

**TRANSGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY IN POST-APARTHEID
SOUTH AFRICAN ART**

VOLUME I

Submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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by

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

Karen Elaine von Veh

On _____ day of _____ 2011.

ABSTRACT

In this study I propose that transgressive interpretations of Christian iconography provide a valuable strategy for contemporary artists to engage with perceived social inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. Working in light of Michel Foucault's idea of an "ontology of the present", I investigate the ways in which religious iconography has been implicated in the regulation of society. Parodic reworking of Christian imagery in the selected examples is investigated as a strategy to expose these controls and offer a critique of mechanisms which produce normative 'truths'. I also consider how such imagery has been received and the factors accounting for that reception.

The study is contextualized by a brief, literary based, historical overview of Christian religious imagery to explain the strength of feeling evinced by religious images. This includes a review of the conflation of religion and state control of the masses, an analysis of the sovereign controls and disciplinary powers that they wield, and an explication of their illustration in religious iconography. I also identify reasons why such imagery may have seemed compelling to artists working in a post-apartheid context. By locating recent works in terms of those made elsewhere or South African examples prior to the period that is my focus, the works discussed are explored in terms of broader orientations in post-apartheid South African art.

Artworks that respond to specific Christian iconography are discussed, including Adam and Eve, The Virgin Mary, Christ, and various saints and sinners. The selected artists whose works form the focus of this study are Diane Victor, Christine Dixie, Majak Bredell, Tracey Rose, Wim Botha, Conrad Botes, Johannes Phokela and Lawrence Lemaoana. Through transgressive depictions of Christian icons these artists address current inequalities in society. The content of their works analysed here includes (among others): the construction of both female and male identities; sexual roles, social roles, and racial identity; the social expectations of contemporary motherhood; repressive role models; Afrikaner heritage; political and social change and its effects; colonial power; sacrifice; murder, rape, and violence in South Africa; abuses of power by role models and politicians; rugby; heroism; and patricide.

Christian iconography is a useful communicative tool because it has permeated many cultures over centuries, and the meanings it carries are thus accessible to large numbers of people. Religious imagery is often held sacred or is regarded with a degree of reverence, thus ensuring an emotive response when iconoclasm or transgression of any sort is identified. This study argues that by parodying sacred imagery these artists are able to disturb complacent viewing and encourage viewers to engage critically with some of its underlying implications.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS
VOLUME I**

	Page:
DECLARATION.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	xx
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Foucault’s theories on power and regulation.....	6
The importance of parody.....	11
Structure of the thesis	14
CHAPTER ONE: Mechanisms of power and subversion in Christian Imagery.....	17
Transgressive Christian imagery in Britain and America.....	18
A historical contextualisation of religious iconography.....	30
Conclusion.....	37
CHAPTER TWO: The integration of Christianity and Politics in selected images from the apartheid era.....	39
Apartheid era artists and the black saviour.....	42
Diane Victor’s response to politics and religion in the 1980s.....	49
Christine Dixie’s art made during the transitional era of South African politics.....	57
Conclusion.....	63
CHAPTER THREE: Adam and Eve.....	65
A Christian doctrinal context of original sin.....	65
A feminist agenda for Adam and Eve.....	71
Identity crisis.....	77
Homosexuality.....	79

Colonialism and exploitation.....	82
Conclusion.....	85
CHAPTER FOUR: Mary, Virgin and Madonna.....	87
Diane Victor: <i>The Eight Marys</i>	91
Majak Bredell's Black Madonnas.....	102
Tracy Rose and <i>la Messie</i>	110
Christine Dixie's evocations of motherhood.....	115
The Madonna according to Wim Botha and Conrad Botes.....	127
Conclusion.....	133
CHAPTER FIVE: Images of Jesus Christ, Son of God.....	134
Diane Victor's Christ - made man.....	135
Wim Botha's deconstruction of doctrine.....	139
Conrad Botes and the search for Afrikaner identity.....	151
Lawrence Lemaona and black masculinity in the new South Africa.....	161
Conclusion.....	168
CHAPTER SIX: Saints, Sinners, Patriarchs and Politicians.....	170
Interpretations of sacrifice in prefigurations of Christ.....	171
Murder and Mayhem.....	180
Injustice and Infamy.....	186
Personal interpretations: Female gods, saints and martyrs.....	191
Conclusion.....	196
CONCLUSION.....	198
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	202

