

The Prestige

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Italian film director, writer and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini accepted an invitation in 1962 to attend a conference of the Pro Civitate Christiana, or Citadella in Assisi, to join an open initiative conducted by the Franciscan monks to “lead society back to the principles of the Gospels”. Pasolini, who had already twice been tried and acquitted on charges of public indecency, was by now a well-known public figure, known for his strongly-held though vacillating views on politics and for his rampant homosexuality. His invitation to take part in the Citadella was both surprising and predictable. For on the wing of his election in 1958 and his establishment of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the liberal Pope John XXIII had been leading a concerted push to bring back ‘lambs into the fold’ and was eager to find perky, up-to-date ways of disseminating the Christian message.

Pasolini responded with unanticipated fervour and a typical lack of reserve. He read the Gospel According to Saint Matthew and was duly struck by its conviction and the nobility of its representation of faith and suffering. He was also drawn to what he viewed as an untypical Christian account; to him it was “unpleasant and terrifying” and cast Christ in an ambiguous light. But this is not to suggest that Pasolini was putting himself through anything resembling a religious conversion. Rather, because he was a radical humanitarian, he saw the story as exemplifying the ‘revolutionary’ character of Christ. The film that eventuated in 1964 from Pasolini’s pseudo-conversion greatly pleased the Church, and the international Catholic film commission handsomely awarded *The Gospel According to St Matthew*. Pasolini had entered the fold. Or had he? A little over a decade later he produced his masterpiece *Salò*, based on de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*, in which Pasolini vented his unrestrained disgust at Fascist authoritarianism as well as the vulgarities of pop franchise (the famous faeces eating scene was reputedly aimed at fast food).

On the face of it, the two movies could not have been less alike, but peel the surface and it is evident that they were both forms of deeply articulated outrage at the suffering that humans inflict upon themselves. *Salò* can be considered a compassionate film to the extent that it makes its viewers not just spectators of sadism, but seizes them by the throat and makes them both perpetrators and recipients of injustice; they feel it viscerally, so much so that anyone who has seen this film in its entirety feels having undergone an ordeal and to have come out of the other side summarily chastised. It doesn’t have the dignified sanctity of the opening scene in *The Gospel*, in which the camera pans from face to face seeking the ‘spiritual affect’ in their wan expressions—but that does not make it any less valid in its expression of

the extremes of human experience and the ways in which our means for attaining happiness and conciliation can be horrifyingly coercive. Pasolini was brutally murdered just before the public release of *Salò*; a martyr perhaps, of his own uncompromising views and an anarchic temperament.

What makes Pasolini’s story so interesting is how it was and still is, easily perverted by religious fanatics at either end of the spectrum. Liberals can defend his self-sacrifice, his honesty in the name of truth and his rare attunement to the darkness of the soul, while religious conservatives can condemn his opportunism, his lack of principles, his change of heart from religious conversion to unrepentant vulgarity. So far, I have resisted using the word ‘spiritual’ in any way because it is this that I want to take issue with in how it is aligned, realigned and repackaged by institutionalised religion; in this case concerning art. Pasolini’s case is worth recalling given the way a humane person—in the Nietzschean sense of “human, all too human”—with his flaws, is co-opted, fêted and then discarded by the nameless religious hoarde. It is also a lesson in how the vague notion of spirituality can be moulded depending on where the vested interests lie. For as Pasolini and Nietzsche have taught us, authentic spirit will always be at loggerheads with the institutions that aim to define and simplify that spirit.

This is also the case for William Blake after whom the Blake Prize (for Religious Art) is named. Though he saw himself as a Christian, it was always in especially mystical, trans-theistic terms that, as his artworks show, embraced Judaism and paganism. His poetry used Christian motifs but in a wider sense, such that it speaks about phases of human experience and the act of faith in the broadest way.

