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**CS  
ARTS**

OCTOBER 2007 - ISSUE 28

www.cs.org.nz

## Hidden places

Gretchen Albrecht's lithographs shimmered in an exhibition at Christchurch's PaperGraphica. Residue from a wash of ink floated lace-like on the surface of the paper, a silver sheen on inky black. Ovals were like windows to a macro expanse of the night sky, or the earthy-green, microscopic fungi in her work *Mycelia* (2006). From an incomprehensible expanse to microscopic detail, the illusions of scale played with perspectives. The experience of being part of an

## annunciation and incarnation

existence much greater than ourselves was explored through the luminous matter of ink and water. 'All my work springs from my personal life experiences. The spiritual and the physical and the formal are three strands intertwined and inseparable.'<sup>1</sup> In such abstract fluid- and light-scapes, an annunciation or visual anticipation toward an understanding of spiritual activity and presence may be glimpsed.

*continued on p 10*



*Art can only be  
a vague reflection,  
never expected to  
explain away  
the mystery of God*

//  
**We can only  
 ever hint and  
 whisper at what  
 is truly real**

## Hidden places annunciation and incarnation

(continued from cover)

I'm uncertain of the term 'artist'. I don't feel like one, possibly because I'm new to the exhibiting world, or have settled into an art practice to the point that it is now an ordinary activity. It's life, and it's spiritual. Like Albrecht, through my photography, I also have explored images of places unseen by the naked eye: hidden places, in the glimmer of grit and water, in an amalgamation of light and earthy filtrate—physical and spiritual integration; light radiates towards the viewer, making shadows hide in the hollows of an uneven surface.

The photograph *Aureole* (2005), an encrusted earthy ground encircled by a liquid sheen, is about the sanctity of a physical world. Part of the focal arrangement is a small crescent meniscus: the

consider ordinary and practical things as part of a life before God. To think of art-making as a spiritual activity, one enters into a sort of dialogue with materials, and agreement is reached when the work resounds with balance and dynamism. Through a conversation with photography, I attempt to search for a way of creating the sense of a sacred space. Drawing correlations to established and Christian artistic themes is only part of the perspective. The ordinary work and process with the materials is equally part of spiritual activity.

In biblical terms, the spiritual is as much part of our humanity as the physical. Greek thought established a description of human beings as consisting of separate 'parts' which make up the whole: body and soul; or body, soul and spirit, often with the assumption that the physical is of lesser value than the 'eternal' value of the soul.<sup>2</sup> The Bible doesn't give a scientific description of our psychological make up, but it uses Hebrew or Greek terms like spirit, soul and heart interchangeably. Recent theology has recognised that



curved surface of still liquid—a meeting point. The smaller crescent echoes a larger-looming and golden hemisphere at the top of the image. This semicircular glow is a reference to 'the hand of God', one of the earliest known symbols in the history of Christian art for God the Father. A right hand, usually extended out from the clouds, represented the presence of God. A whirlpool of golden orange light bleeds down from the hemisphere and enfolds the ground. Through merging forms of raw, gritty filtrate with the golden glow of light, the work attempts to communicate a definition of the spiritual in the realm of the physical.

### The work of our hands: art as a spiritual activity

We can consider daily life and all its activities as being spiritual, not simply attending a meeting, or assigning a particular amount of time, to *be* spiritual. This is not to discount these times, but rather to

these terms may not indicate separate faculties but different ways of viewing the whole person.<sup>3</sup>

### Reflections of the mysterious

The mystery of Life, the mystery

Of Death, I see

Darkly as in a glass;

Their shadows pass,

And talk with me.<sup>4</sup>

Ambiguity is part of the emphasis of my work in the *Shrouded* exhibition (see page 32 for details). We can only ever hint and whisper at what is truly real. The work itself is like a shroud; darkness enfolds a grey and monochromatic sheen. It hangs there from above, obscuring more than it reveals. There is no face, no story. *Shrouded* is about the sometimes dim,

This page: *Annunciation*, Garry Currin, 2005.  
 Oil and mixed media on canvas, 1675 x 2136 mm.  
 Courtesy of Milford Galleries, Dunedin.

Opposite: *Threshold II* (from *On this Mountain* series),  
 2007, Joanna Osborne, Colour transparency.

but not hopeless, experiences of relationship with God, reflections of light as only faint indications of the mystery. In contrast, one of the works, *On this mountain*, makes reference to freedom: 'On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples'.<sup>5</sup> It is brighter, clearer, cleaner and dynamic. Reflections fly outward and enfold the image in light. However the picture is not 'complete'.

Art can only be a vague reflection, never expected to explain away the mystery of God. But it is a setting in which we can begin to make meaning, a signpost along a path of understanding spiritual truth in Christianity—the form of God in the physical and historical man of Jesus Christ. It is important to mention that neither art nor the artist can ever attempt to direct a spiritual experience. Art's place is distinct and our role is one of attentiveness—in 'waiting on God'—and participation in view of the works' cultural context.

