The eyes they bring to see with

Rosemary Crumlin

> *Looking is a biological act: open eyes look; seeing is an act of conscience.*
>
> (Augusto Baol)[1]

THEY STAND SILENT; SCRUFFY-LOOKING, SOME OF THEM; in their twenties and thirties. Day after day it is the same. Always young people, surprised and surprising. Silent then, articulate later. 'I couldn't speak there. None of us could. But afterwards, over dinner, we couldn't stop talking.'

Others come also – small children who take up poses in front of the works; men and women wearing suits and carrying catalogues; older people bringing stools and the time and patience for looking. But the biggest single group are younger, in early adulthood, and their questions and comments provide a view of the delicate fabric of meaning that is too easily labelled 'spirituality'.

Where they stand

They stand, these young people, in a traditional art gallery, at an exhibition of twentieth-century art that focuses explicitly on the religious imagination and that is entitled 'Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination'.[2] Around them are ninety-four works by some of the greatest artists of this century, including Picasso, Matisse, Kokoschka, Beckmann, Rothko, Motherwell, Bacon, Kahlo, and younger giants such as Rainer, Clemente, Smith, Holzer and Kiefer.

Entry into the exhibition is through George Segal's installation, *The Expulsion*. Works are arranged in approximate chronological order. Sections include 'Beginnings', 'The War Years', 'The Years of Abstraction', 'Mexico', 'Sacred Space' and 'Desertion'. Once inside, it is possible for viewers to stand in any place – even for them to go straight to the most recent years. There is no right order just as there is no 'right' way to view the art. This is not to deny the importance of the artists' intention and belief system but simply to assert the independence of the work itself. Once finished, the work takes on a life of its own.

They, the viewers, also stand poised on the brink of a new millennium. Behind them is one of the most horrendously violent

centuries in the history of the human race. In front of them is uncharted time, but it is they who will hold responsibility for its vision and its faithfulness.

Where they stand religiously is even more complex and pluralist. Australia is arguably the most secular country in the world. Founded as a penal colony, a sort of ragbag for the scraps from potato-famine Ireland and slum-ridden England, it is now heavily multicultural and a high percentage of this generation is born of the huge sweep of migrants who have flooded in following World War II. Few of these gallery goers would be high in church attendance, more might identify themselves as believers, but most would answer either 'No' or 'I don't know' to the question 'Do you believe in God?'

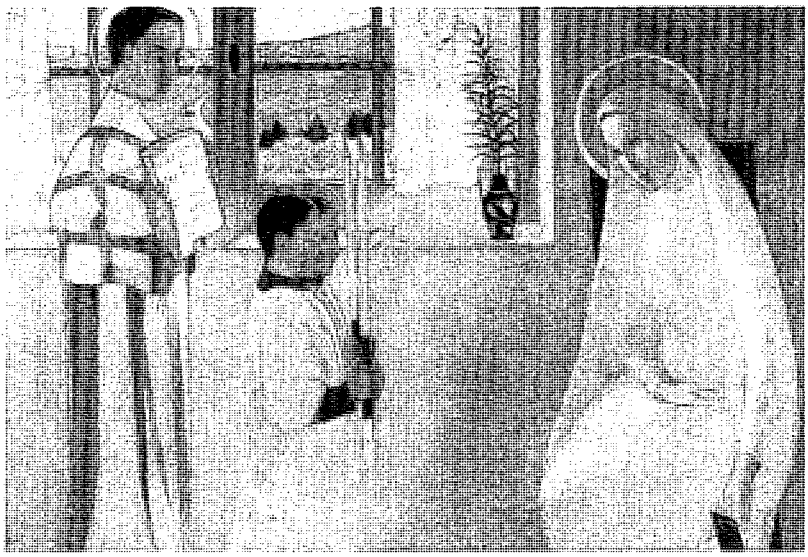
The presence of so many young adults is more than anyone anticipated for this show about belief and beyond. That they come with their questions is clear from the comment books,[3] and that some art works draw them back again is clear from observation as well as from their responses and those of the gallery attendants who watched each day.

