such as the crucifixion narrative. He believes that the inheritance of Biblical narratives as a result of their foundational position in Western culture means that they shape the “moral codes and social behaviour” of Australians regardless of their actual affiliation with Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

Unsurprisingly, both popular journalists and leaders of the mainstream Christian community have been disappointed by Pattenden’s attitude. Art critic John McDonald calls the Prize “a warm, fuzzy bath in which all faiths, all creeds and cults are invited to take a dip.” He suggests it is almost impossible to find religious content in some of the entries.<sup>38</sup> Robert Forsyth, the Anglican Bishop of South Sydney, does not entirely advocate the selection criteria of the Blake Prize. Forsyth believes that the diversity and confrontation of the artworks is “consistent with religious art” but warns that “it’s not enough. My concern is that they seem to be lacking in depth...Perhaps they reflect our confusion about what is religious or spiritual.”<sup>39</sup> The inclusive definition of religion employed by the Prize has allowed works that are critical of religion, but without personal reflections on faith, to be displayed. McDonald quips:

[i]f all religion were as vague and nondescript as the works in the Blake Prize, the world would be a much more peaceful place. Nobody could ever be passionate, let alone fanatical, about the lame and timid entries in Australia’s leading competition for religious art. Or should that be ‘spiritual’ art?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Adam Fulton, ‘How Videos Killed the Painting Stars at the Blake Prize,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (4 September 2009), at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/how-videos-killed-the-painting-stars-at-the-blake-prize/2009/09/04/1251570807723.html>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>36</sup> Pattenden in ABC Television, ‘COMPASS: Chasing the Blake.’

<sup>37</sup> Pattenden in Taylor, ‘The Shock of the Old.’

<sup>38</sup> John McDonald, ‘Award Has Become an Unholy Irrelevance,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 September 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/award-has-become-an-unholy-irrelevance-20100902-14rlo.html#ixzz1KbWfjsj1>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Forsyth in Louise Schwartzkoff, ‘Blake Prize Art Anti-Religious, Says Pell,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (22 August 2009), at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/blake-prize-art-antireligious-says-pell-20090821-etst.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>40</sup> McDonald, ‘Award Has Become an Unholy Irrelevance.’

There is an underlying assumption that the Blake has ceased to feature ‘real religion,’ which appears to be inherently linked to a Judeo-Christian vision of piety.

Despite these reactions, the Blake Prize seems likely to continue causing controversy and irritation in the name of spiritual expression and experimentation. Those who administer and judge the competition often celebrate the potentially unsafe and critical material presented by the entrants. General Manager of the Blake Prize, Stefanie Lewis, describes religion as a subject that is “prickly and scary” and a concept that “brings out the devils and angels in all of us.”<sup>41</sup> Under her leadership and that of Pattenden, the competition is inclusive and values experimentation. Judges of the competition usually support this ethos of questioning and shock. 2010 judge Sasha Grishin remarked, “[c]ontroversy is good. Bill Henson’s imagery is in defence of innocence, in defence of childhood. In the same way, Rodney Pople, by shining a mirror at child abuse, tries to nullify it.”<sup>42</sup> Pattenden finds the annual controversy interesting and necessary. He explains, “[i]n an exhibition that explores spirituality, we need contrast, discord and difference. Otherwise we anaesthetise it and make it comfortable.”<sup>43</sup> The following case studies explore just a few sides of this lively and provocative curatorial manifesto, coupled with a considerable amount of the predicted discord.

### **Rodney Pople: Modern Sex Criminal?**

Journalist Steve Meacham wrote of Rodney Pople’s painting *Cardinal with Altar Boy* (2010):

in the cardinal’s lap – echoing the classic pieta pose of the crucified Messiah – is an altar boy, his genitals partly exposed as he offers his own innocence to the figure of religious authority. Yes, it’s Blake prize time again.<sup>44</sup>

Pople is infamous for his semi-pornographic artworks in which couples copulate in the houses of parliament or within grandiloquent churches. One could hardly accuse Pople’s art of being ugly. His figures and backdrops are exquisitely refined and highlight the delicate luminosity of the world’s most

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<sup>41</sup> Stefanie Lewis [26 October 2009] in Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 181.

<sup>42</sup> Steve Meacham, ‘Spiritual Works that Don’t Flinch from Taboo Themes,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (28 August 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/spiritual-works-that-dont-flinch-from-taboo-themes-20100827-13vzh.html?rand=1284518837064#ixzz1KbTA6yZ5>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>43</sup> Pattenden in Schwartzkoff, ‘Blake Prize Art Anti-Religious, Says Pell.’

<sup>44</sup> Meacham, ‘Spiritual Works that Don’t Flinch from Taboo Themes.’

decorative churches. What Pople lacks in ugliness, however, he makes up for in sexual content and critique of Christianity as a ruling cultural narrative. The reactions to Pople's work show a clear misunderstanding of his content, fuelled by moral indignation over the 'bad values' they represent and the way in which they 'degrade' institutionalised Christianity. Pople makes it clear that he does not advocate acts such as child molestation, which is the topic of his Blake Submission *Cardinal with Altar Boy*. Instead, his focus is on criticising the hypocrisy of institutions such as the Catholic Church.<sup>45</sup> Pople overtly states that his paintings are "not an attack on Christianity," but an exploration of how the Catholic Church's position as a pinnacle of society has eroded over recent years.<sup>46</sup> His works challenge the Church's power to abuse children without punishment.<sup>47</sup> In this sense they are overtly *against* paedophilia despite ongoing accusations to the contrary.

