

BLOGS

Christine Morrow's Central Canvas

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The Blake Blog

Lately it seems like religion has been in the news for all the wrong reasons – from petty not-in-my-backyard gripes about Sydney hosting World Youth Day to the violent clashes between religious fundamentalists that occur in different corners of the globe with alarming regularity.

It comes as a welcome respite that there's an art exhibition and competition that shines a positive light on religion as a force for co-operation and mutual understanding.

The Blake Prize is named after William Blake, one of England's most renowned poets and artists, whose work explored spiritual themes.

The Prize recognises works that explore the religious and spiritual in art and its inauguration in 1951 makes it one of the most longstanding and respected prizes in Australia.

The list of past winners operates as a who's who of Australian art and includes George Gittoes, Hilarie Mais, Leonard French, John Coburn, Ken Whisson, Keith Looby and Asher Bilu.

Religion and the arts may not always be great bedfellows.

Think of Christian Rock and, if like me you attended Mass as a child in the late seventies and early eighties, you will have had some very suspect 'liturgical dance' to contend with too.

But visual art gets it right more often than not.

Anyone who's under the impression that religion is a quaint sideline in the practice of art had better think again.

From the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, to the Isenheim Altarpiece, the works of Albrecht Durer, the biblical narrative paintings of Rembrandt, Da Vinci's Last Supper to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, an overwhelming majority of the most celebrated works of art in the West are religious.

Even what we might think of as pagan subject matter, say Botticelli's Birth of Venus, is merely a representation of the older gods rather than the newer ones.

While art work with religious themes seems terribly unfashionable in the world of contemporary art its actually only Christianity and Judaism that are out of favour.

Buddhist art is held in neutral or positive esteem and art work about Islam is hotter-than-hot.

Last year alone, the Art Gallery of New South Wales showed two religious exhibitions The art of Islam and Goddess: Divine Energy suggesting that (a certain type of) religious art is flavour of the month.

The biggest problem that artists exhibiting in the Blake Prize have to contend with isn't fashion; its how can you make an art work about religion and spirituality when artists like Leonardo have already done it so well?

Basically, the field has already been totally stitched up by the greatest names in the history of art and that doesn't leave a lot of room to move.

Still, more than seventy Australian artists have made the cut for this year's Blake Prize so they are obviously not put off by the tough legacy they are labouring under.

One possible answer to the problem of heavy precedents is that the reinvention of religious art is most successful when it incorporates newer media (thankfully Caravaggio kept his hands off video art) or when outside themes are allowed to cross-pollinate with more traditional subject matter.

Not only in the visual arts but in the world of religion itself as well as in countless other fields, incorporating exterior influences is a successful strategy for reinvigorating a discipline.

For example, Vikki Wilson's work is a photograph whose subtle overexposure in parts eerily suggests that it has captured spirit world activity.

It owes far more to the world of séances and "John Edwards' Crossing Over" than to the King James Bible.

Richard Glover also uses photography to great effect. In his diptych image the wind billowing in the cassocks of a group of monks implies the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Indonesian-born artist Jumaadi presents an exquisite 14-part naïve painting about death called The Last Destination.

Depicting death as a journey, it is richly evocative because it mirrors the fourteen Stations of the Cross of Christ's passion.

Another noteworthy work is Noel McKenna's quirky painting of The Catholic Church in Australia (Churches and Mass Centres by Dioceses) which, just as its title suggests, pinpoints the location of the Catholic hubs in Australia much like you might see a map that shows land use or rainfall patterns.

Not everything in the Blake prize is great.

About a quarter of the works are seriously good and the rest are seriously stinkers.

And that's not because the theme is religion either.

It's because once a prize becomes unfashionable, outdated and a bit tired-looking, not many first rate works are submitted and the exhibition shortlist can appear a bit lacklustre.

Maybe the organisers should take a leaf out of the same book as the best works in this exhibition and look at incorporating some 'outside influences' to give the Prize some much-needed reinvigoration.

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