What they look at to see

Part of their silence, I notice, is linked with a thoughtfulness and openness to the many-layered experience that great art can be. Beyond the colours, shapes and sizes, beyond the iconography and its themes, even beyond the richness of the symbolism and its iconology lie the power and magic of the work itself, the symbol that is the whole work. This can reach into the life experience of the viewer and transform it, like some medieval elixir, into a gold for enlightenment or insight or maybe a flash of enjoyment that enhances the everyday of life. The attention of these young adults is often profound. They usually spend some hours walking around, stopping, retracing steps. Their conversation afterwards and their comments reveal a diversity of responses and a curiosity and hunger for more such experiences.

Within the space of this article it is not possible to explore all the responses to individual works and then to suggest patterns of spiritualities that might have real validity. Rather, what I would like to do is to select seven of the most visited and most spoken about works and explore them briefly as a way towards understanding the power that they seem to have for the generation under discussion. Something of the patterns of viewer responses (spirituality) is thus allowed to emerge, while the reader is left free to be also viewer (beholder) although in a more limited fashion.

Looking both ways



Le Mystère Catholique (*The Catholic Mystery*) 1889 by Maurice Denis was borrowed from his home, now gallery, in St-Germaine-en-Laye on the outskirts of Paris. In this work Denis stands at the pivotal point of the last century, looking back to the security of Fra Angelico's piety as revealed in his *Annunciation* yet looking forward into a century which eschewed religiosity and came to revere simplicity and abstraction in art. 'Remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman or some anecdote,' wrote Denis in 1890, 'is essentially a plane surface covered with colours in a certain order.'[4]

Denis' Mary is Fra Angelico's Virgin of the Annunciation. The vase on the window holds a lily, medieval symbol of purity; the male acolytes and the reader (all saints) are upright and straight-backed in contrast to the seated, humble woman. The scene is in Denis' house, the view from the window is his view. For Denis this painting was the summation of his Catholic belief; it is a young man's faith, unquestioning in its acceptance and strongly tied to the hierarchies of the institution.

The viewers saw all that ('Isn't that a load of Catholic kitsch,' I heard one say), but what they spoke about most was the way the golden light suffuses the work, the compliance of the Mary, the serenity and security of the whole composition. The young women especially spoke of the fact that the central figure is seated with her eyes averted while the

males stand upright in command of the scene and the picture plane. Above all, what impressed them as young people was the artist's age. At eighteen, Denis had created this, possibly his greatest masterpiece; at eighteen he was accepted as a fully mature person and carried the accompanying responsibilities of leadership. Some expressed surprise at this, others pleasure. But for most, including other viewers, this was seen as a sign of hope in the capacity of youth.