The hysterical reactions to Pople's *Bellini Altarpiece*, part of the 'Bellini 21c' exhibition, have already been alluded to. This image uses a traditional mode of church art to combine Venetian ecclesiastical interiors with graphic renditions of a porn star Madonna. Pople describes his work as an attack on hierarchies within Western civilisation and the way in which the morally upright is often merely pretence. He writes, "[m]y paintings challenge the facade of our politically correct society by hinting, with an unabashed use of fiction and exaggeration, what might lie beneath the surface."<sup>48</sup> One could argue that Pople's images rally for a more ethical and open society. This is certainly more sustainable than accusations of infectious moral wrongs. Despite this, *Bellini Altarpiece*<sup>49</sup> and Pople's *oeuvre* have been frequently

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<sup>45</sup> Simon Plant, 'Rodney Pople's Erotic Art Show Opens in Collingwood,' *The Herald Sun* (24 August 2011), at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/arts/rodney-poples-erotic-art-show-opens-in-collingwood/story-fn7euh6j-1226120775228>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>46</sup> Georgina Robinson, 'Power of the Pople: Protestors Outraged by Confronting Art,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (15 September 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/power-of-the-pople-protesters-outraged-by-confronting-art-20100915-15bwp.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>47</sup> Meacham, 'Spiritual Works that Don't Flinch from Taboo Themes.'

<sup>48</sup> Rodney Pople in Fortescue, 'Rodney Pople's Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock.'

<sup>49</sup> The *Bellini Altarpiece* was not an inclusion in the Blake Prize. Nevertheless, its content and technique places it in the same milieu to *Cardinal with Altar Boy*, an image that is clearly part of an ongoing dialogue with Pople's recent body of work. The reactions to the 'Bellini 21c' exhibition are also revealing of attitudes towards art shows in Sydney (including the Blake Prize) in the wake of Henson.

misread in a shallow and ill-conceived manner. The ‘comments’ section of an online newspaper is an excellent source of popular opinion, and does not disappoint in the case of Pople. Numerous commentators support his art and criticise censorship, implying that anyone who is offended needs to ‘grow up.’ The expected questions over how one can define what art is and is not are also present. What is interesting for the argument of this article is the perceived intimate relationship between art and Australia/Australian culture. There is a suggestion that art and social morals are intertwined, and that Pople’s painting reflects upon and endangers these mores. Comments include the claim that *Bellini Altarpiece Triptych* is a “depiction well suited to representing society’s degradation.”<sup>50</sup> Pople is called an “evil man in an evil country.”<sup>51</sup> One commenter quips “[w]e should not be surprised at this. Our society has been in a moral down hill spiral for ages.”<sup>52</sup> Another asks “why choose to add to today’s moral torpidude [sic] when he could use his time doing something uplifting?”<sup>53</sup>

The possible insult to a Christian audience is an unsurprisingly prominent theme of the discussion. This is epitomised with the comment “[t]his man’s idea of art is very, very, sick and highly offensive [sic] to those who practice the Christian faith. It is sacrilege [sic].”<sup>54</sup> A significant portion of responses deals with the idea that only Christianity is targeted by this kind of imagery. To show but a few examples of this prominent theme, one respondent asked:

[t]here is something I don’t understand...Firstly, a slight is made against a gay person and the Gay Community come out ‘guns firing’ so to speak...Someone wants to burn the Koran (which I do NOT agree with by the way), the Muslim Community are in a total uproar, but when someone defames Christ or anything to do with Christianity, we are just narrow minded people if we are offended -

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<sup>50</sup> Edward James, comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>51</sup> ‘dave,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Norm,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>53</sup> ‘Michele,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Elaine,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

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tell me why this is so? Also, tell me why the Christian Community is not allowed to have an opinion without being vilified??????????<sup>55</sup>

Here, Islam is presented as a *different* belief system, the followers of which are more likely and able to protest. One commenter remarks, “[i]f this was anyway offensive to Islam there would be riots right now.”<sup>56</sup> Another states, “[i]f this was an Islamic figure [sic] that this mongrel did this too [sic], the government would make him remove it in 5 seconds flat.”<sup>57</sup> One commenter asks “is Pople prepared to do an identical piece of an Imam and is the gallery prepared to put on an exhibition with naked bodies superimposed on a mosque?”<sup>58</sup>

Indigenous art is presented in a similar light. One comment reads, “of course the good old Catholic church is always good for a bashing. Try doing the same thing with a traditional aboriginal painting and see what would happen. He would be hung, drawn and quartered.”<sup>59</sup> Christians are presented as either gentle people, or those who are too crippled by unfair social restrictions to defend their emblems from blasphemy. One comment implies that Pople chooses Christians as “a soft target (what a coward)[,] as he knows they are pacifists as opposed to what would happen to him if he did it to a drawing of Mohammed.”<sup>60</sup> These opinions all suggest that Australian culture fails to defend Christianity in the same way homosexual and Indigenous communities are defended, and that Christians are too peaceful to protect themselves in the manner of pugnacious and violent Muslims. This attitude is obviously deeply misguided as Islamic, queer, and Indigenous cultures have been major targets for attack in modern Australian history. Here the problematic ‘political correctness gone mad’ attitude has led to accusations of reverse racism that reveal a misunderstanding of social privilege. Pople has pushed the boundaries of acceptable art, and has thus been accused of attacking ‘safe,’ peaceful Christianity. This attitude is unsurprising considering the leadership of public

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<sup>55</sup> ‘Far Away Anne,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Anthony,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>57</sup> ‘waxer,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Nick,’ comment on ‘Concerns Over Blake Prize Entry of Boy on Cardinal’s Lap,’ *CathNews* (6 September 2010), at <http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=23154>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Joe,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

<sup>60</sup> ‘waxer,’ comment on ‘Rodney Pople’s Art is Erotic, Exotic and Designed to Shock,’ posted 10 September 2010.

figures such as Bolt in the debate over ethics in art. It has also resulted in a clear misunderstanding of Pople's aims. Instead of pondering potential hypocrisies within institutions of power, Pople's work seems to have done more toward giving the public an excuse to complain about Islam.

