

IMAGE(in)ING GOD: New Norcia's contemporary religious art collection.

Ted Snell,

The problem of how to depict divinity has intrigued humans since the first artist scratched an image onto a rock face to give form and presence to their belief in a supernatural progenitor. Some cultures created many gods, some only one — though distinct from all others — some artists were encouraged to depict their god as human, others from depicting the deity at all. In my paper I will explore how contemporary artists both imagine and give a visual image to their sense of the divine. It is a lens that helps us to understand faith and humanities relationship with their sense of a supreme being. With billions of images already fabricated we are not without resources but even so how to give visual form to our most sincere and significant beliefs remains open to mystery and conjecture. The collection of works by contemporary artists in the New Norcia Mission give some intriguing examples of how artists have tackled the problem of IMAG(in)ING GOD!

My grandmother owned a large leather-bound illustrated Bible that contained several full colour illustrations, most rather undistinguished. One though enthralled me and drew me back again and again to this musty, brittle repository. It was Raphael's *The Transfiguration*, illustrating the moment on Mount Tabor when Jesus was transformed spiritually and physically, his divinity expressed through the radiance of light. As a small boy in Gran's dark and fusty drawing room, with the heavy tome on my lap, my nostrils alert to the rich aroma of neglect, I floated above the earth imagining — no experiencing — that moment of transcendence. That a painting could create such an extraordinary sense of luminous actuality; could alter time and space; could bring me into such close proximity, mentally and physically, with an experience, so completely, was remarkable! Unsurprisingly, since that time I've been always been attracted to artworks that allow me entry to moments of revelation when my reality is shifted, twisted, warped or re-calibrated by a spark of insight that leads to deep knowingness. Not surprisingly then I am drawn to the work of artists represented in the New Norcia Contemporary Religious Art Collection.

Genesis 1:27

“And God made man in his image, in the image of God he made him: male and female he made them”.

When looking at the ways in which contemporary artists have represented Divinity it's also true that they have made god in their image. From the works held in the Collection of New Norcia I want to explore some of the ways in which contemporary artists depict their god, and how these modes of representation are responding to our changing world.

Contemporary artists are often iconoclastic or subversive when approaching religious subject matter (for example Maurizio Cattelan's *La Nona Ora* (1999), showing Pope John Paul II struck by a meteorite; or Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), depicting a crucifix bottled in urine). Not so this group of artists who embrace the challenge of documenting their faith and giving form to their beliefs. According to Mark Oakley, the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London "We're all looking for a resonant, universal language with which we can explore questions that you might call spiritual. And for many, the religious vocabulary is no more, it isn't resonant, so

we need to find shared forms that we can utilise to start the conversation – and art is one of them<sup>1</sup>." The works in the New Norcia collection certainly reinforce Oakley's thesis.

Some artists have a very deep and personal commitment to their God and enter into a pact with him or her that links the work they make to a promise or hope of redemption. Salvatore Zofrea began painting the Psalms as a celebration of life and of his rediscovery of his Catholicism. At a time of great personal suffering he sought solace in the beliefs of his childhood and on recovery he undertook to fulfil his promise to paint all of the 150 Psalms. His painting of Psalms 71/72 addresses a recurring theme in his work; the provision of food and the connection between eating imbibing and Holy Communion. In several of the Psalms this image of food and the simple ritual of daily meals is as an act of communion. Bread has traditionally symbolized both spiritual nourishment and the body of Christ, 'the living bread which came from heaven', and that interpretation is at the heart of all of these paintings. Of course, food is an essential element of Italian life and in the several of the series Zofrea documents his family eating and preparing food. From the history of Renaissance painting he has discovered strategies for illustrating biblical stories with experiences from his own life and that of his family and friends. In the process, he has discovered how to release the mystical in the common place, or in Rimbaud's words to show 'That other world ... this one'. His history and his

deep religious conviction has enabled him to create a body of works that are unique, though parallel, to contemporary art practice in this country. It is also very much an image of the divinity in his own image and embedded in his life. These are his family and friends sitting at the table, with Christ in the garden and reunited in Heaven and in a place he has constructed from his memories of family events. It is the miraculous in the everyday in a very real sense for Zofrea.

