

Art and Sacred Places

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This catalogue is the retrospective record of an intriguing Millennium project, documenting the site-specific installations five artists created at four churches across the south of England. For those of us who missed the one month run of the show during November 2000, it is an excellent opportunity to regret at leisure what we could have seen. However, two of the catalogue articles go further and represent a genuinely new template for the nexus of contemporary art practice and ecclesiological spaces. The commissions were individually curated, produced as the result of residencies and intended as unique ephemeral art works for the project.

Keith Elford wrote in his introduction 'art and religion share the desire and the capacity to open our eyes and help us to see the world differently'. This remark sets the tone for the respect accorded to the interaction between the artist and their chosen environments. The introduction continues by making the excellent, almost Father Couturier-like insight, 'We hope to challenge and enrich not only the lives of the audience – the church member, the visitor – but also the artist.' This confidence and generosity of intention at the heart of Art 2000 radiates an inspiring warmth and purpose.

At Guildford Cathedral Tamsin Williams created a diptych of video projections capturing a figure soaring in an arc, set with the sound track of narrated flying stories. Daniel Coombs installed, at St Peter's Brighton, a wall assemblage made from every-day objects and personal belongings, whilst Duncan Whitely filled the space with sonic metaphors of the beating wings and the pealing of the bells of the Church. Over the font at Portsmouth Cathedral Dion Ellis hung an audio visual of a virtual fountain showing water flowing in light. In Winchester Cathedral Richard Wentworth constructed an installation from steel girders, a pillow and wire. The structure alluded to the scale and construction of the building, set against the intimacy of a domestic pillow.

The curators notes on the individual works were, as the photographs, clear and illuminating. A particular welcome touch was the inclusion of audience comments quoted at the end of each section. I would have liked to hear a few articulate reservations aired and more direct speech from the artists, but then (funding permitting) a video of the on-site process could have eclipsed the book format itself.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the publication is the ancillary essay by Fr Friedhelm Mennekes SJ of St Peter's, Cologne. His pungent, provocative words have real bite, and are full of ideas that demand thoughtful weighing before response. His chief contention is that art must be accorded the freedom to act autonomously, on a parity with the building. To do this effectively he recommends creating 'a kind of emptiness,' by clearing out 'anything which is not absolutely necessary'. There is much sense in this view from the curatorial angle. But it causes profound concerns about the cultural annihilation necessary and the uncomfortable associations of a church being rendered an historical tabula rasa. Also worth raising for debate is Fr Menneke's somewhat autocratic opinion of 'art as art and nothing else. Commissioned religious art or liturgical art is not art but illustration... which has a message which is already known and therefore unnecessary.' However his vision of religion as a continuous form of creation, which relates to tradition by creating new forms, is enormously exciting and encompasses the excellent ambition behind the whole Art 2000 project. This catalogue proves of the value of a printed record that outlives the exhibition, and should serve as an example for others to follow.

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Mark Cazalet is a painter who has recently created a new work for Manchester Cathedral. This review was first published in the July 2002 edition of the Art and Christian Enquiry Bulletin. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author and Art and Christian Enquiry.