## Annunciation and Incarnation

A very popular theme in the history of Christian art was the 'Annunciation of the Incarnation': the moment when the angel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary to announce she is to give birth to the Son of God—His human form on earth. This extraordinary occasion of the miraculous conception of a life marks the entrance of God into our physical and historical existence in the life of Jesus Christ. The account by physician and historian Luke unfolds Mary's emotional response to the angel's words. 'Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."'<sup>6</sup>

The Incarnation was the intersection of the timeless with time, the place where spirit came into contact with matter. Art can be considered in these terms, like a horizon line where matter comes into contact with spirit—a window or a signpost towards spirituality. Art may even help towards an understanding of relationship with God: not simply through analogy, but understanding redemption through God's empathy with our physical and human nature. His taking human form gave justification for appreciating our senses and for perceiving something of the transcendent.

Garry Currin's *Annunciation* (2005) is a work of particular interest. Turbulent water rushes to crash against rock and throw lighted mist into the hazy horizon. In the words of Simone Weil, 'One merely thinks of water, actual water itself, but the image of water is like a cry from our whole being'.<sup>7</sup> The water in this work is like a cry from the earth, a roar of desperation, moving, life-giving, whilst at the same time displaying nature's perilous power.

Consider this particular work of Currin's as an announcement, as an almost prophetic reference to the spiritual through water and light. Could this painting work as another announcement of the incarnation of God in Christ who claimed to be the 'water' and 'light' of life? Images that deal with fluidity

will adhere to any reference—psychology, global warming or other spiritual sensibilities. This sort of art is inclusive and adaptable, regardless of 'the eye of the beholder'. Light shining in a darkened land does not only communicate 'Christianity'. It is only through Jesus Christ the metaphor is made explicit and given context. In this instance the title helps—linking to historic figurative and didactic Christian images—anchoring Currin's work to a Christian perspective.

Albrecht's painting also works in this kind of way. Although her work is more abstract in nature, she draws on the heritage of Christian art to inform her work. *Pacific Annunciation* (1983) is one of her many reflections on this theme. The colours in this work correspond to the colours of the cloth that traditionally clothed the Angel of God and Mary—pink and blue—seen in so many fifteenth century Italian paintings of the Annunciation. Here they are perfect halves of a hemisphere, heaven and earth. The left side flickers heavenly pink, light-filled fluid paint in dialogue with the deep blue right side of the painting: Mary's contemplative reflection on the angel's greeting. For Albrecht, the division line down the centre of the hemisphere was the point of conception, the moment of physical formation, the Incarnation in a line of light. Albrecht's work at this time was linked to her own sense of motherhood; her hemispheres were resonances of her own experience, as both mother and artist. They bear bodily references, the mound of a pregnant belly, the fusion line of a caesarean scar. As one stands in front of this hemisphere, the fluid colour curved heavenward enfolds the viewer in a meeting point of the senses and the spiritual, like being in the presence of a speaking voice.

The association of these works with a significant event in Christian tradition allows us to explore their themes in a new way and to perhaps hear the resonance of an announcement in our spirit. The works bring us to the boundary, the moment, the horizon line—a meeting point.

## Joanna Osborne

- 1 Ron Brownson, *Gretchen Albrecht Illuminations*, Auckland Art Gallery 2002, New Zealand.
- 2 For further reading on Greek concepts of Trichotomy, Dichotomy and Gnosticism see *Created in God's Image*, Anthony A Hoekema, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, USA, 1986.
- 3 For further reading on the use of Hebrew terms in Scripture, see *Bodies—That is, Human Lives: A Re-examination of Human Nature in the Bible*, Joel B Green from *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, Warren S Brown, Nancey Murphy and H Newton Maloney (eds), Fortress Press, Minneapolis, USA, 1998.

For further reference (Greek and Hebrew) see: Paul K Jewett, *Who we are: Our dignity as Human, A Neo-Evangelical Theology*, William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, USA, 1996, pp 26–46, and Joel B Green (ed.) *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology*, Abingdon Press, Tennessee, USA, 2004, pp 47–61.

- 4 Christina Rossetti, *Mirrors of Life and Death*. From *The Works of Christina Rossetti*, Hertfordshire, United Kingdom, 1995.
- 5 New International Version of The Bible, Isaiah 25:7.
- 6 Ibid., Luke 1:26–35.
- 7 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God: The Essence of her Thought*, Collins, Fontana Books. Great Britain, 1950, p 168.

Opposite: *Shrouded*  
[detail] (from *On this Mountain* series),  
2007, Joanna Osborne, Colour transparency.



## The Overshadow

*"...the power of the Most High  
will overshadow you..."*

Luke 1:35

When we think of God, and  
angels, and the Angel,  
we suppose ineffable light.

So there is surprise in the air  
when we see him bring to Mary,  
in her lit room, a gift of darkness.

What is happening under that  
huge wing of shade? In that mystery  
what in-breaking wildness fills her?

She is astonished and afraid; even in  
that secret twilight she bends her head,  
hiding her face behind the curtain

of her hair; she knows that  
the rest of her life will mirror  
this blaze, this sudden midnight.

**Luci Shaw**

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