Stan Hopewell also made a pact with his God. He began painting at the age of eighty, when his wife Joyce was terminally ill and he committed to paint his love of God, his love for Joyce and their life together, and the impact of his beliefs on those he met and cared about — for as long as she remained alive. Although the period of his creative expression was brief — no more than four years — in that time he created a body of remarkable works that offer an insight into the human impulse to make sense of the world, to reveal the unseen and to decode the inexplicable. With few models of artistic practice to work from, he developed a highly sophisticated way of making paintings that incorporated assemblage, collage, electrical wiring and elaborate framing. His catalyst for creation was a compelling need to impart a powerful message. However, surprised by his ability he assumed an unseen power must have directed his hand. In a letter he wrote to me on the 23 March 2007, just weeks after our first meeting, he explained:

“... I have a confession to make ... My hand and arm were guided by an unseen Power on my paintings and the skill which may be evident in their presentation for anyone who likes my art is done by an unseen Angel2.”

His work was untutored, grounded in personal experience and initiated by a compulsion to recount a narrative about his life. In one series Stan described the conception, birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, combining the theological with the personal, the spiritual with the everyday and the ethereal with the banal. They are ideas so important they could not be contained on just one surface, so the message was expanded onto the verso. The second painting of the series represents Christ's passage down the birth canal to enter the world and take on his mission of salvation. He is represented by a golden megaphone protruding from the surface, a golden trumpet, illuminated by the yellow field in which it is placed, sounds out the good news to the world. The ministering midwife is in awe and a bowl holding the afterbirth glows brightly. It is a moment of joyous celebration depicted with deft skill. Angels in the heavens rejoice

along with us, but at the same time there are questions Stan poses on the back of the painting. *The Miricale of the Birth of Christ*, documents a subject painted by artists over the past two millennia, but never like this! 'Wisdom From on High', Stan writes, explaining that '... the Christian Faith was born, and man had a soul'. But why would God give his only son to make a world of peace and then create war? 'Why', he writes several times, and the 'Answer, I do not know', and 'nobody else knows', but 'have faith, *The Miricale of Creation*'. Clearly it was a very profound and personal experience of divinity that prompted his painting. Stan's ability to summon forth a visual language from his own resources, referencing what he found in the world around him, then digging deep to reveal new insights, is the essential component of all great art. It is also a moment when we as a viewer come into contact with another person's humanity, when we empathise and connect.

His painting in the New Norcia Collection, *God is Love: Last Supper*, is a joyous celebration of the painting's central message, spelt out in sparkling letters – 'GOD IS LOVE'. Stan articulates the Christian message that Christ died for our sins and his sacrifice is our redemption and he highlights the need to take up the challenge of giving our lives to deliver that message. Around the central sun-like orb surrounded by smiling angels and stars, planets attached to the frame spin around in this universe of love and forgiveness, just as we must be subservient to God and act in accord with his power and authority. The cosmos was always a powerful metaphor for Stan of the balance and unity we must find in our own lives and this representation of a universe in harmony, symmetrically arranged, ordered and controlled is a map for the future. In this harmonious world Joyce will be well and their lives together will continue under the auspice of God's love.

Miriam Stannage also had a deep faith. Her father was an Anglican Minister and throughout her life she invested her work with her own theological interpretation of world events, often played out in intimate, domestic subjects. A series of works from the mid-1980s were often overtly about Biblical themes. *The Flood and the Seven Deadly Sins*, *Crucifixion*, and *the Stations of the Cross* were so intense as to suggest a personal crisis or perhaps a deep response to world crises, as Gael Newton acutely observed in Lee Kinsella's monograph on the artist published just before her death in 2016.

*Stations of the Cross* symbolically narrates the final events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Stannage's own assessment *Stations of the Cross* was one of her major accomplishments. She considered it to be about

“death, but also of course about resurrection”.

It was difficult to produce because of her faith and Anglican background, and because of the visual tradition of the *Stations of the Cross*.

She was particularly inspired by other artists who worked non-figuratively and yet still succeeded in conveying a sense of human presence and scale, and even more challenging, a sense of invisible, metaphysical and spiritual realms. She constructed the tableau of her fourteen Stations outdoors, using natural ground of rock, direct or sand on which she placed ordinary, everyday objects whose role was symbolic. The crown of thorns that appears in every images is fashioned from barbed wire (an explicit Australian reference to rural fences); a coat-hanger refers to Christ being stripped of his garments; a dead white bird symbolises his death on the cross and a stained handkerchief represents Veronica wiping the face of Christ; Seva Frangos in her essay '*Seeing eye to eye*', perceptively writes that:

“The intimacy afforded with the words has been emphasised through the simplification of the image and this intimacy is equal to the intimacy of the Christian Belief it explores. The images become a series of ‘dense, tactile and haunting symbols’ which provoke simultaneously both an intensely personal and impersonal response from the viewer”.