Beyond the beginnings

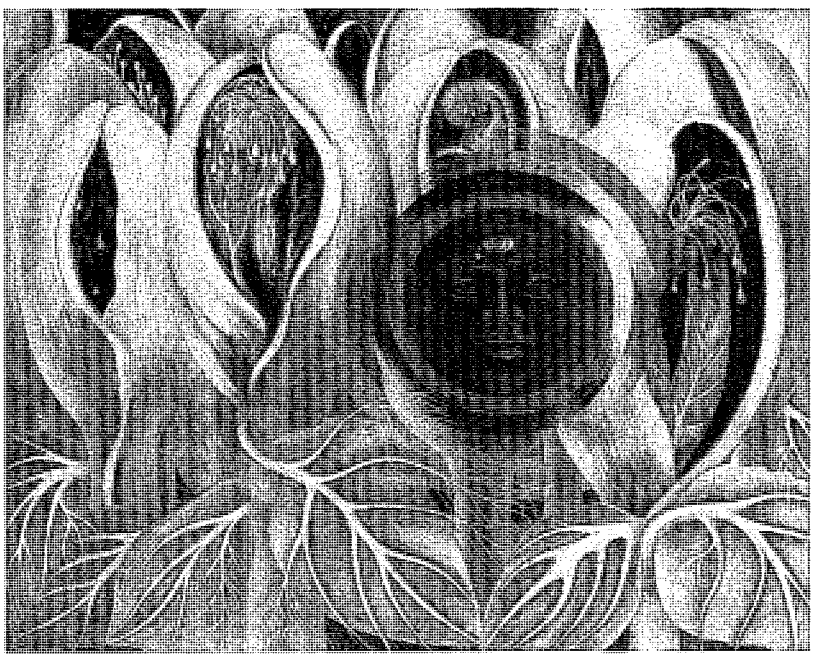
Of great historical and art-historical importance are the works from around the World War I years – Beckmann's *Descent from the Cross*, Käthe Kollwitz's *Pietà* and Max Ernst's *Crucifixion* – and then, from World War II, Otto Dix's *Ecce Homo* and George Gross's *Cain or Hitler in Hell.* Some visitors lingered with these, especially those viewers whose life experience of war spun off similar images. Teenagers gravitated to surrealist works, with their juxtapositions of

meaning and obvious emotional content. But I noticed that the young adults moved to more earthy and body images at this section of the exhibition.

They often smiled at Stanley Spencer's *Christ in the Wilderness* series. *Consider the Lilies* (1939) was a constant favourite with its fat, floating Jesus smelling an abundance not of lilies but of daisies in the artist's familiar English yard. *The Eagles* (1943) and *The Hen* (1954) added sober notes to the Spencer suite, but I believe it is the at-oneness with nature, the edge of humour and the tenderness of the subject that they found beguiling, for *Consider the Lilies* touches into a growing consciousness that the earth has to be cared for and respected if humanity is to survive. Those who came with a religious affiliation and theological background saw the Spencers as prophetic in embracing the earth and Christ as its redeemer.

Magic and alchemy

Frida Kahlo's *Sol y Vida* (*Sun and Life*) (1947), raised many of the same questions and was the focus of constant viewer attention. It is a small work (40 × 50cm), jewel-like in its character, colour and sense of intimacy. Kahlo was forty at the time of its creation, passionately in love with Diego Rivera, and desperate to have his child. At one level



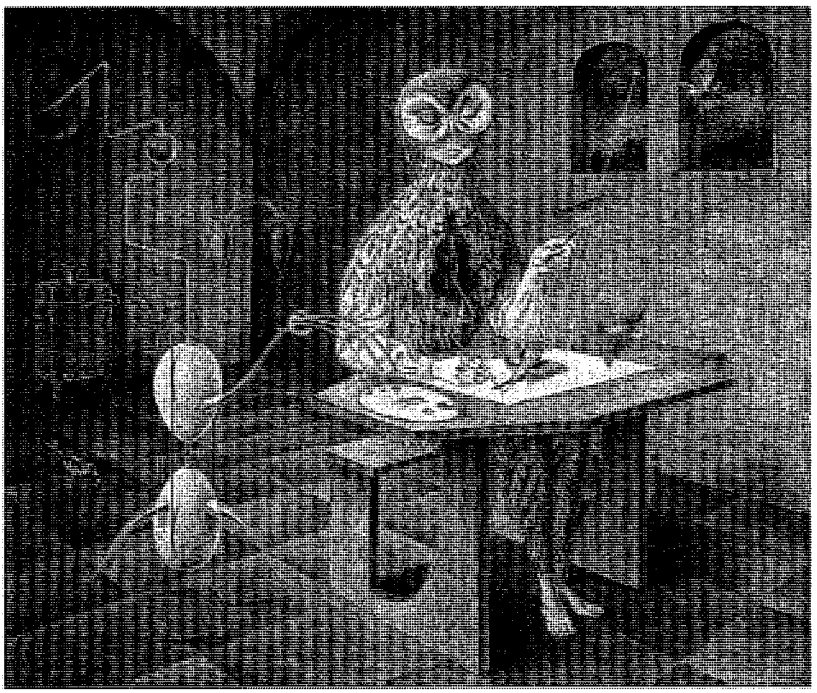
this work is about her grief over three miscarried pregnancies. An autobus accident at eighteen followed by a long series of operations made it impossible for her to carry a child to term. The focus of *Sol y Vida* is the round, red surface of Diego, her sun, with its Tantric third eye. Above in the bud of magnolia is a foetus. Both sun and bud are weeping. The energy of the sun spins out into the rich, intertwining foliage suggestive of male and female genitalia. That this work acted like a magnet for young adults is not surprising. It arises from the deeply personal, yet it is mysterious. It is a painting about present concerns – the body and its sexuality and fecundity as well as the complex and suggestive consciousness of sun and plants and earth and energy. The image encompasses the whole cosmos in a way that, given the date of its execution, is clearly prophetic.

