

SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART

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It is widely asserted that we are not a spiritually concerned culture and that there is no body of uniquely Australian religious art. But is this really the case? Australian culture is more complex than the standard interpretations of 'Australians' suggest, and characterisations of 'Australians' as an 'irreligious' people may be misleading.¹ Moreover, as Richard Ely in *Historical Studies* (1980-81) notes, Australian historians may have been too quick to accept that during the last century and a half, European Australia has 'undergone almost total institutional secularisation'.² While recent revisionist history reveals that popular forms of religious activity in Australian life and art have been ignored, one could say that many of the unusual, spiritual aspects have been generally edited out of representations of our culture. The standard version of nationalist Australian art history celebrates a constrained view of Australian art. Certain views of Australian art are privileged over what is deemed 'un-Australian'. Many of our artists *are* involved with these issues but the majority of art historians tend to be either biased towards secular interpretations of contemporary art or largely ignorant of religion. A secular interpretation of history is reflected in the dominant writers of art history. Are we being offered what is really there - something that is exciting and fascinating - or are we being given what is generally considered 'the standard Australian view'?

In this paper I draw attention to Australian art from the 1970s to the 1990s and argue that the work of the artists discussed here reveals a strengthening preoccupation with spiritual themes that questions standard interpretations of Australian art history.

Numerous writers have characterised Australians as 'irreligious'. O'Farrell³ and Russel Ward noted that religion substantially failed 'to take root' in Australia. However, Richard Haese suggests that mysticism and spirituality existed in Australian art by the 30s and 40s in the form of landscape painting, primitivism, Romantic 'blood and soil' pastoral tradition and surrealist-apocalyptic interpretations by the *Angry Penguins* artists.⁴

Crumlin alleges that religious Australian artists of the 1950s 'looked to the past... Byzantine styles... for models and symbols' while in the 60s and 70s little in their art 'was distinctively Australian'.⁵ Crumlin claims that the

Blake Prize for religious art in Australia (founded in 1951) initially gave stimulus to a religious iconography. She concedes that the Blake Prize initially failed to engender a change in sacred art, possibly because 'the tides of art history and secular history were moving too strongly in other directions'. Moreover, she argues that by 1961 religious Australian art changed from liturgical images to expressions of a 'private religious art'.

According to A. L. McLeod, by 1963 Australian culture had produced no Pietas, or important religious sculpture,⁶ and the same pattern of interpretation can be found in more recent art historians such as Bernard Smith, Terry Smith and David Bromfield. Secular historians often forget that apart from Christianity Australians had other powerful spiritual resources available to them such as Theosophy, which was brought to Australia in the 1880s. Theosophy is a movement which played a vital role in the emergence of modern art.⁷

Richard Ely alleges that religion was more alive in Australia than older historians wishfully believed. Vance Palmer was favourably disposed towards loose notions of 'spirituality' in relation to the land, fauna and flora. Australians, Palmer tells us, had nothing to hold people 'until the men who had been born in it' conceived of a 'mystical faith in its future' and 'gave it a spiritual core'. For Palmer, white Australians had to create 'sacred places' for a new culture by striking 'roots' in the soil and gaining an 'aboriginal power'. Australia did have strongly spiritual alternatives in theosophy and the traditional art of Aboriginal Australia.⁸

To judge European Australian culture in its first two hundred years as being 'irreligious' is to judge too hastily. Because of the nature of our colonial settlement it could be expected that religious imagery would arrive at a later date in our development and it is a mistake to assume that Australians would be unlikely to produce religious icons of spiritual art at any stage, something that takes time to develop in an emerging culture. This paper argues that historians may have prematurely misjudged our culture to be 'secular' and we are instead developing spiritually and artistically.

Similarly, Roger Thompson argues, there are 'recent signs of a small religious upsurge' from the 1960s with an increase in Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Aboriginal spiritualities, fundamentalism and liberal Protestantism.⁹ Australia is now home to many varied postmodern, postreligious or spiritual practitioners who express themselves through the arts as well as a younger generation of Australian artists who are appropriating from varied spiritual sources and materials. To illustrate my

argument, I refer to the work of mid-career Australian artists Dale Frank, Mike Parr, Jill Orr, Luke Roberts, Anneke Silver, Dawne Douglas and Sebastian Di Mauro, all of whom explore mystical or spiritual elements in their work. Identity with the Australian land also merges with a mystical ideology, and additional Aboriginal concepts create an original Australian art form of significance.

