

THIS ESSAY WAS WRITTEN IN RESPONSE TO THE EXHIBITION, 'WITH OR WITHOUT GOD - ECSTATIC WONDERMENT AND PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE IN PAINTING and beyond' at L-13 GALLERY, CLERKENWELL, LONDON 2009

An Experiment to Test Belief in Art
by *Stephanie Moran*

Abstract

"The image is perhaps our sole remaining link with the sacred: with the horror provoked by death and sacrifice, with the serenity resulting from the pact of identification between the sacrificed and those who sacrifice, and with the joy of representation indissociable from sacrifice, its only possible passage..."

Painting has often been defined in relation to the divine - from depictions of the afterlife in Egyptian papyrus paintings, Medieval celebrations of divine beauty and light, the obvious religious scenes and icons, seventeenth century monochrome Tantric paintings and the American sublime, to the Abstract Expressionists' preoccupation with mysticism and Pop worshipping at the altar of materialism, for example.

God as such may have died, there may be an obsolescence of belief systems and intrinsic values have been replaced by simulated, synthetic values but what is the condition of the divine in painting?

The results of this experiment indicate it is located in the process, and that in order for it to be attained there must first exist Belief.



Stephanie Moran, 'Vampire', oil on canvas

Part One: Hypothesis / God Made Flesh, the Pain of Creation

Painting may be performed, enacted in a state of grace or ecstasy, a mystical trance. Most painters will understand what it is like to enter this state, a channeling, focusing of the will; a raising of power, being answered by the spirits as the possession takes hold. There is an outpouring, a rendering-flesh of a thought, idea, feeling - translating the intangible through the medium of paint. This is how L-13 artists Billy Childish, Harry Adams, Geraldine Swayne and Jamie Reid approach their work; which is not to deny other factors involved, their underlying structuring, selected symbology - the work is not devoid of content - the role of the ego in shaping the work. The act is thought as direct expression, a letting-out or release, a mystical experience.

"And she never ceases to look upon his nakedness, open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at his wounds from the nails that pierce his body as he hangs there, in his passion and abandonment. And she is overwhelmed with love of him/herself."

Childish and Adams' encrusted surfaces, thick and fleshy heaviness and gestural paint slashes constitute a flagellation, a burning heart, passion or obsession acted out onto the body of the canvas.

" 'I saw an angel... in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to be thrusting it at times into my heart and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great it made me moan, and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it.' "

In Swayne's 'Spankers' the staining of the canvas and the drippiness of the paint, suggestively liquid, wet and shining, colours of flesh and bruises evoke the pleasure of pain, a state of grace achieved through repeated abjection.

"And if in the sight of the nails and the spear piercing the body of the Son I drink in a joy that no word can ever express, let no one conclude hastily that I take pleasure in his sufferings. But if the Word was made flesh in this way, and to this extent, it can only have been to make me (become) God in my jouissance, which can at last be recognised."

Adams' layering of paint and encaustic builds up heavy surfaces and depths. The performing of collaboration, a dual authorship, an exchange which brings about splitting doubling and merging, while Reid transcends the ego, insisting on the irrelevance of the individual through his choice of support, a 5 million year old slate; the splattering of the paint worships the gods of chaos.

"Now the abyss opens down into my own self, and I am no longer cut in two opposing directions of sheer elevation to the sky and sheer fall into the depths. I know, now, that both height and depth spawn - and slit - each other in(de)finately. And that the one is in the other, and the other in me, matters little since it is in me

that they are created in rapture."

Part Two: Method / Sacrifice and Prayer

The response to the first part of the exhibition resulted in a plethora of sacrificial and ritual or fetish items; there was love, death and nurses, also prayer, meditation and devotion.

Birds were a recurring motif, appearing as offering and witch's familiar. Rachel Robb's painstakingly rendered 'Dead Bird', recalling the subject and paintwork of moralistic seventeenth century Dutch still lifes, depicts the still, quiet aftermath of the sacrifice; Grant Foster's 'Relic' with bird headdress, Childish's 'Bird in Hand' and 'Hero of the British Art Resistance', these all refer to the archaic-ness and sorcery of painting.

Chris Burns' sinister nurses compare with Richard Prince's Nurse - painted from a Mills and Boon medical romance cover and featured on the Sonic Youth album of the same name; also Toby Litt's Rubber Nurse in his novel Hospital, the staff in Lars Von Trier's Kingdom, or the sadistic hospital director in the manga Pure Trance by Junko Mizuno. They relate to Swayne's paintings and reveal the underlying masochism of the Mills and Boon's nurses; they represent sacrifice, an erotic giving up of the self, but also sadism. It is unclear who is the sadist - is it the artist who violently attacks the body of the canvas with the paint, or is it the nurse/subject/figure, who approaches covered in bloody dripping red crosses, menacingly wielding an oversized syringe.