### **Adam Cullen: Purveyor of the Ugly**

Adam Cullen's unorthodox treatment of Biblical figures has led to media outrage, much of it focused on the 'ugly' renditions of sacred peoples. In 2009, Cullen's depiction of David and Goliath for the Blake Prize was singled out by Cardinal George Pell. His figures were described as "gross." Pell stated "[i]t's difficult to see how that is not anti-religious."<sup>61</sup> Here we see an 'ugly' rendition of Biblical narrative as justification for its rejection as genuine religious iconography or as a genuine engagement with faith. Cullen's intentions are difficult to define. He is a controversial figure in the Australian art world due to his hostile and unhinged persona; described in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as a "serial stirrer...who once paraded around art school with a pig's head bagged and tied to his hand."<sup>62</sup> In terms of religious beliefs, Cullen has described himself as Catholic for "Irish political reasons." He states, "Jesus Christ wasn't killed by Romans but by the English on the streets of Belfast."<sup>63</sup> Is Cullen just stirring his audience, or might he be reverential? These issues may be explored through an examination of the 2008 painting *Corpus Christi (Only Women Bleed)*. In this image, a cartoonish Christ hangs against a toxic purple backdrop, rendered in Cullen's frantic and distinctive style. Internal debates in the Blake Prize judging panel over the inclusion of the image led to resignation. Christopher Allen, no stranger to Christian iconography, quit the Blake Prize in protest after *Corpus Christi (Only Women Bleed)* was selected to hang in the exhibition. Responding to the grotesque and cartoonish nature of the image, Allen explained his complaint by stating, "[i]t has a kind of deliberate ugliness which has been exploited as a gimmick."<sup>64</sup> He believes that

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<sup>61</sup> George Pell in Schwartzkoff, 'Blake Prize Art Anti-Religious, Says Pell.'

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Taylor, "'Cheap' Laws Make People Fear Real Art,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (4 July 2010), at <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/cheap-laws-make-people-fear-real-art-20100703-zuzt.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>63</sup> Adam Cullen in Andrew Taylor, 'Drag Queen Christ Sure to Stir the Passions,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (7 August 2011), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/drag-queen-christ-sure-to-stir-the-passions-20110806-1igjz.html#ixzz110FgSBnt>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>64</sup> Christopher Allen in Erik Jensen, Louise Schwartzkoff, and Richard Jinman, 'Religious Art Prize Judge Quits in Disgust,' *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 August 2008),

Cullen takes “ugliness to the point of provocation” in a bid to make his work appear interesting.<sup>65</sup> Diplomatically, Pattenden explained that Allen’s reaction was “based in a deep appreciation of beauty in art.”<sup>66</sup>

Here we see the technical qualities of a Crucifixion image causing genuine irritation. Readers of the *CBC News* website offer some valuable insights into how this image is viewed by a non-academic audience, both in Australia and abroad. The ‘comments’ section of this site is a microcosm of the broad debate over the issue of religious representation in modern art. Many readers have a very clear opinion of what religious art should be and how it should be analysed. One commentator epitomises this notion with the statement: “[i]s the piece well executed [sic]? That should be the most important question. In this context, is it religious is of utmost importance. To me it appears to be anti-religious.”<sup>67</sup> This establishes a common attitude that a work in a religious prize exhibition should be technically refined and overtly pious. Hesitating to even call it art, one audience member categorises the piece as “political graffiti.”<sup>68</sup> The vernacular nature of Cullen’s communication is seen as too lowly to qualify as ‘high art.’ Cullen’s piece is frequently described as unattractive and distasteful. One respondent labels *Corpus Christi (Only Women Bleed)* as “ugly with a capital ug!”<sup>69</sup> Upon sighting a reproduction of the work after a reading of the controversy, another commenter confessed, “I thought it would be a much more complicated and technically rendered work. I’m afraid I will agree with Mr. Allen – it’s ugly in a gimmicky kind of way.

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at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/religious-art-prize-judge-quits-in-disgust/2008/08/05/1217702042611.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Allen, ‘Why I Quit the Blake Prize Jury,’ *The Australian* (7 August 2009), at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/why-i-quit-the-blake-prize-jury/story-e6frg8n6-1111117126187>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>66</sup> Rod Pattenden in Rob Taylor, “‘Only Women Bleed’ Crucifixion Art Fury,” *The Standard* (7 August 2008), at [http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news\\_detail.asp?we\\_cat=6&art\\_id=69792&sid=20072563&con\\_type=1&d\\_str=20080807&fc=7](http://www.thestandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?we_cat=6&art_id=69792&sid=20072563&con_type=1&d_str=20080807&fc=7). Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>67</sup> ‘WayneMacIsaac,’ comment on ‘Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,’ *CBC News*, posted 7 August 2008, at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/artdesign/story/2008/08/06/art-religious.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>68</sup> ‘DalekPrime,’ comment on ‘Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,’ posted 10 August 2008.

<sup>69</sup> ‘trolley,’ comment on ‘Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,’ posted 7 August 2008.



Or, to be more politically correct...it's not my aesthetic."<sup>70</sup> This statement implies that Cullen is bad on purpose.