One of the most significant additions to the collection has been Robert Juniper's *Last Supper: Lord, is it I?* Which was acquired in 2016 with a grant from the Copland Foundation. Juniper was searching for a contemporary visual expression of the incantatory power of this inward looking, meditative art and Paul Klee's inspiration never waned as a source of inspiration. Since the 1940s and evident in this early work *St. Xavier's Thorn and Fetish* 1954 in the UWA Art Collection Klee is a crucial point of reference.

Juniper's natural feeling for ornament and pattern is evident in these paintings and the slightly later *Three Kings Came*. He discovered in the work of Stanley Spencer and particularly in the works of Paul Klee both an aesthetic interest and a practical purpose. He understood the formal

repetitious intonation of the liturgy and the power of the pattern and ornament in icons and religious imagery, learned as a choir boy soprano in England, and he used visual patterning to reinforce that sense of unification and organisation in his paintings. In *Last Supper: Lord, is it I?* which was shown at the Australian Landscape Painting exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, curated by Bryan Robertson, he created one of his most ambitious and successful paintings on a religious subject. Once again it pays direct homages to Paul Klee and lays the foundation for Juniper's now familiar treatment of the local landscape as textured fields enlivened with finely wrought visual incidents, such as leaves, a bird or the traces of human habitation.

Considering its history, it is appropriate that a number of works by Aboriginal artists are also included. Working in collaboration with the local Yuat people of the Noongar nation Salvado and his fellow monks created a community that flourished when so many others failed. That for many local people Christianity remained an important part of their lives is another testament, of sorts. In her version of the Last Supper Lynda Syddick Napaltjarri, a Pintupi woman from Lake MacKay in the Gibson Desert, has created a wonderfully abstracted painting that reduces the image of Christ to a dash of blue in a moment of benefaction or surprise, as he raises both his arms. In doing this he radiates a force field of energy, his Disciples reduced to the cypher of a half circle. Like Juniper, Napaltjarri creates a powerful and succinct visualisation of her image of Jesus as a source of all power. Although informed by their different cultural inheritance and their different experiences, they both found in abstraction a way to transmit those ideas succinctly to a wider audience. In a similar way Debbie Nannup, a local Yuat women, in her painting *The Visit of the Magi*, made in 2009, is able to encapsulate the complex narrative of the journey of the three wise men to the crib in Bethlehem to welcome the Messiah. Like Napaltjarri, she uses a simplification of forms and the repetition of pattern we've seen in Juniper's works, to describe the nativity story. Each of the four panels containing a separate component of that narrative, yet together they provide a cogent account of the key element of that story and the presentation of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. Pattern has always been an important component of Julie Dowling's work.

A Badimia Yamatji woman, she uses the rich and complex interplay of pattern in religious imagery, and in particular the icons of the Eastern Church, as a formal device in her practice to celebrate and solemnise members of her family and her extended community. Her homage to John Pat, the young Aboriginal Man brutally murdered is an excellent example of this process of commemoration and acknowledgement.

It is evident also in her depiction of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Dowling presents Christ as an Aboriginal person, male or female, who is troubled, like Christ, enduring the same doubts and fears, their lives inextricably entwined in his story. So much of Dowling's work is at this level of deep identification and 'knowing' and it is what gives her paintings such power and impact. Great art, works that moves us and expresses profound insights into our existence, enters our experience through many pathways. It is also true, I believe, that the subject does not have to be 'religious' or depict stories from canonical texts to be profoundly moving.

For example, I find this sense of transcendent spirituality in images of the landscape by Western Australian artist Howard Taylor, whose images of the Southwest forests, around his home in Northcliffe, like the small work in the Collection from 1993, are suffused with a luminous intensity that is almost blinding. They are contemplative, meditative works that provide a space for thinking deeply and profoundly about the world we live in, our lives and what it means to be human.

Whether reduced to a series of horizontal brushstrokes, or still recognisable as a conventional landscape, Taylor is able to communicate to us his deepest and most powerful beliefs, understandings and desires. His artworks provide direct and immediate access to those beliefs, whether it be his sense of wonder when confronted with a sunset in a bushfire haze or whether documenting the tenets of his faith.

