

VAGRANT NOTIONS AND SPURIOUS CLAIMS:
THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

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We cover the universe with drawings we have lived....
(Gaston Bachelard)

Introduction

The following paper offers a consideration of the notion of the spiritual in the contemporary visual arts in Australia, with particular focus on the work of eight artists included in the exhibition *Spirit/Level*. This exhibition was held at the *Tin Sheds Gallery* University of Sydney, 2-24 February, 2001 in association with the Sixth International Conference on Religion, Literature and the Arts.

Spirituality is a seasonal term in the arts. It is not a concept that offers easy regulation, for it remains impatient of structures, and is too elusive and wild to be domesticated for rigorous use. It is, at times, an excuse for excess, at other moments a prompt for the eruption of violence, and sometimes it is just plain boring. These sorts of chaotic possibilities have left organised religion with some ambiguity about the usefulness of the arts, and in particular the illusory capacities of the visual.

At worst, religion finds in the visual arts a source of potential threat. Such fear, whether real or imagined, results in the punishment and repression of the faculty of vision. The fear of images and their seductive capacities has been a feature of the history of art in the west especially as it has

been nurtured by the Church.¹ Art in its imaginary power offers the seductive promise of consummation, that life can be experienced in terms of a savoured vision that is whole and meaningful.

It is the intention of this exhibition *Spirit/Level* to investigate this set of tense relationships in terms that celebrate its very diversity, instead of trying to resolve it as evidence of a lack of faith. Rather than confirming some pre-determined notion of the divine, or coalescing these diverse approaches into some stylistic agreement, this selection of eight artists has no common intent or ideological commitment. They just happen to inhabit the one space at the one time in such a way that irritates each other. If you take any of these visions half-seriously, you will be involved in a conflict of allegiance, in turn experiencing the seduction of the senses by apparently jealous suitors.

The diversity of these spiritual projections find their only point of common concern to be that of the human image. The mysterious and infinitely creative play that is found in the diversity of human cultures is seen in this exhibition against the backdrop of playing with the divine. Each of the artists, attends to the experience of vision in a way that constructs the human person as a spiritually aware creature and in turn invites the viewer to contemplate that larger reference of vision, insight and revelation against such a horizon.

History of the Spiritual

The possibility of presenting such an exhibition is confirmation that in the last ten years there has been a resurgence of interest in finding connections with religious ideas from within contemporary art practice. This

¹ Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, University of Chicago, 1989.

exhibition confirmed that artists are fascinated by the possibility that visual material may reflect or critique the larger rhythms of existence and contribute to a greater appreciation of ethical, social or mystical realities.

The task of investigating a history of the spiritual in Australian art is one that was anticipated by art historian Bernard Smith in his consideration of the influences in the development of abstract art,² and was taken up in a comprehensive way in the retrospective *Spirit and Place* mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1996.³ These investigations point to the fact that the spiritual has been repressed in discourse about the contemporary arts.

The renewed use of the word spiritual as an intelligible term has been influenced by Aboriginal and Asian artists who see no divide between the realms of secular and sacred. Critics have sought a widened vocabulary to account for the religious and social meanings caught up in works of this nature. This has led to a reappraisal of the nature of the spiritual in contemporary arts practice.⁴ This period has also seen a renewed tolerance for considering the meaning of life beyond tried formulas and for a more necessarily aesthetic understanding of human existence which has allowed for a renewal of the term spiritual.

The work by Rosemary Crumlin on aspects of the spiritual in Australian art has been of fundamental importance in opening up this area for art history. Crumlin has developed a wider reading of the effect of the Blake Prize for Religious Art which was begun in Sydney in 1951. She demonstrates the diverse range of responses made by artists

² Smith, Bernard, 'Notes on Abstract Art', reprinted in *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1988, p.187.

³ Mellick, Ross, and Nick Waterlow, *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861 - 1996*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996.

⁴ Magon, Jane, 'Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Art: Some Contexts and Issues In Interpretation', *Artlink*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1998, pp.38-42.

to religious subject matter and the influence of the Prize in promoting an exploration of such subject matter.⁵

Vagrant Trajectories

John Adair has drawn critical appreciation through his inclusion in the *Moët and Chandon* touring exhibition in 1993 for a minimalist approach to abstraction that uses a widened range of materials from wax to car enamel on aluminium. His seemingly hard-edged cool approach gives way to a complex consideration of visual presence associated with a personal language of forms that are drawn from an interest in Jewish mysticism.

Aspects of his work indicate an appreciation of the landscape drawn from a personal visual vocabulary based on living for a period in the area around Bondi Beach. Strong horizontal colour blocks can be read as sky, sea, beach, interrupted by the verticals of human flesh and building forms. His Blake Prize winning work in 1998 drew fresh attention to this often overlooked aspect of his work.

In the work produced for this show the landscape reference is reduced to a flat and reflective surface of acrylic that could represent a window into the sky. Two beach balls look on as separate works but also allow for interaction and dialogue. Always working within the flatness, sharp shadows and the slippage of the work, Adair calls our attention to this plus of meanings that collect around his visual playfulness.

Bronwen Bassett also works within the traditions of abstraction, pushing the process of mark making into the fine rhythm that modulates the surface tension of the work. The push and pull of the surface – so much a part of the

⁵ Crumlin, Rosemary, *Images of Religion in Australian Art*, Bay, Kensington, 1988.

vocabulary of abstraction – is here resisted as the work tries to deflect any prior meanings. While based on the landscape, the work celebrates the process of mark-making as a form in itself. The reference to possible realities in the landscape is always undermined by the process of mark-making and the re-establishment of the paint on the canvas as the primary reality. Resistance to the spiritual by negation has always been the spur for the more mystical response of erasing the visual for the pure and more inwardly apprehended image.