The monetary value of the Blake Prize is surprisingly paramount in reactions to Cullen's work. Statements on this topic include "Is it worth \$20,000? To me it looks to be worth about \$500."<sup>71</sup> Also, "Worth maybe \$100.00"<sup>72</sup> Another reader writes "What makes it worth \$20,000? Because some crap drawing of Jesus [sic] is in it."<sup>73</sup> Viewers seem to be irritated by the potential worth of a painting that they consider pointless or badly rendered. There are also accusations that the work is inherently meaningless or confused. One respondent ponders, "I wonder if Mr. Cullen even knows what he's really trying to say."<sup>74</sup> The artist is denounced as unoriginally derivative, borrowing too heavily from outsider artists such as Howard Finster via "jarring colors, the inclusion of text." This accusation of "faux primitivism" is connected to a complaint about Cullen as technically unrefined. He is said to show "no sign of any engagement with or concern about the imagery – no hesitations, re-thinking or re-working, no care taken. Blake himself would dismiss it. In terms of technical artistic merit, sloppily executed – just spewed out."<sup>75</sup> Cullen is presented as careless or untalented, thus undeserving of consideration for the Blake Prize. This search for beauty in the painting is critiqued by one commentator who asks "as opposed to the actual beauty of the crucifixion? Crucifixion was a bloody, brutal execution – a reality which I think is more honestly portrayed in this painting than [sic] most of the over-romanticized paintings of the last millennium."<sup>76</sup>

Another obvious feature of this work, as cued by its title, is the feminisation of the crucifixion. Unsurprisingly this has caused significant

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<sup>70</sup> 'kareny,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 7 August 2008.

<sup>71</sup> 'WayneMacIsaac,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 7 August 2008.

<sup>72</sup> 'JeanHess,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 8 August 2008.

<sup>73</sup> 'Iacrosseguy,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 8 August 2008.

<sup>74</sup> 'trolley,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 7 August 2008.

<sup>75</sup> 'JeanHess,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 8 August 2008.

<sup>76</sup> 'mdenny,' comment on 'Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,' posted 7 August 2008.

offence. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her exploration of gender bias in the Christian church, states that “the incarnation of the Logos of God into the male is not a historical accident, but an ontological necessity.” The sex of Christ reflects the male as dominant and the female as subjugated.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, an inversion of Christ’s sex represents a direct challenge to church power structures and mainstream theology. Contemporary artists who deconstruct and morph the historical Christ are engaging in a counter-cultural discourse that can be read as a challenge to Christ as saviour or as an attack on the teachings of the Christian Church. The historical Jesus is clearly a male figure, although Cullen juxtaposes his dripping blood with the statement ‘ONLY WOMAN [sic] BLEED.’ This title references an Alice Cooper song about a woman in an abusive relationship. The song’s narrative explores her ongoing suffering and personal sacrifices. Through the quotation of this song, Cullen implies a connection between the Passion of Christ and a woman subjected to ongoing abuse. Questions may be asked such as ‘does the woman in the song suffer out of love for her children?’, ‘can she be seen to have free will?’, and ‘can she reject her mantle as a martyr?’ These can be correlated to theological questions raised in regards to Christ. Thus, Cullen’s work can be read as a sincere rumination on the broad topic of sacrifice, both on a personal and spiritual level. One *CBC News* reader believes this is “a reference to the plight of women in the church.”<sup>78</sup> One possible reading of Cullen’s image is as a comment on female issues within a predominantly male discourse. Considering the rather angry debates around Cullen’s image, it is apparent that there is tension between the use of Christ as revolutionary political motif (represented here by Cullen) and Christ as a motif of the established church (as upheld by many of his critics).

The debates over Cullen’s Christ can be seen as a tense negotiation between these two faces of Christianity, rather than an overt denial or ridicule of Christianity itself. As Crumlin argues, Cullen’s work is “balanced precariously between intense belief and intense mockery.” Nevertheless, she maintains that his intentions are always serious.<sup>79</sup> It is easy to lose perspective of the artist’s intended statement when its ‘offensive’ means of delivery is too intensely foregrounded. Whatever his intent may be, feminist or otherwise, Cullen claims that he did not mean to create religious controversy. He

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<sup>77</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 126.

<sup>78</sup> ‘mdenny,’ comment on ‘Judge Quits Religious Art Competition Over Painting,’ posted 7 August 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Crumlin, *The Blake Book*, p. 183.

frequently implies that scandal is automatically attached to his images. In terms of *Corpus Christi (Only Women Bleed)*, Cullen overtly states that “it’s not ugly and it’s not shocking. I don’t see how anyone can be offended by such a familiar image as Christ on the cross.”<sup>80</sup> The artist denies creating an atypical image and does not consider his work to be distasteful. Cullen was surprised by Allen’s actions. He retorts, “[i]t’s just a Jew on the cross. All the other entries would be of a Jew on two bits of wood. It’s a very left wing, almost pseudo-femme, artwork. How can he be offended?”<sup>81</sup> Jethro Lyne believes that Cullen may enjoy the debate over his startling imagery. He writes, “Cullen is no stranger to controversy; he would be concerned if there was a neutral response to them.”<sup>82</sup> Whether or not Lyne has correctly read Cullen’s thoughts, his suggestion that we value a work on its intent is important here. The artist clearly produced this work for a reason other than offending the public. Its meaning is deeper and should not be ignored or minimised due to the public outrage that surrounds Cullen’s Biblical images.

### **Luke Roberts and the Nature of Sacrifice**

Luke Roberts’ 2011 Blake Prize entry, *Three Figures at the Bases of Crucifixions*, demonstrates yet another misunderstanding of content coupled with a strong desire to maintain normative Christianity as the source of ‘good values.’ Roberts’ triptych includes such models as Indigenous artist Richard Bell, and well-known members of the LGBTQI community Jodie Taylor, Tobin Saunders, and Jandy Rainbow. These public figures recreate a well-known pose of crucifixion art, many of them dressed in outlandish stage make-up and drag attire. Unsurprisingly, ill-informed criticism emerged as soon as the submission of this image in the Blake Prize was made public. Without having seen the artwork first, Forsyth, told the press “[i]t sounds like something I would not be happy about...It’s either disrespectful or seeking to take Christ and use him for other fundamentally non-religious causes.” Although he qualified that such art should not be forbidden, Forsyth was clearly unconvinced (sight unseen) that such an image could have religious

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<sup>80</sup> Adam Cullen in Louise Schwartzkoff, ‘Allen Let Bias Cloud Judgement: Artist,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (7 August 2008), at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/allen-let-bias-cloud-judgment-artist/2008/08/06/1217702141352.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

<sup>81</sup> Adam Cullen in Jensen, Schwartzkoff, and Jinman, ‘Religious Art Prize Judge Quits in Disgust.’