This is presumably the rationale of the Blake Prize that (while supported by the Catholic Church) prides itself on its expansive attitude to religion. But the inconsistency from the outset here is that Blake was never comfortable with competitions and eventually eschewed anything resembling them. It is one thing to be ‘spiritual’; it is something considerably different to have a competition focused on things ‘spiritual’, awarding its ‘best’ entrant with a monetary prize, something that would have been Blake’s conception of free-spiritedness.

Since its beginnings, Christianity has been anxious about its proselytisation, gaining a greater intensity with the factionalisms stirred up by Martin Luther and Protestantism near the beginning of the sixteenth-century, after which Catholicism responded both with the seductions of wealth and protection, and punitive force with the Inquisition. When a miscreant like Pasolini was invited by the Franciscans to participate in their initiative, he did so

in the larger tradition of ‘conversion by stealth’ (that had by then spanned two millennia), designed to indoctrinate people about the ‘right way’ of the Catholic Church. The Blake Prize was founded in 1951, during a post-war period of religious uncertainty. The Church subsequently enjoyed renewed membership as a result of the 1960s booming economy. Since the late 1990s it has once again suffered a serious decline. While the world, from India to China, may still be in thrall of the Vatican, local churchgoers are noticeably dwindling. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the Blake Prize should raise in purported prominence. It was, after all, Christians who took over from the Romans in using art as a vehicle for publicity.

That is somewhat flippant admittedly, since one of the prime motivations for art is ‘religious wonder’. However, the reason why institutionalised religions have regularly seen cause to censure some of the art that is made in its name is because the ‘religious wonder’ that motivates art is seldom chaste (the concealment of Michelangelo’s completed *Last Judgment* is an example). Philosophy too, as Aristotle remarked, arises from wonder. Philosophy’s main region of navigation is ethics, the justifications and values that define and guide what amounts to correct conduct; the best patterns and ways of living vis-à-vis self and other; what makes us continue and propels us to improve ourselves is a matter of faith. Art is built on the same faith. It is faith in art or what art can do that allows the artist to make one work after the next. It is faith that there is a community of interests that keeps artists making and audiences looking. Indeed, when art doesn’t seem to have any real meaning yet compels us, that quiddity that draws us to it, is usually a tacit contract of faith between the work of art and the person who views it. I am not referring to the supposed religious experience of sublime awe that people repeatedly confess to feel when they stand within Rothko’s chapel in the Tate, view Holbein’s *Dead Christ* in Basel, visit the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the shrines in Kyoto in Japan, or the endless grids of war graves at Ypres in Belgium. I am referring as much to snide and crass art like that of Dada which at its best, was profoundly concerned that art had lost its focus—which was to dislodge the mind from workaday habit and to force us, sometimes painfully, other times reluctantly, into a richer and more valid way of looking at the world. Good art is always commensurate with the same wonder that made early humans conscious that there was something more to hunting, gathering, fighting and procreating, and that there is some deeper strength to draw from and which, if communed with, might afford a better life.

In short, all art worthy of the name is spiritual. This is the singular flaw, if one can call it that, of the Blake Prize—the problems that flow from it are many. When art was inextricably linked to religion, that is, in a sacred society,



there were no competitions singled out for religious art. (As I pointed out in the article 'Overdressed for the Prom,' in the previous issue of *Broadsheet*, competitions began as a device for State centralisation and control.) In a secular society, religion and spirituality manifest themselves in countless ways, no less in a still-life or photograph of an embrace of people on a street. That there should be a singular religious art prize suggests anxiety over popularity and legitimacy. This also begs the question of, only every partly answerable, the definition and nature of spirituality in art. Just as the use of oil paint and canvas is not a safeguard for

something to be called 'art' (this was the Dadaists' issue), religious content is no guarantee of spiritualism. Additionally, there's the issue of the Blake Prize's sponsors, the Catholic Church. If one looks at just the last decade of the Prize, it is evident that the Catholic Church has taken care to show itself to be liberal and encompassing. But the hypocrisy is then double—first, the Prize targets and selects a certain kind of art which it deems 'spiritual'; second, it allows for content from other religions but nonetheless it is a concession which can only ever be patronising (were another religion be accepted and embraced with equal conviction then quite

simply, the primacy of the Church would be undermined). But the Church is always known to have it both ways; for example it supposedly accepts gays in society except when acknowledging and granting them the same civic legal rights such as that of marriage.