VOLUME II

ILLUSTRATIONS.....	Page: 1
ILLUSTRATIONS SOURCE LIST.....	125

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN VOLUME II

INTRODUCTION:	Page:
Fig.0.1: Max Ernst. <i>The Virgin Mary Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter</i> . 1926. Oil on canvas, 196 x 130cm. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany.	1
Fig.0.2: <i>Justinian, Bishop Maximanus, and attendants</i> . c.547. Mosaic on the north wall of the apse, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.	2
Fig.0.3: <i>Christ handing the crown to Justinian, seated between two angels, Saint Vitalis and Bishop Ecclesius</i> . c.547. Mosaic in the apse of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.	2
CHAPTER ONE:	
Fig.1.1: Andres Serrano. <i>Piss Christ</i> . 1987. Cibachrome photograph mounted on plexiglass, 152 x 101 cm.	3
Fig.1.2: Chris Ofili. <i>TheHoly Virgin Mary</i> . 1996. Acrylic, oil, resin, paper collage, glitter, map pins and elephant dung on canvas, 244 x 183 cm.	3
Fig.1.3: Angus Fairhurst. <i>Pietà</i> . 1996. C-print in frame, 261.6 x 195.6 cm. Sadie Coles HQ, London.	4
Fig.1.4: Sarah Lucas. <i>Christ You Know it Ain't Easy</i> (detail). 2003. Marlboro light cigarettes and paint, dimensions variable. Sadie Coles HQ, London.	4
Fig.1.5: Conrad Botes. Page from: <i>Dukuza drawing book no.4</i> . 2004.	5
Fig.1.6: <i>Madonna and Child (Whakapakoko)</i> . 1845-90. Wood, Paua shell, 83 x 15 cm. Auckland Museum.	5
CHAPTER TWO:	
Fig.2.1: Azaria Mbatha. <i>David and Goliath</i> . 1963. Linocut on paper, 25 x 30 cm.	6
Fig.2.2: Azaria Mbatha. <i>Herod and the Wise Men</i> . 1965. Linocut on paper, 29.2 x 23.1 cm. Collection Mr P. C. G. McKenzie, Pietermaritzburg.	6
Fig.2.3: Charles Nkosi. <i>Pain on the Cross I</i> . 1976. Linocut, 337 x 223 cm.	7
Fig.2.4: Charles Nkosi. <i>Pain on the Cross IV</i> . 1976. Linocut, 337 x 223 cm.	7

- Fig.2.5:** Charles Nkosi. *Crucifixion II, Pain of the Cross II*. 1976. Linocut, 34 x 23 cm. 8
- Fig.2.6:** Charles Nkosi. *Crucifixion III, Submission to Death*. 1976. Linocut, 33 x 23 cm. 8
- Fig.2.7:** Paul Stopforth. *Elegy*. 1981. Mixed media on paper on wood panel, 152.4 x 243.84 cm. MTN Collection. 8
- Fig.2.8:** Hans Holbein. *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. 1521. Oil on wood, 30.5 x 200 cm. Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, Switzerland. 9
- Fig.2.9:** Andrea Mantegna. *Foreshortened Christ*. c.1500. Tempera on canvas, 68 x 81 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. 9
- Fig.2.10:** Paul Stopforth. *Biko Series: Heels (negative)*. 1980. Graphite and wax on paper, 76 x 56 cm. Collection of the University of the Witwatersrand. 10
- Fig.2.11:** Samkelo Bunu. *Daniel in the Lion's Den*. 1995. Etching, 29 x 29.5 cm. MTN Collection. 10
- Fig.2.12:** Paul Stopforth. *The Island #3: Hinge*. 2003. Mixed media on paper, 58.5 x 56 cm. Private collection. 11
- Fig.2.13:** Paul Stopforth. *The Island #1: Trash Cans*. 2003. Mixed media on paper, 58.5 x 56 cm. Collection of the artist. 11
- Fig.2.14:** Paul Stopforth. *The Island #4: Blankets*. 2003. Mixed media on paper, 58.5 x 58 cm. Collection of the artist. 12
- Fig.2.15:** Diane Victor. *The Problem with being a God These Days*. 1987. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 150 x 100 cm. ABSA Collection. 13
- Fig.2.16:** Diane Victor. *Adoration of St. Eugene*. 1988. Etching and aquatint, 70 x 40 cm. 14
- Fig.2.17:** Diane Victor. *He'll Steal More than Your Heart*. 1988. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 150 x 80 cm. 15
- Fig.2.18:** Diane Victor. *The Ultimate Adoration*. 1989. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 150 x 80 cm. 16
- Fig.2.19:** Attributed to Leonhard Kern. *Corpus Christi*. c.1625-40. Bronze, 19.6 x 19.2 x 3.8 cm. Michael Hall Collection. 17
- Fig.2.20:** Georg Petel. *Crucifix*. c.1630-34. Ivory corpus mounted on ebonized wooden cross with original ivory banner cartouche, 31.3 x 23.3 x 7 cm. Michael Hall Collection. 18

- Fig.2.21:** Christine Dixie. *Still the gilt frame holds*. 1991. Two-plate copper etching, soft-ground etching, hard-ground etching, chine collé and aquatint, 595 x 405 cm. 19
- Fig.2.22:** Christine Dixie. *Bathsheba: looking on from a secret space*. 1992. Four-plate copper etching, soft-ground etching, hard-ground etching and aquatint, 300 x 405 cm. 20
- Fig.2.23:** Christine Dixie. *Potiphar's wife: pursuing his mirage*. 1992. Four-plate copper etching, soft-ground etching, soft-ground impression, hard-ground etching, mezzotint and aquatint, 300 x 405 cm. 20
- Fig.2.24:** Christine Dixie. *Ricci's 'Bathsheba bathing': as though the present was a spectator*. 1993. Four-plate copper etching, soft-ground etching, hard-ground etching, mezzotint and aquatint, 595 x 447 cm. 21
- Fig.2.25:** Sebastiano Ricci. *Bathsheba at the Bath*. 1725. Oil on canvas, 118.5 x 199 cm. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest. 22