<sup>82</sup> Jethro Lyne, ‘Struggle to Put Faith in the Frame,’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (7 August 2008), at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/struggle-to-put-faith-in-the-frame/2008/08/06/1217702138306.html>. Accessed 20/11/2011.

merits.<sup>83</sup> In regards to Roberts' perceived attack on Christianity, Forsyth opined that his community was "fair game" to artists as Christians "don't threaten to kill someone because they insult Jesus Christ even if [they] find it offensive. It's not in the genes of Christianity."<sup>84</sup> The comments left on articles dealing with this image are so similar to those already mentioned in this paper that they are almost indistinguishable from one another. Epitomising such retorts against Roberts, *CathNews* reader Gerry McIvor states:

[i]t seems that modern art has to resort to shock, provocative tactics which assaults the sensibilities of those who hold very sincere religious beliefs. This is a direct assault on Our Lord and by extension causes very serious distress to those of us who place Him at the centre of our lives. Christians form a very easy target as we are not prone to reflexive violence by the nature of our beliefs.<sup>85</sup>

Roberts would probably disagree with this wholly positive vision of Catholicism, based in part on his experience as "a downcast, unhappy, gay youth" who had to "renegotiate my own spiritual connection in rejecting Christianity in the 1970s."<sup>86</sup> Roberts was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family and enjoyed his role as an altar boy. In an interview with Pattenden he celebrates the sense of ritual and history in the Catholic Church, but also expresses the pain of having to cease attending Mass due to conflicts with his homosexuality.<sup>87</sup> Roberts is now a Raelian and has achieved the rank of level four guide in Oceania, a priestly role. (The Raelian press has an overwhelmingly positive view of Roberts and his artistic achievements.)<sup>88</sup> In the present era, Roberts prefers Christ-Consciousness to Christianity on the basis that the former is inclusive whilst the latter is exclusive.<sup>89</sup> His body of

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<sup>83</sup> Rob Forsyth in Taylor, 'Drag Queen Christ Sure to Stir the Passions.'

<sup>84</sup> Forsyth in Taylor, 'Drag Queen Christ Sure to Stir the Passions.'

<sup>85</sup> Gerry McIvor, comment on 'Brisbane Artist's Provocative Crucifixions.'

<sup>86</sup> Luke Roberts, 'Art, Anarchy & So Much More,' *Lukeroberts.com* (8 September 2011), at <http://lukerobertsartist.com/2011/09/art-anarchy-so-much-more/#article>. Accessed 8/2/2011.

<sup>87</sup> Luke Roberts [2010] in Pattenden, 'Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,' pp. 767-768.

<sup>88</sup> 'Drag Queen Christ Art Stirs Passions,' *Raelianews* (14 November 2011), at <http://raelianews.org/oceania>. Accessed 8/12/2011. It is also interesting to note the comment that "[t]he Australian Raelian Movement was greatly concerned about the shrill indignation, hysteria and fear mongering around the depiction of nude children in the arts." See 'Bondi Beach Nude Sculpture Clothed,' *Realianews* (15 November 2009), at <http://raelianews.org/comment.php?comment.news.382>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>89</sup> Roberts, 'Art, Anarchy & So Much More.'

work seeks to investigate Christ as a figure who expands beyond the role assigned to him by the church. On this note, he also advocates the idea that Christ spent time in India where he was influenced by the teachings of the Buddha and Krishna.<sup>90</sup>

There is no evidence that the artist wishes to convey an anti-Christ statement or to mock religious sentiment. Rather, *Three Figures at the Bases of Crucifixions* explores Christ as a figure of openness and generosity. By choosing models who are members of persecuted groups, Roberts wishes to convey the idea that “we’re all Christ-like.”<sup>91</sup> He critiques the culture of the church in which the only body whose persecution and sacrifice is worth caring for is that of a heterosexual white male. As Pattenden explains, Roberts is engaged with “drawing attention to the illusory boundaries of individual identity based in gender or race. He is an artist interested in the margins and prefers to inhabit these often-difficult spaces with pleasure, irony, and the humour of a clown able to loosen the tie of social norms.”<sup>92</sup> His jocular attitude is not meant to degrade Christianity, but rather to question the way in which it is socially applied. He quips “[i]f people think I’m just taking the piss out of Christianity, they’re way off track.”<sup>93</sup> Roberts perceives his art-marking as a kind of social justice project. In an interview with Pattenden he explained:

[m]y Catholic background gave me a sensitised awareness of what was right and what was wrong, or what needed to be worked on to bring harmony into a world that badly needed it. I always wanted to be an artist. I saw the spiritual potential of art.<sup>94</sup>

Roberts is adamant that all people may achieve Christ Consciousness by following their individual spiritual path toward love and truth. He remarks that this path is not closed by a person’s traditions or sexuality.<sup>95</sup>

Roberts does, however, have a message of extreme social upheaval. He believes that culture must be reformed and changed in order to achieve spiritual awakening for the world. Roberts calls for a syncretic religious system in

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<sup>90</sup> Roberts, ‘Art, Anarchy & So Much More.’ He cites, for example, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (*Luke* 6:41-42); “The faults of others are easier to see than one’s own” (*Undanavarga* 27:1); “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (*Luke* 6:31); and “Consider others as yourself” (*Dhammapada* 10:1).

<sup>91</sup> Roberts in Taylor, ‘Drag Queen Christ Sure to Stir the Passions.’

<sup>92</sup> Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 766.

<sup>93</sup> Roberts in Taylor, ‘Drag Queen Christ Sure to Stir the Passions.’

<sup>94</sup> Roberts [2010] in Pattenden, ‘Visible Religion, Visible Spirituality,’ p. 768.