Within the 'Beyond Belief' exhibition, *Sol y Vida* was among a cluster of works from Mexico which drew large crowds. As one viewer commented,

> . . . they beckon with a power of resistance (greening) in tears; an energy and a yearning for fertility, cosmic processes, life opening, a transformative possibility, power in creative, imaginative endeavour. They touch a vibrant magic I want in my own life.[5]

This yearning for magic and alchemy is caught and imprisoned momentarily in Remedios Varo's *Creation of the Birds* (1957). As in the Book of Wisdom the creator is female, represented here as an owl. She is an artist and a musician with a violin for a heart. She is drawing birds. As rays from the window pass through the prism she holds and touch the drawing, the birds rise and fly. Beside her are the alchemical vessels out of which flow the primary colours, red, yellow and blue, that she uses to create and transform. This painting, like Kahlo's *Sol y Vida*, is shot through with female imagery of generativity: eggs, fallopian tubes, an umbilical cord.

Many viewers identified within this painting the major themes of the religious and spiritual search that they were experiencing within their own lives – transformation, creativity and journey, with none of these tied to a specific religious tradition in the narrow sense of belonging to a religious institution. At the time of the Civil War, Varo left Catholic Spain for France and encounters with surrealism. From there she went in 1941 to Mexico City, which was then a real crossroads between the Europe of Nazism, Fascism and Communism, and the simpler,



indigenous cultures of Mexico. In this place, which she came to love, she pursued her own questions of meaning with whimsy and frequent recourse to a surrealist dream vocabulary but without a hint of the esoteric or exaggerated eroticism of artists such as Salvador Dali who were working at the same time.

Together with her friend, the artist Leonora Carrington, Varo studied the Cabala, Tarot and alchemy. Her late works reflect these interests and her passion for the unity of persons, nature and the cosmos. There is a certain coolness and detachment in the mood of Varo's work that leaves the viewer freer to continue the spiritual journey, aided by her superb draughtsmanship and delicate humour. *Creation of the Birds* bewitches and beckons.

While it was women who seemed to write most frequently (in this exhibition) about Kahlo and Varo, it was men whom I saw standing in front of David Alfaro Siqueiros's *El Colgado (The Hanging One)* (1947) and Julio Castellanos's *Los Robachicos* (1943) in the Mexican bay, as they did before Antonio Saura's *Crucifixion* (1959), Francis Bacon's *Second Version of Triptych 1994* (1988) and John Bellany's *Star of Bethlehem* (1968) from the National Gallery in London.