These works seeks to hold in tension the process of ordering stylistically engaged by shapes, grids, maps and scale to the other fluid realities of space, light, chaos and change. The stasis of the works invites a state of mind that is found in many meditative practices that evoke a sensory equilibrium as their goal.

Anne Edmunds fills out the possibilities of the illusory capacity of paint to evoke a tradition of the sublime in the landscape. Inspired by her research into the northern Romantic tradition, which is best exemplified by the German Caspar David Friedrich, Edmunds achieves a subtle interplay of light reflections that move the eye forward and back through the implied mystery of the picture plane.

These works are a formal investigation of the painterly devices employed within the sublime tradition that evoke responses in the viewer suggesting the nature of the spiritual. Her investigations also pay homage to issues that have been influential in the history of Australian landscape painting which involve the play of the human figure against the vast, harsh or exotic backdrop of nature.

Ruth Faerber has had a distinguished career and has been an innovator in the use of paper in print making techniques. She draws on an appreciation of Jungian archetypes, a

highly sensory appreciation for material and their archaeology, and a visual referencing of her Jewish heritage to evoke works that contain a wide diversity of religious meanings. Ancient voices, barely decipherable markings, archaeological fragments, invite our inventive imagination to re-assemble and appreciate their genesis both as objects and as ensembles of meaning.

The particular works chosen for this exhibition evoke a stronger association with her Jewish heritage. 'Legacy,' for example, contains a sense of loss, with visual references to her Jewish spirituality against the dusky framework that may also be the doors of train trucks. Through their fragmentary imagery and tactile appearance they evoke a sense of mourning and darkness.

Margarita Sampson provides a series of delightful ensembles that playfully evoke the forms of the sea and the refraction of light. They neither contain nor displace space as they play within forms that are sympathetic to natural processes of growth by accretion. They serve as primal containers, working within their own geometry as open containers that shape space.

While not specifically addressing religious imagery, they nevertheless evoke the primal energy and geometry that underlies most religious systems – particularly in their visual genesis. The woven basket forms 'Niades,' in particular, operate as both containers and as vessels of light. Shimmering in space, they evoke multiple associations of the form and formlessness of light and its containment within meaning.

Richard van der Aa has punctuated a corridor with a range of enigmatic shapes that are suggestive, delicate and subtle. The viewer is required to slow down and look for parameters and frameworks for this approach to space. Trained originally as a painter, van der Aa has more

recently moved into installation work with this family of three dimensional shapes that hint at some other point of reference. They act on the body, reminding us of everyday objects, but objects which have been removed from their clear reference or use.

These forms hint at some functional purpose or they could have simply been left over as the remnants of some previous scenario that has been lost in time. They elude the fixed points of domestic or historical reference. The artist is tilting at our innate catalogue of meanings, exhausting our logic, till we begin to contemplate the connections behind, underneath, exposing the repressed shadow of minimalist art. As the artist has said, 'They are pointers to another picture. The reality behind the seen life. A place where matter and spirit meet.'

Vince Vozzo, of all the artists, would be closer to the vision of the great William Blake. Vozzo's imagination runs through a debate with the currents of contemporary art, an engagement with the landscape traditions gathered around the associations of Hill End to the quiet classicism of the female head rising like the moon over the sea of artistic change and chaos.

The grand scenario of 'Apocalypse', set out within the romantic landscape of Hill End, draws attention to the greed for gold which created this romantic ghost town. The shaping of the landscape and human society is shot through with conflicts that reflect moral and ethical dilemmas which are here played out like on some universal stage writ large in blood, violence and dismemberment. Vozzo's sense of spirituality provides a diverse engagement with both wholeness and the prophetic voice of chaotic renewal.

Alex Wanders is a fine figurative artist who has created a studied density of space into which are placed translucent containers of mystical significance. With consummate care,

he has created a series of works that evoke the typologies of form found in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. These works are mystical visual containers that pulse with multiple associations. The forms have their genesis in the stories and containers of meaning found in the scriptures but are expressed in visual form that shape and hold the mystery of their referred meaning.

Wanders' work carries an effervescent sense of light that simply expresses the joy of painterly marks. These containers made with the material of pigments transcend their limitations to evoke the immaterial, existing themselves to dissolve so as to make present the terms of their own genesis. These are works which celebrate the notion of revelation and incarnation. Rather than denying the world of things, the divine can only be apprehended through a careful and loving respect for the material as mediatory symbol and sign of divine faithfulness.

The Spiritual as Cultural Project

The role of the artist in attending to the spiritual is one full of possible and multiple connections. The increasing authorisation of the artist role as seer, mystic, medium, prophet and sage is evidence of the connections art is seeking to make with the shape of larger cultural projects and forces for change. Culture is an open-ended experiment which needs the poetics of the artist to imagine in terms that can be discriminated and assessed.

The tenuous links found in this project have a common moment of shadow where the human form is set against a horizon open to some divine agent or some more abstract referent of a spiritual or sublime nature. This is a speculative process rather than one dependant on clear ideological or theological doctrines. It is measured more in the slippery waters of mystery, anticipation and hope than in any precise use of language.

Lines must be drawn across this particular landscape. In respect of the spiritual, however, it will not be lines that are level-headed or pragmatic, but rather, meandering lines that look for connection by more circuitous means. Spirituality seeks the goal of making life into art, silence into meditation, and action into an energy that renews. This is a form of faith rather than belief, that involves human beings in the crafting of life in social terms that is achieved with both discipline and ecstasy.