It is with these contradictions in mind that I am drawn to the repeated use of the word ‘prestige’ in the Prize’s press releases. Prestige means something that is accorded widespread admiration and respect. Curiously though the word is derived from the Latin *praestigium* meaning “illusion”; the plural, *prestigia* refers to “conjuring tricks”, hence seventeenth-century France’s widespread usage of the derivative to relate to both illusion and glamour. I am reminded of Nietzsche’s statement somewhere in *Dawn* that the “truth of the Church lies in its grandeur”. The illusion or legerdemain of the Blake Prize is not only its encouragement of artists to turn to subjects with an anecdotally religious content—in the name of religion while also ultimately in the name of the Church—a contradictory double-helix move to demonstrate the Church’s tolerance while all the time ensuring that its hold remains inviolable. All roads lead to Rome.

The hypocritical double bind at the base of the Blake Prize is exemplified when faced with Aboriginal art, as was the case again with this year’s winner, Shirley Purdie. The judges’ report on its decision is decidedly gushing to the point of convulsive:

The winning work by Shirley Purdie is simply delicious in colour, texture and feeling. It is a marvelously (sic) realised painterly journey that recreates the stories told to the artist in childhood of the Stations of the Cross in Warmun country using a breathtakingly beautiful natural ochre palette (sic) made from the earths eroded from the very Kimberley rocks whose mobile shapes enclose and frame the vignettes of story (sic). A solidly honest, confident, and true painting (sic) it becomes a meditation on traveling (sic) within the artist’s country following a remembered and cherished biblical journey of suffering and pain towards redemption, and perhaps as well (sic) asks us to reflect on loss, pain and the journeys we all need to make towards each other.

With sanctimonious vigour, the judges’ attempted to displace what is the inevitable arbitrariness of human judgment and taste with the decisive statement that it is a “true painting”. (A pity then that the judges are not as good grammarians as they are barometers of truth.)

One of the work’s premier virtues is its representation of suffering. I wonder if any Aboriginal commentators have taken the time to examine this (or perhaps they are too exhausted from repeated condescension and the trail of backhanded compliments). ‘True’ Aboriginal spirituality has been effaced through the privileging of Christian content. More astonishing is the way ‘suffering’ is rhapsodised without a single mention of Aboriginal suffering since European settlement, together with one-sided policies and decisions ratified by the religious right. The fact that all Aboriginal art that derives from groups and societies dealing with their ancestral origins is sacred. The Blake Prize is therefore willingly perpetuating the Catholic Church’s instinct to

convert and the joy it takes in its own rectitude. It is also yet another display of suffering made abstract. The painting is an example of a religious lesson that the student has correctly digested and absorbed. The indigenous pagan has been converted. Echoes of the tragic fate of Albert Namatjira abound.

Yet not every year’s decision is as didactic about good old-fashioned Christian values. The 2006 decision was much more open in its spiritual references. The beginning of the report from the *Catholic News* is worth citing at length:

An untitled image of a figure bathed in a pool of light with the rugged West MacDonall Ranges as a backdrop was this week selected from a field of three hundred and sixty entries for the annual \$15,000 Blake Prize for Religious Art. The winning painting ‘Untitled Landscape with Figure’ by former Archibald winner Euan Macleod “stands out as a rather conventional, though strong and painterly, abstract oil”, writes Australian critic Rosalie Higson. “Macleod’s enigmatic figure stands alone in the middle of the West MacDonnell Ranges, under a lowering sky. The judges considered that the painting made a significant statement about the human condition, and the spiritual power of an eternal landscape”, Ms Higson writes dubiously “but Macleod is loath to make a definitive statement about what the painting represents”. Fairfax reporter Linda Morris, also notes that the painting “is not a religious devotional work, and Macleod was so nervous about questions of its spiritual dimensions he left the painting untitled”. The New Zealand-born artist says “it’s about confronting the wilderness, confronting the void”.