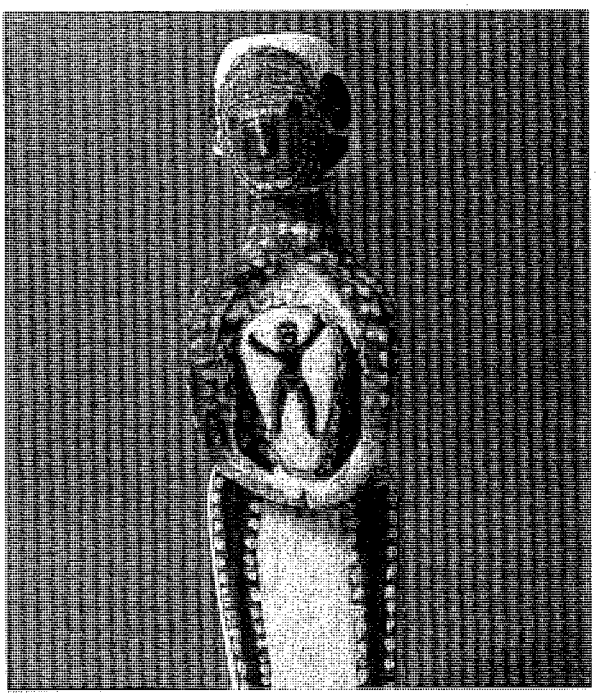
Sacred and holy

Right in the centre of the 'Beyond Belief' exhibition was a space, symbolically a 'sacred space'. In this place were a few paintings and a sculpture already designated as special, powerful and associated with a sacred religious moment. Germaine Richier's controversial *Christ of Assy* (1959) was here as was Arnulf Rainer's *Wine Crucifix* (1957–78) originally painted for an Austrian Catholic chapel but now in the Tate Gallery, London. Here, too, was Herbert Falken's 1981 work of a pregnant Christ, entitled *Pregnant Man* though there can be no doubt about the theological intent of this image of the man pregnant upon a cross.

At the time of their creation these three works were seen to be highly controversial and offensive. The Richier was removed from the church at Assy in response to a Vatican directive. It was denounced by the right-wing French Integrists as 'blasphemous', 'scandalous', 'an infamous profanation' and 'sacrilege'.[6] Rainer's work had been created for a sacred space in the seminary chapel, but was removed as offensive.[7] Falken so named his work to avoid direct confrontation with the established order. In this sacred space and at this, the very end of the

century, these works caused no controversy. Many people expressed some bewilderment that what were so serene and reverent were not seen as such in their day. A number spoke about societal and theological change following Vatican II, and some about the 1997 furore when Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* caused a frenzy of protest, some of it violent, with one act of vandalism leading the National Gallery of Victoria to close the whole exhibition.[8] 'What one age judges to be sacrilegious, the next can see as serene,' one viewer commented. 'So take care what you call sacrilegious,' came the response.

In the centre of this central space was a small wooden figure of a young Aboriginal girl, pregnant. The child in her womb is in a shield shape under her heart; he is no small baby, but a dancing man. The young girl carries the body-paint designs reserved for young, unmarried Warmun girls. The artist, George Mung Mung, who died in 1991, was a traditional elder of the Warmun community of Turkey Creek in the remote Kimberley district of Western Australia. He was thus a law man, a man of the Dreaming, responsible for the spiritual welfare of his people and for keeping a right relationship with his country. It is in this country that the spirits of his ancestors reside, and here, Mung Mung



believed, his own spirit would return on his death. Mung Mung, like most of the Warmun elders, was also Christian and Catholic. As his fellow elder Hector Sundaloo said of him,

> He was looking forward
> to a blackfella way
> and a Kartya[9] way
> he was a two-way man
> he was a clever man for the Dreaming.