<sup>95</sup> Roberts, ‘Art, Anarchy & So Much More.’

which “spiritual disciplines of East and West” are united and the past is reinterpreted.<sup>96</sup> In a nod to his Raelian beliefs, Roberts also calls for an acknowledgement “that we live amidst grand deceptions and aren’t alone in the Universe.”<sup>97</sup> He believes that anarchy is the ideal system under which to achieve this, as it implies the creation and development of social cohesion without the need for a state or ruler. Roberts remarks, “[a]t the very least Christianity requires this kind of anarchy,” and criticises the Catholic Church with “Chief Homophobe Benedict XVI as the current Caesar.”<sup>98</sup> One might expect that Roberts’ call to anarchy or a supra-cultural society based on a New Religious Movement would be the most alarming aspect of his message. This, however, has not been the case. The criticism levelled against him in the past year has been entirely due to the sexually ambiguous and non-normative figures he has used in his rendition of the crucifixion. Again, this betrays a wilful ignorance in the face of an artwork that has been concisely and publicly explained by its creator. Even when presented with an artist who really does wish to attack the social order of Australia, the actual nature of his plan for revolution has been comprehensively ignored.

## **Discussion**

The current nature of submissions to the Blake Prize, that is, art that evokes obscenity, satire, ‘ugliness,’ confusion, and de-institutionalised spirituality is best read as a reflection of the way that religion is viewed within contemporary Australia, and the limitations of its representation. The Prize does not represent sinister forces of secularisation aiming to mindlessly debase cultural traditions. It now appears standard that a finalist in the Blake Prize will have to defend the potentially offensive content of his or her work. For example, 2011 finalist Dawn Stubbs pre-empted controversy over her work *G9*, which quotes from the book of *Genesis* and displays orang-utans with halos. Although the artist made it clear that her work is a criticism of selfish behaviour towards endangered species, she expected it to be read as an offensive statement about Christianity.<sup>99</sup> Recent efforts at artistic censorship are worrying. A senate enquiry, led by Guy Barnett (a conservative Christian and Tasmanian Liberal

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<sup>96</sup> Roberts, ‘Art, Anarchy & So Much More.’

<sup>97</sup> Roberts, ‘Art, Anarchy & So Much More.’

<sup>98</sup> Roberts, ‘Art, Anarchy & So Much More.’

<sup>99</sup> Dawn Stubbs in Rosemary Neill, ‘Monkey Business Over Religious Art Award,’ *The Australian* (9 August 2011), at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/monkey-business-over-religious-art-award/story-fn9d3avm-1226111262323>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

Party member),<sup>100</sup> hopes to force a system of classification on to artworks in Australia. Under his proposed changes, art would need to be analysed by the film and literature classification board before being displayed. The Henson debate is a major topic of the inquiry, and one that angers Barnett. Under his system, artworks could be refused classification (and thus banned), including those containing nudity.<sup>101</sup> Barnett and his supporters also wished to eliminate “artistic merit” as a defence for what they consider to be immoral pieces.<sup>102</sup> Journalist Kelsey Munro reports that many members of the art establishment believe that the changes will not be implemented.<sup>103</sup> Regardless of the likelihood of such a classification system, its proposal reveals a culture of censorship and paranoia. Tamara Winikoff, executive director of the National Association for the Visual Arts, was disturbed by many comments made during the senate inquiry. She believes that artists were demonised and presented as pornographers.<sup>104</sup> Accusations of obscenity and deviance are apparently integral to the contemporary public appraisal of modern art.

As this article has shown, many artists who have presented Christ in an apparently offensive or deviant manner have actually attempted to celebrate the figure or critique their own spiritual struggles without demeaning Christian beliefs as a whole. Even artworks that seem to be an overt mockery of Christ are often multifarious pieces that contain genuine ruminations on faith,

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<sup>100</sup> Barnett has dedicated a significant amount of time to the censorship of material he considers to be dangerous or offensive. For a more detailed account of his campaigns, including his views on the contentious film *Salo* (dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), see Robert Cettl, *Offensive to a Reasonable Adult: Film Censorship in ‘Secular’ Australia* (Adelaide: Wider Screenings, 2011), p. 223ff.

<sup>101</sup> Wendy Frew, ‘Warning: This Art Debate May Contain Adult Themes,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (18 April 2011), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/warning-this-art-debate-may-contain-adult-themes-20110417-1dqv8.html>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>102</sup> Frew, ‘Warning: This Art Debate May Contain Adult Themes.’ As of 2010, artistic merit has been officially scrapped in the defence of artworks dealing with children in a pornographic manner; it can still, however, be employed for material that is deemed “offensive.” For full information on this legislation see <http://www.artslaw.com.au/info-sheets/info-sheet/children-in-the-creative-process-nsw/>.

<sup>103</sup> Kelsey Munro, ‘Senate Inquiry Cruellest of All, Say Artists,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19 April 2011), at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/senate-inquiry-cruellest-cut-of-all-say-artists-20110418-1dlrp.html>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>104</sup> Tamara Winikoff in Frew, ‘Warning: This Art Debate May Contain Adult Themes.’

sacrifice, or the historical Jesus. Clearly there is a problem with the interpretation of art in Australia when this culture of wilful ignorance and panic persists. As Australian art historian Mary Eagle writes, “[t]he community controls art through what it approves.”<sup>105</sup> Unfortunately, this approval is usually based on a shallow analysis of form over intended meaning. There has been an overwhelming failure to make appropriate distinctions between art that aims to lampoon religion and art that aims to engage with issues of faith, albeit in a potentially negative or unorthodox manner. This is largely a result of the position of religion, especially Christianity, within Australian culture. It is important to ask why an ‘attack’ on Christianity is an attack on ‘Australian civilisation’ when church attendance is low and dropping. Why too is Islam so readily presented as Christianity’s dichotomised other, even when the artworks that inspire such comment often have no Islamic content? In order to comprehend fully the problematic comments on religion and civilisation discussed in this article, one must consider the religio-political landscape of present-day Australia.

