

**Copying Christ**  
**What Artists Do with Visual Traditions and Why it Matters**

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Storied, meditative visualisations of biblical episodes are not uncommon in Western art. The modern era of the white-walled gallery has done much to erase the contexts of art-works created for an immersive narrative-like continuum, but the tradition of, for example, stations of the cross continues to find new expression. One thinks of William Fairbank's *Forest Stations* (touring since 1998), or the London-wide trail co-curated by Dr Aaron Rosen and artist Terry Duffy in 2016. St Michael's Church, Discoed, has also been a fruitful site for multiple-artist 'station' exhibitions in recent years, whether more traditionally conceived (2012), or with the slanting perspectives of the Last Supper (2013), Jesus' wilderness experience (2014) and most recently through the eyes of the twelve disciples (2015).

For this year's Lenten experience, curators Charles MacCarthy and David Hiam have expanded the brief to include forty art works, each referencing another art work within one of ten traditional themes. Undoubtedly, the much-enlarged scale emphasises a collective rather than a continuum, and possibly more of a cognitive exercise than an immersive experience. This is not, however, so much a dilution of the dramatic subject-matter, as it is a level recognition of Western cultural inheritance. More specifically, this exhibition recognises, with a particularly postmodern eye, the inescapability of an artist's 'quoting' what has gone before. In so doing, the biblical narrative is recast in the language of layers of interpretation – which is, after all, the primary mode of our coming to it, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Layers of interpretation need not mean, of course, the obscuring of principal meaning, even if in visual terms the translation across biblical text and historical image is not 'obvious'. It is an insightful and intriguing *The Mocking of Christ* that Jane Tudge creates with inspiration from Fra Angelico. Just as the original painting (1440-1443) includes specific disembodied signs of Christ's disfiguration (detached hands and heads), Tudge presents similarly sharp and visceral physical signs around a similarly 'absent' Christ. The veiling of Christ in mockery becomes the ghost of Christ's impression, evoking the Shroud of Turin, or the Veil of Veronica. Particularly strong is the sense of a two-dimensional/three-dimensional conversation going on here – in which world is Christ real, if indeed the 'here' and the 'there' can be cleanly demarcated?

Like Tudge, the most successful artists in this exhibition are those whose journey into 'copying' take rather circuitous routes, where transparency is rather more than simple exchange of form or media. At one end of the scale, the gentlest of deviations can introduce the most sensitive and 'slow burning' effect: Christopher Kilmartin has absorbed all the careful measure and line of Piero Della Francesca's *The Mocking of Christ* (more accurately *The Flagellation*), but has also subtly introduced a modern setting amongst shoppers and stacked shelves. The command of zoned areas (with a mesmerising attention to fluorescent strip lighting) and the lightness of touch bring a remarkable formal harmony to the subject's informal resituation. Also exemplifying the light touch is Charles MacCarthy's *The Entombment*. This time, shadow and cool hue synchronise with the warmly lit setting of what could be a bomb-scarred Aleppo.

Resituation of biblical event into our time is a well-established visual technique: think of Pieter Breugel, or Stanley Spencer, to name only two. The conflation of time zones uses the sense of imaginative re-inhabitation and appropriation of biblical themes, in which viewers are either assumed or encouraged to live within the subjects represented (see John Harvey's *The Bible As Visual Culture*, 2013). With more dramatic deviation from their exemplars, Guy Lester's *The Arrest of Jesus* and Vivienne Luxton's *Jesus Carries the Cross* are both gritty, moody translations of this type. In urban nocturne and caricatured crowd, we the viewers come up against realism more than

compositional poetry. Biblical referent, original painting and present situation perform a *three-layer* conflation, which is here more strongly felt in the dynamism of real encounter, particularly in personal physical proximity.

Departing even further from the idea of time-hopping within the picture, is the journey undertaken into collage or abstraction by other artists. The conventions of (realistic) representation are either required to become visually athletic, or are abandoned altogether. In Carmel Stephens' *The Arrest of Jesus* and Ken Eastman's *The Supper at Emmaus*, abstraction rather wraps the whole collective of forty pieces into a journey from a sense of appearing (Stephen's lozenge of flesh-coloured opening) to a sense of materialisation (Eastman's earthy organic trefoil-like form). I find it fascinating that both these moments come at points in the biblical story when Jesus is taken away: in arrest or in physical disappearance. The art of 'copying' is perhaps aptly served by the concept of erasure, of known forms becoming not quite what we think they should be, and so expanding into the unknown (instead of vice versa). This is indeed an emphasis of the Passion story.

Such an expansive effect is also elicited through the playfulness of collage. Yvonne Crossley's *The Entombment* is like the leaking of classical form into theological generosity. Michelangelo's unfinished original perhaps permits the loosening of Jesus' body from its diminutive downward weight, such that its isolation and scale in Crossley's interpretation assume emancipation and elevation, even resurrection. Combined with Giotto's sky-diving angels, Jesus' ascension seems imminently possible too. In Alex Ramsay's *The Agony in the Garden*, a more surreal juxtaposition of photographic detail and text suggest the precipice of a moment that yawns onto uncertainty: Brexit and political machinations being associated with Jesus' unwanted (but ultimately accepted) cup of suffering and estrangement. The movement in these examples of somewhat lateral interpretation is welcome testimony of creativity's discursive bent. Instead of mapping out a singular linear route, art arrives by continually beginning.

Ultimately, this awareness of staying with, and playing with, something icon-like grounds this exhibition in the peculiar visuality of the Bible. We do far more than read the texts in a single linear fashion, and artists do far more than re-tell (or re-re-tell!) its narratives. Particular forms of artistic novelty may provide momentary comparative interest, but the more fascinating result is greater engagement with a scene's enduring cultural clout. There is something irreducible about the stations of the cross, as there is with the iconography of Mary. Here surely lies the power of art's persuasion – not that we understand and can de-code long-held visual conventions, but that we are led to re-visit and can enter into its lasting images, *for ourselves*. So often, we think the biblical is part of art/artist's ingredients, but I wonder if it is rather more the case that art is part of the Bible's ingredients for life here and now. This spring at St Michael's Discoed, that inversion is very much in evidence.