This sculpture, which I believe to be one of the most powerful images of this century, was originally intended to replace a plaster statue of Our Lady knocked over by some dogs. 'I will make you a travelling Mary that will never break,' Mung Mung told the others. And so this splendid work was born, carved with a sharpened car-spring from a branch of a tree deep in the Bungle Bungle ranges in the Kimberley. Mung Mung said of her, the pregnant Mary:

> This young woman
> she's a young woman, this one
> the spirit of the little baby
> comes in a dream
> to his mother.
> Proper little one,
> his mother says.
> The babe grows and
> he might be ready at
> Christmastime.
> He says,
> Mother, I'm ready now,
> and the old women take her away
> and the little one is born
> down in the river there.[10]

The presence of this work dominated the sacred space in the same way that other truly great works seem to emanate immense power. In addition, this work held the faith that was invested in it by Mung Mung and then by the Warmun people for whom it is sacred. It was as if Mung Mung, with his old sharpened car-spring and his newly cut branch, had rethought one of the most central symbols of Christianity – the Virgin who gave birth to a Child who became the Redeemer of the world.

One of the patterns of attendance to this exhibition was the number of people who returned more than three times,[11] often bringing others with them. Always there were people silent in this space, standing in front of the Mung Mung or the Richier, or going from one to another. Many of these were young adults, products of a culture which is often characterized by frenetic activity and an impatience with things of the spirit and contemplation. They did not appear like this as they stood quietly here, looking and listening. In 'The stillness of paintings!' R. S. Thomas reminds us:[12]

> Move stealthily so
> As not to disturb
>
> They are not asleep
> . . . It is not they
>
> are being looked at
> but we.

Leaving the sacred space and walking past Beuys, Motherwell, Rothko and the Australian Arthur Boyd's powerful image of a woman crucified in the Shoalhaven River, viewers came into another partially separated space. The wall panel at the entrance read: 'DESERT-ION', and underneath the words of Jean-Luc Nancy:

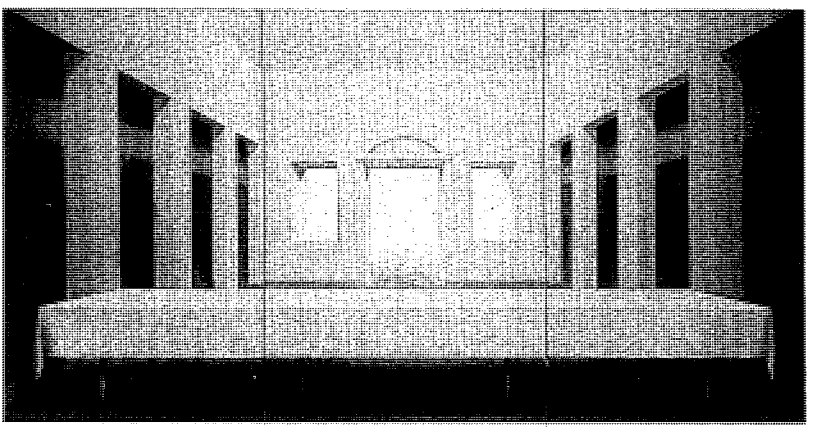
> Our experience of the divine is our experience of desertion. It is no longer a question of meeting God in the desert. We do not encounter God. God has deserted all encounter.[13]

Here were works from the last twenty years, most from the last few years. These are the years of a waning of institutional church allegiances and, as Nancy has put it, of a loss of the sense of God and disillusionment with the old religious symbols. The desert is not so much a place where God is found in the silence, as a symbol for the desertion of God. The works in this section of the exhibition all pushed and probed at newer meanings of presence and absence, at search and the questions that accompany the journey to meaning. And to this section came a steady stream of young adults.

Many works in this section of the exhibition seemed to reach into these questions and invite attention – James Brown's *Portrait of Christ*, James Lee Byars' *Conscience*, Anselm Kiefer's *Lilith*, Kiki Smith's *Lilith*, Francesco Clemente's *Fifty-one days on Mount Abu* and Audrey

Flack's speaking *Daphne*. But two works were spoken about consistently by all age groups except, perhaps, the very young. There is evidence still of the impact of these two works in the memory of those who saw them face to face, and for those who encounter them now in reproduction only.