According to both the artist and his critics, there was nothing overt in the religious content to this painting—nor need there be, but once again this raises serious questions as to the Blake Prize’s *raison d’être*.

Since the Blake in 2005 raised its prize money from \$10,000 to \$15,000, it has asserted its tradition with religious zeal—its far-reaching ‘tolerance’ (awarding prizes to Aboriginal and even Buddhist works); its prestige (no doubt based on their judges’ unrivalled ability to locate ‘truth’); and now its ability to stir up controversy. A conservative institution or any institution for that matter, that prides itself in how much controversy it can stir up is somewhat like the college geek who brags for months about the drugs that were consumed at his first party when the folks were away. This year the little known artist Priscilla Bracks submitted a work with a lenticular effect that became either Jesus or Osama bin Laden depending on where you stood. Accounts presented it as a glib and meretricious work, the artist protested her serious intentions to show the way bin Laden has been raised to deity status by his followers and through exposure in the media. Perhaps this type of sensationalism is like the comedian who elicits laughs through constantly saying ‘fuck’.

By now it is clear that I am no great defender of Catholicism, but Bracks’ ploy is about as subtle and as penetrating as painting swastikas within a shower recess.

But it is with such works, with their gormless sensationalism, that the dead-end of religious prizes like the Blake are exposed. To reject such a work would be seen as reactionary, censorial and defensive, yet to include it is to show how reliant the Prize is on outward perceptions of its far-reaching sensibility, its tolerance and that it is cutting edge enough to attract so-called controversial works. The Prize even found its way into the national (and international) media as a result of Bracks’ work. Both Prime Minister John Howard and opposition leader Kevin Rudd voiced their disapproval—but they too were painted into a corner since not to dignify a successful attempt at media mongering would have been seen as haughty or negligent. This was the Blake’s moment in the sun so to speak, when its own dead-ends were eclipsed by the dead-ends of political voice made mandatory by the media.

Wearing the controversy, such as it was, on its sleeve, the Blake Prize made it the centrepiece of its own press release, headed, “Blake Prize hits the nerve between POP culture and Religious Fundamentalism”. The report opened with a comment by the Prize’s Chair, Rev Rod Pattenden: “The controversy surrounding works on exhibition in this year’s Blake Prize for Religious Art is an indication of why art is such a powerful means of exploring cultural and religious difference.” This is nothing new, but the Prize had precious little such art in it—that it had to rely on cheap sensationalism to lend it bogus credibility was a reflection of its contradictions and instabilities.

During the late 1960s Marxist intellectuals began to voice what had been on their minds since the outbreak of World War II and which had reached a head with the parlous misapplication of Communism at the hands of Mao Zedong—namely, that Marxism was undergoing a ‘legitimizing crisis’. Intellectuals were casting about for a new program to advance humane, benign ends. The intellectual chaos that resulted lent itself to postmodernism and its detractors decried its lack of direction. But others viewed that postmodernism spelt liberation from the stranglehold of simplistic ‘master narratives’. That was when in the 1970s and 1980s, postcolonial and feminist critiques were at their most ardent. Maybe it imploded with its own ideology. Yet there are fanaticisms and fanaticisms, but only two decades ago the Blake Prize was seen more for what it was, a quaint, dusty, conservative bastion of a superannuated idea. Its raise in ‘prestige’ is yet another alarming reflection of our cultural *zeitgeist* which defends the same conservatism that calmly vilifies homosexuals, is silent about the death of indigenous people in custody or their lower life expectancy and disapproves of women’s rights to have freedom of choice for abortion. When institutions tout their own probity and their purchase on ‘truth’, the real ‘prestige’, the veil of Maya, has fallen and revels in having put its critics, that see its unstable foundations, to sleep. That is the real controversy at the heart of the Blake Prize.