Anneke Silver, a Dutch migrant who arrived in Australia in 1959, has explored nature mysticism, Earth Goddess images and feminist spirituality. In her 'bush icons' (golden icon formats) she combines ancient, Byzantine and medieval European format and imagery with symbols, materials and concepts from Aboriginal art. The result is a personal meshing of different spiritual and symbol systems. Her symbols of 'sacred' Australian fauna and flora acting as her landscape saints in her icons, merge European art practices and formats with Australian motifs in an original way.

There is a shamanic impulse which structures the work of at least nine Australian contemporary artists: Dale Frank, Mike Parr, Jill Orr, Peter Booth, Luke Roberts, Stelarc, Hollie, Sebastian Di Mauro and Dawn Douglas. Frank, Parr, Orr and Roberts will be discussed here.

A shaman in traditional cultures takes spiritual journeys on behalf of the sick or dead. One becomes a shaman by curing oneself of physical or mental illness or undergoing near death experience, which becomes a kind of mystical 'initiation'. Similar results can be simulated by an extensive initiation of 'trials' and suffering: a cutting of the body, symbols of dismemberment, bloodshed, handling or walking on fire, horrendous nightmares, the development of a 'theory of illness' and active ritual healing. Shamans often develop ecological concerns as an outcome of their theory of illness, through healing the self, others, the environment and the cosmos.

All these features can be found in the work of contemporary Australian artists.¹⁰ Almost all these shamanic artists share two features: that of growing up in an Australian rural or outback setting and of having to deal with illness, psychological instability or deformity. The harshness of desert and near desert conditions has shaped a specific aesthetic in the work of Parr, Frank, Orr, Roberts and Douglas. In the semidesert, shamanic 'beliefs and rituals are modelled on natural phenomena, and parts of the physical environment are used as ritual paraphernalia.'¹¹ These artists incorporate nature's *object trouvee* into their ritualistic art: ground earth, animal bones, charcoaled branches, seeds, grasses and leaves.

Frank's early paintings and drawings explore his mysticism, themes of dismemberment, bleeding, primordial seas, the mystical eye of knowledge, ascents to the sky and union with Christ. Frank's shamanism is mediated by a chiliastic impulse or belief that the end of the world is 'now', along with powerful feelings of revenge and war. Sometimes he portrays himself as the suffering Christ or angry God. His earlier paintings are characterised by thick textured, luscious or gloriously smooth paint in almost fluorescent colour. The stimulus for his textured and glassy smooth, paintings of miasmas or primordial swamps comes from the stagnant waters he saw as a school boy in country N.S.W. The harshness of much of Frank's textures might develop from the rawness of the Australian earth. Frank's large drawings contain images of concentric lines, of indefinite dream images and whorls, circles, mandalas, and portals for accessing another world. Although his 'aesthetic' is marked by an antagonism to regular beauty, Frank uses his shamanism to pursue a critical mysticism.

Mike Parr was born in Sydney in 1945 with a deformity, an unformed arm, that had a major impact on his work. Parr's earlier performance art was characterised by scenarios of extremely painful, self-mutilation, through cutting or burning his body, being bitten or branded. In *Leg Spiral* (1975) Parr wound explosive cord around his leg, and burnt a spiral form deeply and painfully into it. Paradoxically, Parr notes that the spiral is a symbol of healing. From the early 1980s Parr began a massive series of self-portraits in drawings and prints often incorporated into installations. In the 1990s he again began to explore the shamanic concern with androgyny in his performances, often wearing a wedding dress, while bouquets of flowers or green, sprouting branches emerge from his unformed arm in a condition of renewal and reconciliation with his incompleteness. Some of Parr's work contains specifically Australian references such as *Rib Markings in the Carnarvon Ranges* (1975), a private performance making parallels between his unformed arm and the dying gum trees. In *Rib Markings* he represents himself as a 'white Aborigine' with 'Aboriginal style' charcoal rib markings on his chest. Parr attempts a shamanic healing of his incomplete self and a collective, damaged Aboriginal psyche, a white 'shaman' attending to the ills of an aboriginal culture and the environment. Yet Parr's mystical concerns have largely been played down by secular art critics and art historians.