Ben Williken's *Abendmahl* (*Last Supper*) (1976–79) dominated the end wall of this section. The familiarity of the image with its direct reference to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in Sta Maria della Grazie in Milan and its rigidly accurate use of linear perspective is hypnotic yet alienating. For where Leonardo has painted a soft Italian, bearded Christ surrounded by the drama of loving young men celebrating a meal, Willikens has only absence. No Christ, no figures, and the side



walls are steel, locked doors. Enlightenment comes from beyond the room, beyond the strong light that floods in from outside the end windows. The light has the power of mystery. 'I flew in from Alice Springs,' one young man said, 'and I have been sitting on that bench for the last hour and a half, looking and thinking.' He went on to talk about his experience of the work, what he saw and thought, and something of his own life. What he said might have surprised Ben Willikens, the artist, such is the power of the art symbol to open the imagination and take the viewer beyond the artist's intentions. This is not to denigrate the importance of the artist's intention in creating the work, nor the spatial mastery of Leonardo's Renaissance mural. It is an assertion of the limitless capacity of great art to inspire, confront, puzzle and even anger.

Like the good wine that surprised the guests at Cana, I have kept the best (in terms of most visited, most talked about, most clearly indicative of an agent for changing attitudes) until last in this small study. There were always young people around this work – young men in pairs, young girls holding hands, groups of students, parents carrying children in pouches or on their shoulders. It is now almost two years since this exhibition closed and people still comment on this work. Occasionally even now strangers will stop me in the street to talk about this exhibition and their memories. 'I remember the skin.' And from the comment books located at the end of the exhibition: 'I can't say I exactly enjoyed the experience. I felt myself so close to tears so many times. The Goldstein is incredibly sad.' And another: 'There's no doubt about the power of this work. I've spent time looking at people looking – and being moved by their seeing.'

Daniel Goldstein lives in San Francisco. In 1991 he began this series of reliquaries. Each beautiful case contains a skin, the leather cover from a piece of equipment in a San Francisco gymnasium frequented by young gay men. They came before the advent of HIV/AIDS to this place for social reasons and to keep their bodies beautiful. Many have since died. Others, often HIV positive, still come. Goldstein removed the skins from the equipment (this one is from an Incline), spread them out, and realized that the constant contact with human bodies, the vapours and the sweat and dirt from the hands, had impregnated the skins with images. This work, *Icarian II*, is redolent also of the young Greek Icarus who flew so close to the sun that the wax of his wings melted in the heat and he fell to earth.

Leather, sweat, copper, felt and Plexiglas are the listed materials for this work. Goldstein 'found' the skin, then built the case, named it a Reliquary as if (because) like a medieval reliquary it holds the marks of some extraordinary (saintly) young life. While Goldstein is not claiming that these young men are saints in the traditional Christian understanding of the term, this work (and the series) raises questions about the disease that is AIDS and its devastating effect on a whole generation of (mainly, in the US) young gay men. As Mary Charles Murray wrote in the exhibition catalogue:

> By their humanity and their humanism [these works] negate contempt, and by their relationship to other ghostly images of the religious tradition, particularly that of the suffering Christ, they go further, even suggesting an element of hope.[14]

Seeing is an act of conscience[15]

Young viewers signalled the depth of their responses:

> I can't say I exactly enjoyed the experience. I felt myself so close to tears so many times. The Goldstein is incredibly sad.
>
> I have spent a restless night with all these images exploding in my brain and gut! The exhibition has 'rattled the cage' – and helped make it possible to think without prescription. Mostly, when contemplating the religious images that have been standard fare, I have thought, 'No – it doesn't feel like that.' These great works on exhibition touch the marrow of true feeling, of being human: of being in a small boat in the eye of the storm . . .[16]

