

Still Small Voice: British Biblical Art in a Secular Age (1850-2014)

The Wilson, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum, 17th January – 3 May 2015

Sheona Beaumont, for *Art and Christianity*, Vol. 82, Summer 2015, p. 8.

Bringing the Bible to visual life has, in the past, been rooted in centuries-old doctrinal credos pertaining to illustration and iconography.¹ These modes of representation were born of and borne along by a dominantly Christian West, whose veneration, commissioning, and socio-religious consumption of such works ensured a cultural register of familiarity which we have now lost. Further, as much as today it proves impossible to see this rich visual tradition 'outside' the conceptualising frame of art, we also miss its location as doggedly mired 'inside' text, as inside the well-known biblical framing of story and meaning. ***Still Small Voice*** is an exhibition which largely starts from these two separating premises, yet is not without quiet (and two bold not-so-quiet) attempt(s) to invert the contemporary position.

Some 40 art works (drawings, paintings, prints and sculpture) are spread across 2 floors of The Wilson, in a display initially marked by eclectic visual difference: a seemingly chronological start in David Roberts' diminutive *Burgos Cathedral* (oil on panel, 1838) is followed by Joe Tilson's 5-foot abstract *Genesis Archeozoic* (oil on canvas with sacking, on board, 1958). Differences in scale, media, figuration, and status (studies/maquettes in contrast to completed works) are amplified by the dramatic colour-field presentation, whereby each wall-mounted piece has a large near-rectangular backdrop of painted colour. The effect as a whole is of a stained-glass supernova, and the church-like space of the art gallery is reclaimed for its visually-saturating liturgical and sacramental power.

Angus Pryor, Head of the School of Art and Design at the University of Gloucestershire, has nevertheless sought to encourage the art works' individual resonance by these colour panels. That the collection, which belongs to Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, has found a home in domestic and working environments in California reveals the transitional capacity of such art to engender intimate and thoughtful engagement. Here, it is an intimacy encouraged by the formal conversations and comparisons between works (rather than with the surrounding architecture): so Gerald Moira's jewel-like study of *Moses on Mt Sinai* (oil on card, c.1902-1906) inhabits the same blue field as the larger work opposite, Augustus Lunn's *Jacob's Dream* (tempera on board, 1944). Somnolence and an expanding dreamscape in the latter contrast with explosive illuminating glory in the former, yet they are given an equal visual footing, with the effect that the biblical voice of revelation assumes a dialogical quality in keeping with the Pentateuchal texts.

Less successful for an integrated biblical connection is the arrangement of crucifixion images along one wall in the upstairs gallery, which include works by Craigie Aitchison, Sidney Nolan, Graham Sutherland, Keith Vaughan and Stanley Spencer. That which is thematically similar points up the formal variation, staying comfortably within the normative programme of classically-appreciated iconographic reference. Here the biblical part of the work more generally originates in a quasi-mythical background heritage, which surfaces in the individual conviction of the artist. That which Ben Quash argues in the catalogue 'can be a source of powerful resistance to the great totalitarianisms of the noisy and violent century that broke upon us in 1914'² is rather more the dissipation of the particular text into personal expression, while retaining a poignant vulnerability.

¹ Hans Belting's seminal study of the holy image or icon is distinguished by him from the more general category of the narrative image, these two major forms of picture-making being predominant from the Middle Ages onwards. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

² Referring to Craigie Aitchison's *Pink Crucifixion* (etching on paper, 2004) and Barbara Hepworth's *Madonna and Child* (oil and graphite on panel, 1953). Lyrica Taylor, *Still Small Voice: British Biblical Art in a Secular Age (1850-2014)*, Pinatubo Press, 2014, p.11.

Perhaps two places where the text's teeth leave clearer imprint is in Stanley Spencer's *Angels of the Apocalypse* (oil on canvas, 1949) and Angus Pryor's own homage to this work, *God's Wrath* (painting, with found objects and installation, 2014). If there is a sense in which the British sensibility for 'domestic, particularist aesthetics'³ is brought to bear on a text like Revelation 15-16, it is in the dirt and the detail of both Spencer and Pryor. Less an illustration of and more a lens with the text, Spencer's renowned style weaves the immanence of biblical theme with his own views of Port Glasgow (and elsewhere, Cookham). Interestingly, his particularist aesthetics is actually an anti-aesthetic of the apocalyptic text, since his humanly-dressed angels bear seeds for new life, not bowls of wrath. In a different way, Pryor's anti-aesthetic is self-consciously aware of generative engagement over and against the end of (a kind of automatic) painting itself: his angels become space-hoppers both referentially within the frame and literally outside it. Just as end times are not the end in the text (Rev 21-22), so imagistic interpretations can speak of and with the Bible's reflexivity.

In the end, the 'still small voice' of the exhibition title turns out to be the artist's, not God's.⁴ Where the exhibition lacks the multi-strandedness of biblical engagement from the Pre-Raphaelites or John Piper or even Damien Hirst, it shores up the thematic reducibility of biblical subject-matter in art. Rather hopefully, attempts to counter this effect have been seen in the hugely popular lecture series accompanying the exhibition, and also in a room where public responses and children's engagement are encouraged. Ultimately however, it is the contextualising and recontextualising of the artists' individual voices that sing a postmodern tune, not the contents of the biblical reflections themselves.

³ *ibid*, p.10.

⁴ A point made explicit by Angus Pryor's reflections in the catalogue, where 1 Kings 19 is not mentioned. *Ibid*, p.12-13.