Another local artist, Brian McKay, also created a number of works with a religious theme, arising from his painterly interests and manifesting in images that combine his use of visual cues that encapsulate a Christian message. His winning entry in the Mandorla Art Prize in 1986 titled Logos, was a response to the overall theme of Christ- The Word of God (John 1:1-4)

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were*

*made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.*

It enabled McKay to use his love of calligraphy and script to embody the word becoming flesh in the figure of Jesus Christ. The left hand, his own hand print and hence a mark of identification, is nailed the cross, his right arm is lifted in a victorious salute in victory over death.

Like all McKay's work it is graphically powerful, technically polished and it leaves a lasting embedded memory.

After beginning work on the Central Park mural in the early nineties McKay changed his modus operandi after discovering aluminium panels. Soon he began discovering its wonderful, mysterious effects.

"The minute you make a mark on this lustre, it changes the perception of the piece. By distressing the surface in ways you create an illusion of depth, or space or form."

Those qualities made it perfect for his continued explorations of religious themes such as his 2002 winning entry in the Mandorla the Enigma of Christ. The image of Christ is symbolised by the Cross, again, though in a more abstract form, with only the echo of a face like shape emerging from the crucifix. It's only through belief in Christ that you can find eternal life, is written in Latin across the bottom on the painting. As McKay continued to explore the possibilities of aluminium he developed even more abstract forms that encapsulated the message of hope and redemption, as seen the painting *Xavier's Cross* from 2005. This work, not in the New Norcia Collection, though I am sure they would like to acquire it through donation, brings together the other key themes in McKay's work, text and texture. This fragment of a scroll or plaque proclaims the work of the monastery – though I haven't been able to find out much more about the meaning of the text. It's not surprising that many artists working in within the genre of Abstraction have taken to depicting religious themes. After all the symbolism of Christianity, and indeed of most religions, are highly abstracted and their impact is dependent on embedding meaning in geometric forms or simplified graphic images. The crucifix is perhaps the best example of a very straightforward geometric element, two lines crossing at right angles, that has become a symbol of Christ's sufferinfor the salvation of humanity. We have seen how that simple element was gradually reduced to its most elemental form in Brian McKay's work.

Similarly, John Coburn, who converted to Catholicism in 1953 on his marriage, and though he became less dogmatic in his interpretation of his faith, this abstract symbolism remained a powerful tool in his creative armoury. In 1991, he told The Sydney Morning Herald's Deidre Macpherson: "Basically, I believe in the teaching of the Church ... People need spiritual guidance and I'm a Christian because I learnt about Western European culture." So, the forms that he uses in the most simple and straightforward way are his attempt to embed and imbue that cultural inheritance with the power and weight of his faith. His large work entitled *Prepare the Way* was inspired by the scripture text concerning John the Baptist. At the centre of the composition is a stylised Eucharistic cup and, above it, the triangle representing the Trinity. The strong simple colours of gold, red and black emphasise the majesty of Christ's redemptive work. Although entered in the 1982 Mandorla Award it didn't win, but the artist entered into negotiations with the Monastery and it entered the collection. However, in 1996 he entered again with a work titled *Blue for faith love and hope* and this time, the elegant reductive simplicity of his work did find favour with the judges. Simplicity and the process of pairing away is fundamental to the working methodologies of many artists, and in the Collection, there are a number of works that whittle away the visual elements to their fundamental core. Paul Uhlmann's painting '*Breath: Eternal Life*', which won the 2016 Mandorla Prize is one such work, the spiritual message articulately presented as a breath, captured, hovering in space, the embodiment of all that it means to be human, to be alive. Brent Harris is also a very reductive artist and throughout his creative life he has been finding the quintessential form to carry his ideas, including his image of Mary, in his wonderful work of 2006 her face reduced to a few curvilinear lines and a cypher for red lips. Yet it is, perhaps because of that process of pairing away, that he creates an image that is hard to dislodge from your brain. It is also an image the artist has continued to explore, finding small variations as an important way of keeping the image vital and relevant.

The Collection is fortunate to have some major works by major Australian artists who have embraced the task of IMAGINING, IMAGING the Divine. Roy De Maistre, in *Noli me Tangere*, shows Jesus, facing us, towering over the kneeling Mary Magdalene, who has her back towards us. It is still early in the morning and the sky is red with sunrise. The warm red-brown colour

of both the landscape and Mary contrasts with the cool blues, white and greys of Jesus and the rocky garden. The mouth of the tomb, in a reddish stone or brick, is visible on the left. It is the moment recorded in John 20:17 when Mary Magdalene recognizes him after his resurrection and he tells her "Touch me not". He applied abstraction to the figurative form in order to heighten the emotional intensity of the scene, the wrought triangular facets emphasize the tension of the relationship with Mary Magdalen. Painted at the time of his conversion to Catholicism it is a testament to his new faith and a materialisation of his belief.