### **The Safe and the Unsafe of Australian Society**

Guided by the Prime Ministership of John Howard, and strongly influenced by the events of September 11, Christianity has come to represent tradition, safety, and the maintenance of cultural boundaries in Australia. An obvious example of the supposed ‘unsafe’ in contemporary Australian society is the Muslim population. In Maddox’s discussion of the ‘us versus them’ mentality fostered by the Howard Government, she pinpoints 2001 as the year in which Islam was specifically posited as a supposed menace. Maddox posits this as a religious anxiety as opposed to a racial one.<sup>106</sup> In contradistinction to Muslims as “outsiders-within-the-nation, conduits of anti-Western views and potential terrorists,”<sup>107</sup> Christianity has been firmly reiterated as ‘tradition.’ Maddox observes the depiction of Christianity as values-based and as a conduit of nationalism, civic order, and public safety.<sup>108</sup> This mindset persists to the present day, and has become a discourse of public safety versus public menace centered on the idea of Christianity as a stable and non-threatening basis for

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<sup>105</sup> Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1989), p. 43.

<sup>106</sup> Marion Maddox, “‘People Like That’: Race, Religion and Values in Recent Australian Political Rhetoric,” paper presented at the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 29 September to 1 October 2004, p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> Maddox, “‘People Like That,’” p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> Maddox, “‘People Like That,’” p. 2.



Australian social values, even if actual church attendance is more or less unnecessary.

Maddox also draws attention to the non-specificity of the concept ‘values,’ linked in Australia with Christianity. She likens the mainstream emergence of this rhetoric with Howard’s 2004 comment that parents are moving their children out of state schools because the education provided is “too politically correct and too values-neutral.”<sup>109</sup> As Sophie Sunderland explains, Howard was careful to show that the upholding of ‘values’ does not involve the establishment of a state religion. Simultaneously, however, his concept of ‘values’ was intrinsically linked to the promotion of a Westernised Judeo-Christian system of ethics as the “moral underpinnings of Australian society.”<sup>110</sup> Sunderland aptly argues that this “effectively constructs a singular moral system or code within Australia’s ostensibly multicultural and multifaith society.”<sup>111</sup> Any criticism of this tacit system of ethics may be dismissed as political correctness, which was established by Howard as a term with negative connotations. Maddox demonstrates the way in which Howard dichotomised ‘political correctness’ and ‘values’ through various instances in which he criticised schools for supposedly banning nativity plays and visits from Santa.<sup>112</sup> Howard phrased these instances as an attempt to “bland down...observance of traditional approaches in our country” for the sake of “minorities.”<sup>113</sup>

Here, notions of tradition are prioritised over pious observation. To say that all Australians should be Christians would be an unpopular, extremist viewpoint. But to imply that modern Christian ritual such as nativity plays, and associated seasonal characters such as Santa, are parts of Australian culture and tradition is neither misleading nor alarming. This weaves a social narrative of Christianity as a normal and joyous expression of culture. The performance of

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<sup>109</sup> John Howard in Annabel Crabb and Orietta Guerrera, ‘PM Queries Values of State Schools,’ *The Age* (20 January 2004), at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/19/1074360697635.html>. Accessed 29/12/2011.

<sup>110</sup> Sophie Sunderland, ‘Post-Secular Nation; or How “Australian Spirituality” Privileges a Secular, White, Judaeo-Christian Culture,’ *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2007), pp. 59-60.

<sup>111</sup> Sunderland, ‘Post-Secular Nation,’ p. 60.

<sup>112</sup> Maddox, “‘People Like That’,” pp. 15-16.

<sup>113</sup> John Howard in ‘PM Renews Public Schools Attack,’ *The Age* (28 January 2004), at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/28/1075088058752.html>. Accessed 29/1/2011.

a nativity play is presented as part of the experience of Australian childhood and part of expressing hegemonic 'values.' There is also the implication that 'someone out there' wishes to steal away our identity and warp our culture. Maddox explains her argument succinctly with the following observation:

Howard's vague appeals to 'values' work in the same way as his allusions to his Methodist childhood: they add a quasi-religious weight to his frequent nostalgic invocations of 'the way things used to be,' without being religiously specific enough to mark him off from the secular, amorphously spiritual 'us.' The combination contributes to a politically invaluable persona for a prime minister in a highly secularized electorate, where religion (meaning some vaguely-apprehended kind of Christianity) is seen as a good thing for other people to have. It makes particularly effective politics in a climate of increasing fear and suspicion. Religious values, even if we don't ourselves share them, promise sincerity, right-mindedness and safety in an uncertain world.<sup>114</sup>

This explains why the maintenance of Christianity assists in the maintenance of hegemonic Australian values. Even with a change in government to the supposedly less conservative Labour Party, Howard's intertwining of nominal Christianity with values and safety remains in the public consciousness.<sup>115</sup> As Sunderland writes, "in its current usage in the Australian context, 'the secular' includes the elevation of the 'Judaic-Christian ethic' to the level of national culture."<sup>116</sup> Thus the secular itself is intrinsically tied to a particular religious viewpoint. One does not need to be a practising Christian in order to conflate the protection of Christianity with the protection of Australian values. These notions are so thoroughly intertwined that Christianity now stands as a representation of safety, with Islam and other non-Christian forces posing a sense of lingering menace and social upheaval. This is why an artwork that denies or ignores the tenets of normative, nominal Christianity is perceived as an object of violence and danger that threatens the boundaries of cultural decency.

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<sup>114</sup> Maddox, "'People Like That'," pp. 18-19.