Jill Orr grew up in country Victoria. She develops her theory of illness to deal with mental and physical illness, but extends this to healing rituals of the land and dying trees. Her commitment to an environmental ethic is

much more developed than in Frank or Parr. Orr's aesthetic refers to the red earth, blue sky and the soils, grasses and seeds of the Australian outback. A number of her early performances are shamanic rituals of death and resurrection. In *She Had Long Golden Hair* (1980) she invited the audience to cut off her hair in a mystical ritual of renunciation and dedication of oneself to a spiritual life. In *Blinding Surface* (1978) she readjusted her body, makeup and posture to enact a dancing through the life cycles of a woman, prior to placing herself over a large round mirror to symbolise entry to another world. *Do You Speak* (1980) was a shamanic ritual of blood-letting, while *Love Songs* (1990) was a ritual of androgyny, with Orr acting as woman to herself dressed as man in a video, contrasted with herself dressed as man playing to herself as woman on video. In her *Raising of the Spirits* (1994) she magically drew male and female into one 'hermaphrodite' body by performing naked with a prosthetic penis. Many of Orr's performances emphasise the ecological, the healing and renewal of land and tree. *Bleeding Trees* and *Response*, both 1978, and *Walking On Planet Earth* (1989) are all performances that are healing rituals of the Australian bush and outback.

Luke Roberts was born in 1952 in Alpha, a small, rough, harsh outback town. His only cultural heritage and knowledge of art came through the local Catholic church and its graveyard, from which he gained his sense of tradition, ritual and performance. Roberts' works blend with a semi-abstract, semi-figurative style, combining religious motifs with the colours, textures, plants and animals of the outback. His *Mother Mary and Her Joeys* (1995) depicts Roberts' vision engendered by a chance remark of his father which took root in his fertile child's imagination. Here he depicts Mary MacKillop galloping past the Alpha Convent bringing more joeys to western Queensland, merging Catholicism and Australiana. In his earlier installations he has used dead Australian animals and skeletons, possums, birds and bats with fur, feathers and skins attached.

Roberts' shamanism, like Orr's, results in an aesthetic expression that emerges directly from an experience of the land - red earth and blue sky, its colour and textures, creating an original fusion of universal shamanic structures with Australian references. He is an Australian shamanic artist who incorporates both Australian landscape and mysticism. *Aorta Painting / Mother/Fatherland We of the Never Never (sic)* (1991), relates both to the earthy-coloured heartland of Australia and the blood within the heart as organ, an aspect of his theory of illness. The plastic roses refer to the romantic heart symbol and his Catholic upbringing. Roberts metamorphoses the Romantic heart shape into the heart/organ reflecting images of descent

through tunnel-arteries and concerns of rebirth through a healing of the self.

In his performance art Roberts employs an extraordinary, ambiguous, 'campy' attitude both subversive and religious. As Pope Alice, Roberts wears a white silk chasuble and Pope's crown, matching high heeled white satin shoes, and long evening gloves. 'Alice' is a multi-layered spiritual reference to the Australian outback town of Alice Springs, Alice in Wonderland and Alice Jitterbug, an American Indian shaman. Roberts both reveres and sends up the adored Catholicism of his childhood.

The work of these artists' quests for an Australian identity is merged with a shamanic ideology to create an original Australian art form. Australian culture is now producing vibrant genres of religious art that are 'quirky', spiritual, magical and political all at once. It seems that the standard story of Australian art is not half as interesting as we really are. The uncensored version of Australia is far more fascinating and far more accurate than the incomplete picture of sanctioned constructs. It appears that the religious impulse in Australian art is strengthening with time. Certainly, religious interpretations in Australian art have come a long way from Crumlin's disappointed remarks on the Blake Prize of the 1950s, that there was little in their art which 'was distinctively Australian'.¹² These forms of contemporary art contain within them the developing strains of a distinctively spiritual Australian art of the present and future. What the disappointed Crumlin and the instigators of the Blake Prize were desperate to foster was a thriving religious art that was distinctively Australian. Thirty to forty years after its inception in 1951, that time has arguably arrived. Perhaps a day will come when Australian historians and art historians will refrain from denying the existence of a distinctly Australian religious impulse in our culture.

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- ³ O' Farrell, P. 1976-7, 'Writing the general history of Australian religion', *The Journal of Religious History*, vol.9.
- ⁴ These *Angry Penguins* artists include James Gleeson, Max Harris and Ivor Francis.
- ⁵ Crumlin, R. 1984, *The Blake Prize for Religious Art - The First 25 Years: A Survey*. Exhibition Catalogue, Monash University Gallery. Crumlin's views are reflected in her book *Images of Religion in Australian Art*. (1988).
- ⁶ McLeod, A. L., ed. 1963. *The Pattern of Australian Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- ⁷ The theosophists also hoped for a 'restored harmony between religion and science' through

art (Roe 1986, p. 317).

⁸ Thompson, R. 1994, *Religion in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Magon, J. Dale Frank (1992), Magon, J. *Art and Text* (43, 1996, pp. 80, 81)

¹¹ Hultkrantz, A. 1987, 'Ecology', *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, vol.4, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, p. 583.

¹² Crumlin, 1984.