Also in the collection are works by Ray Crooke, better known for his images of Fiji, which often have a religious overtone, this painting of the deposition painted in 1961 shows how he deployed the lessons learned from European Modernism to tackled a religious theme. The simplification of the forms, the angularity and the subdued colour all work to create a sense of sombre contemplation. Similarly, with Weaver Hawkins, who experienced the horrors of the Western Front and moved to Australia in the 1930's to find a place of tranquillity and escape, Modernism offered a way of combining a geometric order with his attempt to create ambitious, sometimes mural-sized, allegories of morality for an age of atomic warfare and global over-population. Frank Hinder, similarly made many paintings and drawings that applied his notions of art as perfecting relationships, a working methodology he described as Dynamic Symmetry. He made many preliminary drawings towards a final work of great complexity, possibly like this painting of Jesus of Nazareth, which was likely initiated by this drawing for the Crucifixion in the New Norcia Collection. As he explained, "Beyond the sum of the parts is the organization, the geometry, the pattern of connection" and that for Hinder was the key to some deeply sense of divine order.

Another major work in the Collection from a contemporary artist who has found in their creative practice the means to give voice to their beliefs is Alan Oldfield's *Triptych of the Annunciation*. A realist painter his bold and colourful images of religious themes are both very beautiful, as well as powerful in their ability to re-engage with the narratives around Christian doctrine, in this case the Annunciation described in Luke 1:26–38: 26 "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David" saying of her baby:

“He will be great, he will be called ‘Son of the Highest, The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob’s house forever—no end, ever, to his kingdom.”

Later, Oldfield became fascinated with Julian of Norwich the Christian mystic and theologian. He documented her sixteen revelations of God’s divine Love which Julian refers to as ‘showings’ that kept her heart fixed on the nurturing “motherly” qualities of God and Jesus. The Mandorla Prize has been a great boon to the Collection and it has brought in a number of key works that, as Mark Oakley suggests “... is about spiritual growth and development and transformations. So I’m not at all surprised” he says “that when artists engage with people of faith, they find that there’s a lot of overlap in terms of shared interests and concerns. Contemporary artists have an enormous amount to offer to the church – and vice versa.” The Mandorla has done that and it has brought works like Theo Konings and also the work that won when I was judging in 2016 by Megan Robert’s, titled *‘The Bread Basket at Emmaus’*.

Robert’s work was out of left field in many ways, yet it was the unanimous choice of the three judges who saw her basket, woven from the pages of a James 1 translation of the Bible fabricated into a basket, complete with the five wounds of Christ stitched into its fabric. It is an astounding and very memorable work.

But the final group of works I want to discuss are those that are about New Norcia, about the place itself, the people who lived here and the life of the community. Not surprisingly, there are a number of works in the Collection that document the community. Most notably the extraordinary portraits of the six surviving Spanish Monks when Mary Moore began painting them in 1997. In her inimitable way she not only depicted them as the amazing characters they are but she documented stories of their lives, their journey from Spain and their areas of specialisation within the Community, recorded in the vignettes sculptured within the frame. Their stories are embedded within the painting and become a meta-narrative of their lives surrounding their wonderful faces, beaming out from the darkness. The other images in the Collection show the daily life of the community from Dieter Engler’s *Washing Day*, painted in 2005, to John Lunghi’s, *Aboriginal Cottages* and Elisabeth Durack’s painting of the father’s walking toward the Church for a service in the early morning.

On our trip through the now tamed countryside it's hard not to think of Salvado's many arduous journeys from New Norcia to Perth and then five times back to Europe to report and raise funds. His extraordinary vision and determination is writ large on the local landscape and at a time of review and reconsideration of our past in the spirit of reconciliation he seems to offer the example of a man of integrity, compassion and understanding at a time when these qualities were all too rare.

And within the community itself is this treasury of images. Faced with the ambiguity and uncertainty of our own lives, when we engage with the work of artists who provide a window into their way of knowing the world, which has moved outside the temporal domain to offer insight, hope and a promise of redemption from human suffering and anguish, then we are all truly blessed to have this collection in Western Australia and here in New Norcia.