As we stand today, like Mark Warringer's *Ecce Homo* in Trafalgar Square,[17] at the turn of a new millennium, we have behind us a century so horrific in its violence and inhumanity as to test the faith of the truly honest and integral. To stand upright today is to question and carry question. The exhibition 'Beyond belief: modern art and the religious imagination' set out to bring together some of the greatest artists of the twentieth century at moments in their lives when they were asking themselves a religious question, that is, a question about ultimate meaning. It was done in the curatorial conviction that great art is like a great story – that it will open up, that it does not have a single meaning, that it invites but does not oppress, that it is so for those with eyes to see, regardless of their age, that as Octavio Paz has said, 'The work of art allows us to glimpse, for an instant, the there in the here, the always in the now'.[18]

Rosemary Crumlin rsm is an art curator and art historian. Relevant exhibitions and books include *Aboriginal art and spirituality* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1991) and 'Beyond belief: modern art and the religious imagination', National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, 1998.

NOTES

1 In Augusto Boal, *Legislative theatre*, trans Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1998).
2 Cf Rosemary Crumlin, *Beyond belief: modern art and the religious imagination* (Melbourne, Australia: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998).
3 Each day visitors to the exhibition were invited to record their comments in books made available for this purpose and located at the exit of the exhibition area. More than 1,200 persons took advantage of the opportunity to do so.
4 In Maurice Denis, 'Définition du Néo-traditionnisme', first published in *Art et Critique* (Paris, August 1890), and quoted in translation in Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves, *Artists on art: from the 14th–20th centuries* (London: John Murray, 1976), p 80.
5 From a signed letter to the curator, dated 24 June 1998.
6 See W. S. Rubin, *Modern art and the church at Assy* (New York: Columbia University, 1961).
7 Interview with artist in Crumlin, *Beyond belief*, p 138.
8 On consecutive days there were attempts to smash the art and tear it from the wall; the second attempt was successful and the Director and Trustees closed the Serrano exhibition immediately.
9 'White man'.
10 Spoken in the presence of Rosemary Crumlin, Turkey Creek, 1990.
11 Five or six visits were not uncommon; one person came eighteen times.
12 R. S. Thomas, *Collected poems 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993), p 455.
13 Quoted in Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: art, architecture, religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 269.
14 Crumlin, Beyond belief, p 174.
15 Boal, *Legislative theatre.*

16 Letters to the curator.
17 This life-size figure of Christ, dwarfed by the scale of the rest of the Square, was unveiled in July 1999.
18 Octavio Paz, *Essays on Mexican art*, trans Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987), p 203.

RECENTLY I READ SOMETHING which described Christians as 'tragic optimists'. I like that phrase. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, I continue to hold on to a belief that there is a force for good which eventually will win out, despite how foolish that belief may sometimes appear to be. In other words, I continue to hope.

No doubt more rational minds would reject this belief. I can understand the logic. After all, why continually allow yourself to be disappointed by placing too much hope, too much optimism, in the eventual rightness of our world? Wouldn't it be better simply to accept that things go wrong, and therefore to be better prepared for what life throws at you?

But try as I might, I've never been able to adopt this attitude, with the result that I often fall on the side of naïveté. It's at this point that I begin to resent my Christian background. I can seem so foolish when compared with my more worldly neighbours. And all because I can't shake off this sense of hope that, eventually, it'll all turn out fine.

Yet I would always prefer to be accused of naïveté – of being a fool for hope – than of being a cynic. This isn't necessarily about being 'a good Christian'; it's more that I believe that it's often only by remaining hopeful about your life and your relationships with people that they turn out for the better. It's hope that carries me forward. And, while I know I may still meet disappointment, I know that, through the persistence driven by hope, I will find that the challenges and problems in my life may be overcome. Despite all logic, hope becomes self-fulfilling. Even if my hopefulness is rewarded just once, that proves that my naïveté has been worth it. One victory for hope is worth a thousand victories for hopelessness.

Eddie Mawdesley