Howard Dyke's burka-clad Miss Vertigo is the sacred to Burns' profane, she disappears among flowing gestural marks, retreats into the pattern of the ground, becoming one with it. The figure is barely recognisable as such, like a black hole absorbing light into her centre, burning up in the 'divine light' or holy fire all around.

Kate Lyddon carries out many acts of devotion to bring her figures to life - she gesturally paints, draws on, writes on and cuts out her people; they are a creation of love, collaged together with stuck-on hair and resembling perhaps much-used but beloved toys involved in an elaborate game while holding an ongoing conversation, the sort of never-ceasing stream-of-consciousness flow of banter, bickering and endearments of longstanding relationships or the angsty accusations and arguments of young lovers.

In my own response, I located the divine in the goddess or sorceress, painting as invocation, possession, a channeling of energy and directing of will; the structure contains a clash of painting styles - starting with the Anti-Form physicality of the drip, countered by the gestural paintwork of the figures. Light shines out from one face, the ecstatic in the facial. The gestural appropriately defines the figure forms, but they dissolve at the edges into the mystical drip. I attempted to contain or resist all of this: Formalist triangles are at the service of the figurative, but fail to retain their integrity.

The non-painted responses function as offerings, spells and devotional objects, from the literal photograph 'The Artist at Prayer' by Neal Brown to Sally Madge's collected objects, left in a hut by many people over time. They are mysterious offerings which have already lived a life and are now reincarnated as objects in cabinets to be considered in their relations with each other or made into sculptures.

Like the fetishy pieces of A.S. Waghorne, 'Witchy Things', which hang from the ceiling. They speak of sorcery, it is hard to tell whether benign or malevolent, Blair Witch-ish or like dreamcatchers? Twigs tied with red wool into shapes resembling symbols - like Chinese characters, hieroglyphs, runes. Attached to each the small spell scroll is like the messages of carrier pigeons or prayers to the gods.

Part 3: Result / Transformation (Enchantment), Shamanism, also Cynicism?

Clare Price's work comes out of a strict process, a balancing of the controlled framework and the free gesture; it starts with free drawings on an old computer drawing programme which pixellates the lines; these are transferred strictly and meticulously onto a large canvas, pixel by pixel, which becomes the rigid framework, the lines of her virtual landscape. It is only when this is completed that Price allows herself the freedom of gestural, physical enactments; the qualities of colour and gesture perhaps signalling a relay of emotional meteorology, an outward transmission of internal weather.

Albirt Umber's naively painted fishing boat scenes recall almost exactly Alfred Wallis's in subject, style and palette; as such they appear cynical, but perhaps are sincerely intentioned. They contrast with Harry Adams' 'Girl in a Boat' reworking of Waterhouse's Lady of Shallot, a 'post-apocalyptic transmission', an image of ruined beauty, of decadence and decay in luscious layers of rotting texture.

Sohrab's photographs of found talismans and rotting totem objects also speak of transience, abjection and decay, an archive of detritus, an anthropology of the street, while Wolf Howard documents a street site of transformation, the death of a cat. In 'James and Gordon', Harry Pye captures two moments spanning a short interval of time, but these celebrate warmth and friendship, familiarity rather than alienation, a meditation on friendship and connecting rather than existential angst.

Ruth Calland's piece, 'Just A Little Dance To Help Me See Into Your Soul' - 'An array of potency-confirmed objects, artfully arranged for your pleasure over a deluxe representation of an evolving Savant' - combines remote telepathy, ritual, divination and enchantment, performance, painting and installation. Calland focused on the exhibition from afar while on holiday in Cornwall, and found a variety of objects in response; she then visited the gallery blind, attempting to pick up energy vibrations from the work without seeing it so that she could

respond more deeply, on an unconscious and mystical level. The finished work was made in situ, the process documented in a series of black and white photographs resembling found archival footage of a bizarre arcane experiment. The work depends on a equilibrium of belief and cynicism, of the mystical and the scientific.

Discussion: Ecstatic Wonderment and Physical Experience in Painting and Beyond

Over the duration of the three parts of this exhibition, what occurs is a re-ordering, the space becomes a repository of votary objects and offerings, and the site of performed ritual, whether live or documented; a sacred space? It opens up the questions, what do we as painters try to achieve through the act of painting? And what is art for?

Painting, generally the application of pigment to surface, must surely be outdated? Why do we still do it? There is a process of making, whether through divine inspiration or rigorous working process; sweaty excitement or a long, cool labour.

Perhaps we are searching for meaning or cataloguing the lack of meaning in order to stave off the void. Are we aiming for redemption, transfiguration, a moment of release or self-deception? Working through thoughts, ideas, trauma, or mediating direct transmissions from the Unconscious. Creative acts, obsessions, like love, passion or masochistic pain, seek connection.

"Belief is a potent medicine"

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