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Seeking the Centre

RLA Conference Proceedings 2001

**Edited by Colette Rayment
and Mark Levon Byrne**

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2001

Australian International
Religion Literature and the Arts
Conference Proceedings

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Contents

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

SEEKING THE CENTRE: PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES <i>Roslynn Haynes, University of NSW</i>	1
PESSOA'S GALAXY OR A DESPERATE QUEST FOR THE CENTRE <i>Ana Maria Binet, University Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III</i>	16
HORIZON: TRANSCENDENT VISIONS; TURNER TO TURRELL <i>Tony Bond, Art Gallery of NSW</i>	36
SEEKING OTHER CENTRES <i>Elaine Linsday, Independent scholar, arts administrator</i>	54
LOVE AS THE CENTRE <i>Ian Weeks, Deakin University</i>	73
DRAWING ON THE LIVING CENTRE: THE CREATIVE SPIRIT AND EMANUEL SWEDENBORG <i>Jane Williams-Hogan, Bryn Athyn College of the New Church</i>	85

STORY, SYMBOL, PSYCHE

CHRISTOPHER BRENNAN AND THE RELIGION OF SYMBOLISM <i>Kathie Barnes, Australian National University</i>	106
THE SOUL OF THE KHMER ROUGE <i>Mark Levon Byrne, University of Sydney</i>	117

A HEROINE CALLED RUTH <i>Jonathan Drew, Writer, Blue Mountains, NSW</i>	135
CONTEMPORARY SYMBOL-MAKING IN AUSTRALIA <i>Lyn McCredden, Deakin University</i>	144
THE ORDINARY STREET, THE STOREHOUSE OF TREASURES <i>Susan Murphy, Sydney Zen Centre</i>	154
LOVE AND PAIN AS PORTALS TO THE CENTRE <i>Colette Rayment, University of Sydney</i>	166
FANTASY, THE NEW AGE AND THE 'CULTIC MILIEU' <i>Kim Selling, University of Sydney</i>	180
VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS	
EVE'S SIDE OF IT: SARAH DANIEL'S BIBLICAL REVISION <i>Carina Bartleet, University of Exeter</i>	191
HARDLY CENTERED: PETER KENNA'S A HARD GOD <i>Noel Rowe, University of Sydney</i>	204
SINGING HOME: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN COMPOSERS RESONATE TO BELONGING <i>Andrea Breen, Composer, Hobart</i>	218
REAL GOOD VIBRATIONS: THE BEACH BOYS, WASSILY KANDINSKY AND HILDEGARD OF BINGEN <i>Laura Markwick, James Cook University</i>	225
VAGRANT NOTIONS AND SPURIOUS CLAIMS: THE SPIRITUAL IN ART <i>Rod Pattenden, Artist, art historian, educational facilitator</i>	236

AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

- THE WANDERER ON THE WAY TO THE SELF:
CHRISTOPHER BRENNAN 245
Veronica Brady, University of Western Australia
- THE FEMALE ARTIST AS ICON OF THE
LIBERATION OF THE SPIRIT 254
Michael Griffith, Australian Catholic University
- THE SPIRIT OF GOD: THE CENTRE FOR AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN 265
Lee Miena Skye, University of Sydney
- COLONIAL IMPERATIVES IN REPRESENTING THE
INDIGENOUS SACRED: A YANYUWA CASE-STUDY 276
Frances Devlin Glass, Deakin University
- THE GUEST OF THE SUNLIGHT 293
Helen Hewson, University of Sydney
- WINIFRED WEST'S ARDOUR FOR THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY 305
Penelope Nelson, writer and researcher, Sydney
- THE PERFECT MASTER OR AXIS OF THE UNIVERSE
IN THE WRITINGS OF FRANCIS BRABAZON 318
Ross Keating, Australian Catholic University

WORLDWIDE

- HEIDEGGERIAN AESTHETICS, EAST AND WEST:
CAN THE CENTRE HOLD? 330
Alice Dwyer, University of Sydney
- 'KEEPING TO THE CENTRE': RU AND DAOIST IDEALS 341
Frances di Lauro, University of Sydney

OF <i>SÉANCE</i> AND SURREALISM, POETRY AND CRISIS <i>Christopher Hartney, University of Sydney</i>	355
THE CENTRE OF MEANING IN ELIOT'S FOUR QUARTETS <i>Barry Spurr, University of Sydney</i>	370
THE 'OTHER SHORES' OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV (1899-1977) <i>Maria Lobytsyna, University of Sydney</i>	379

Preface

The sixth Australian International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference, *Seeking the Centre*, was held in February 2001 at Sancta Sophia College within the University of Sydney.

In selecting such a theme for the conference it was never realistic to hope that the proceedings would reflect a well structured and comprehensive study of any particular area of investigation. Rather it was a call to those interested in RLA to proffer individual and personal, albeit scholarly and artistic approaches, to the spiritual idea of a 'centre'. The result is an exciting reflection of the diversity of imagination on the subject.

That the invited guest speakers addressed a diverse range of subjects is evident at first glance: Ana Binet studied the esoteric poetry of Pessoa, Tony Bond spoke of artists' striving to paint the transcendental experience, Jane Williams Hogan traced Swedenborg's influence on generations of painters and musicians and Ian Weeks, with Plato in mind, claimed that 'Love is the Centre'. Roslynn Haynes' socio-spiritual reassessment of two centuries of literary and visual treatments of the Australian desert was the creative catalyst for the entire conference which took its name from Roslynn's book, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. The last word belonged to Elaine Lindsay who argued that women's writing in Australia has an affinity with the fertility of the coast rather than the more ascetic 'male' spirituality of the desert.

The call for papers yielded an overwhelming interest in a diverse range of subjects constellated around the theme of the centre. The perennial interest in literature, film, painting, music, drama, dance, theology and philosophy was reflected in papers on Aboriginal women's spirituality, streetscape, fantasy, literary biography, dreams, architecture, esotericism, mysticism, genocide and pain. Unhappily, many papers are not included in this collection; a sad but necessary result of an *embarras de richesses*.

It is heartening to see that RLA is attracting specialist interest in the poetry, philosophy and religions of Asia. It is also exciting

that many painters, storytellers, composers, sculptors and contemplatives are trusting their creativity to paper so that there can be a record of their contributions to such an event as *Seeking the Centre*.

There were several other events at the conference which are not preserved in any media: a fine performance of the University Gamelan Orchestra under the direction of Vi King Lim; performances of Alanna Valentine's play, *Savage Grace*, staged at St Paul's College; an exhibition of painting, *Spirit-Level* curated by Rod Pattenden at the Tin Sheds Gallery; many unscripted presentations by prominent painters, sculptors, photographers and curators co-ordinated by Bronwen Bassett; and talks and discussions by writers organised by Irene Stevens and sponsored by the Literature Board of the Australia Council. There were also invitations to join sessions on dreams, storytelling, weaving and meditation.

There will be as many concepts of the centre as there are people who think about it. It is our hope that these proceedings serve as a record of some such thinking in the intellectual and artistic environment of this time and place.

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