<sup>115</sup> Maddox has also explored the enduring presence of nominal Christianity under the Gillard Government. See, for example, Marion Maddox, 'God Under Gillard: Religion and Politics in Australia,' *ABC Religion & Ethics* (10 November 2011), at <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/11/10/3360973.htm>. Accessed 8/12/2011.

<sup>116</sup> Sunderland, 'Post-Secular Nation,' p. 58.

### Solutions (?) and Conclusions

The Blake Prize should be read as an ever-changing discourse as popular definitions of religious content are challenged and mutated by new forms of art making. Attempting to control the competition with censorship and newspaper attacks sustains the idea that the only inherently safe and ‘normal’ religious expression within Australia is Christianity rendered in a specifically reverential and traditionalist manner. It also encourages an alarmist and wilfully ignorant approach to art criticism where even basic research into an artist’s intentions is deemed unimportant. The Blake Prize has attempted to facilitate a plurality of voices that communicate a nuanced vision of Australian spiritual culture. In order to engage with these cultural statements, a less alarmist approach is necessary. There are numerous art historians and critics who offer an alternative way of viewing potentially troubling and supposedly irreligious artworks. As far back as 1961, Hughes proposed that art is religious “because it draws its sustenance from religion.”<sup>117</sup> Enforcing a stringent definition of the religious or the spiritual on to the Blake Prize tends to privilege faiths that most resemble Christianity and often leads to a denial of religious experience outside of religious structures (such as the ecstatic experience captured in the rock concert environment of *Rapture (Silent Anthem)*).

There seems little doubt that the Blake Prize, under its current leadership, will continue to cause skirmishes, revelations, and media hype. Pattenden describes the Blake Prize as “damn irritating” and feels that it uncovers religious life in Australia in a productive manner.<sup>118</sup> He sees William Blake as an example of what art can achieve. Pattenden feels as though “artists have a role in a culture to perhaps alarm us, to frighten us, to make us aware of things which we’ve become too comfortable and put aside into more safe boxes.”<sup>119</sup> He warns that popular themes such as the crucifixion are something “essentially shocking” in nature. He argues it is “by essence scandalous and controversial. It is not neat, tidy and domestic. It is a figure bleeding in utter agony.”<sup>120</sup> He advocates a change in perspective and expectations in regards to this kind of imagery. Pattenden believes that the Prize is interesting because “[i]t is not about people’s faces or gum trees. It is about issues which promote a passionate response.”<sup>121</sup> Passion has indeed prevailed, as the Blake Prize is

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<sup>117</sup> Hughes [1961] in Catalano, *The Years of Hope*, p. 78.

<sup>118</sup> Pattenden in ABC Television, ‘COMPASS: Chasing the Blake.’

<sup>119</sup> Pattenden in ABC Television, ‘COMPASS: Chasing the Blake.’

<sup>120</sup> Pattenden in Taylor, ‘The Shock of the Old.’

<sup>121</sup> Pattenden in Meacham, ‘Spiritual Works that Don’t Flinch from Taboo Themes.’

repeatedly presented as a threatening array of dangerous objects poised to overturn the hegemonic order of the nation.

So too, it is likely that the Blake Prize will be read as a threat in 2012 and beyond, phrased as everything from a waste of money to an affront on Australian culture. There have been numerous calls for the Prize to be suspended due to its spiritually irrelevant or offensive nature. The remarks of Bolt are exceptionally revealing of this trend, which seems set to endure. To Pattenden he beseeches: “you, who fail to defend a moral tradition from its morals-lite critics. Go do your job. Gird yourself. Defend your faith – and with it our civilisation.”<sup>122</sup> For Bolt, Pattenden and his Blake Prize represent the denigration of morality. This idea of the artist as a tool of social unease and deviance may be seen in the reactions to all the artworks discussed in this article. In each situation, the perceived violence and aberrance of the artist is presented as a direct attack on Christianity and Australian society, presented in this context as an interwoven target. In the dramatic and ill-informed reactions to these Blake prize submissions, many messages intended by the artists are lost or ignored. These messages include *criticism* of child sex abuse, considerations of the treatment of women, and an interest in the welfare of transgendered Australians. Thus, it is important to change the prevailing culture of art appreciation and criticism in order to privilege authorial intent over mass-media chaos.

Usefully, Lyne draws a distinction between art that is shocking for its own sake and art that is pious but may contain shocking elements. He asks us to consider “whether they mean solely to subvert or shock, or whether their form causes some deep reflection in the viewer regarding the spiritual experience or the nature of human history.”<sup>123</sup> This guiding principle is useful when attempting to untangle issues of intent and reception concerning problematic images. It also stands in opposition to the dominant popular mode of analysing artworks in modern Australian culture. It is important to realise that not every unconventional religious statement is an attack on religion or society. Pople’s supposed advocacy of pornography and child abuse means that the overt criticism he presents towards abusive institutional hypocrisies is frequently ignored. Cullen’s intent is ambiguous, but one may construct a sound argument that his work does indeed approach the idea of sacrifice, punishment, and gender in a serious manner. His images are more than just social antagonism and wilful ugliness. Roberts takes his priestly role seriously

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<sup>122</sup> Bolt, ‘Osama, Where art Thou Hanging?.’

<sup>123</sup> Lyne, ‘Struggle to Put Faith in the Frame.’

and intends to give voice to a marginalised community via his embrative imagery, yet he is commonly viewed as blasphemous and superficial. This implies that the artworks discussed in this article have been appraised primarily for their technique and an alarmist reading of their content as opposed to the religious beliefs and messages of their creators. It is important to disengage from the fervour of censorship, and value intended meaning over initial visual impressions if the artist has made this available to us. When this style of critical framework is applied to artists such as those above, their actual intent may be given more precedence than how pretty or traditionally reverential their images appear. The schism between intent and reception in contemporary Australian art is deeply problematic when an image advocating embrace, open-mindedness, or justice is read as a site of violent cultural attack.