CHAPTER THREE:

- Fig.3.1:** Hieronymus Bosch. *Garden of Earthly Delights*. 1505-1510. Oil on wood, 220 x 389 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. 23
- Fig.3.2:** Michelangelo Buonarroti. *The Garden of Eden*. 1508-1512. Middle fresco cycle of ceiling, before restoration, 280 x 270 cm, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. 23
- Fig.3.3:** Francesco del Cossa. *St. Lucy* (detail). 1473. Oil on panel, 79 x 56 cm. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington. 24
- Fig.3.4:** Sebastiano Del Piombo. *Martyrdom of St Agatha*. 1520. Oil on wood, 127 x 178 cm. Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence. 24
- Fig.3.5:** Diane Victor. *Strip*. 1999. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 100 x 80 cm. BHP Billiton Collection. 25
- Fig.3.6:** Diane Victor. *Teased*. 1999. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 100 x 80 cm. Collection of the artist. 26
- Fig.3.7:** Friedrich Overbeck. *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. 1855. Oil on board, dimensions unavailable. Cologne Cathedral. 27
- Fig.3.8:** Attributed to the Master of Pedret. *Apse and The Virgin and Child in Majesty, with Archangels and the Magi*. c.1100. Fresco from the Church of San Martin, Fuentidueña, Spain 27
- Fig.3.9:** Majak Bredell. *Sacred Marriage I*. 1997. Mixed media on paper, 128 x 112 cm. 28

- Fig.3.10:** Majak Bredell. *Sacred Marriage II*. 1997. Mixed media on paper, 128 x 112 cm. **28**
- Fig.3.11:** Majak Bredell. *Adam – Tree of Life*. 2009. Oil on shaped masonite, 120 x 180 cm. **29**
- Fig.3.12:** Majak Bredell. *Eve – Tree of Life*. 2009. Oil on shaped masonite, 120 x 180 cm. **29**
- Fig.3.13:** Conrad Botes. *Tree of Knowledge*. 2007. Enamel on obeche and yellowwood, iroko, 93.5 x 171 cm (dimensions include pedestal). **30**
- Fig.3.14:** Tracey Rose. *Adam and Yves, BC*. 2003. Lambda photograph, 82 x 82 cm. **31**
- Fig.3.15:** Johannes Phokela. *Prozac*. 2005. Oil on canvas, 110 x 137 cm. **32**

CHAPTER FOUR:

- Fig.4.1:** Rogier van der Weyden. *Portrait Diptych of Jean de Gros* (left wing). c.1450. Oil on oak panel, 36 x 27 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai. **33**
- Fig.4.2:** Robert Campin. *Virgin and Child*. c.1410. Oil on wood, 160 x 68 cm. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt. **33**
- Fig.4.3:** Raphael. *Madonna in the Meadow*. 1505-1506. Oil on wood, 113 x 88 cm. Kunshistorisches Museum, Vienna. **34**
- Fig.4.4:** Raphael. *The Bridgewater Madonna*. c.1507. Oil and gold on canvas, transferred from panel, 81 x 55 cm. Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh. **34**
- Fig.4.5:** Jan van Eyck. *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin*. c.1435. Oil on panel, 66 x 62 cm. Louvre, Paris. **35**
- Fig.4.6:** Rogier van der Weyden. *Virgin and Child in a Niche*. c.1435-1438. Oil on oak, 100 x 52 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. **35**
- Fig.4.7:** Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. c.1848-1849. Oil on canvas, 83.2 x 65.4 cm. Tate, Britain. **36**
- Fig.4.8:** Diane Victor. *The Eight Marys* (1-4). 2004. Charcoal and pastel on paper, each 170 x 51 cm. Hollard Collection. **37**
- Fig.4.9:** Diane Victor. *The Eight Marys* (5-8). 2004. Charcoal and pastel on paper, each 170 x 51 cm. Hollard Collection. **37**

Fig.4.10: Sir Johan Everett Millais. <i>Christ in the House of His Parents ('The Carpenter's Shop')</i> . c.1849-1850. Oil on canvas, 86.4 x 139.7 cm. Tate, Britain.	38
Fig.4.11: Titian. <i>Venus of Urbino</i> . 1538. Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 165 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.	38
Fig.4.12: Giorgione. <i>Sleeping Venus</i> . c.1509. Oil on canvas, 108.5 x 175 cm. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.	39
Fig.4.13: Medici Venus (known as the Venus Pudica or modest Venus). 3 rd Century B.C. Marble, height 1.53 m. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.	39
Fig.4.14: Diane Victor. <i>Reconstruction Site</i> . 1992. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 200 x 150 cm. Gertrude Posel Collection, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.	40
Fig.4.15: Attributed to St. Amadour. <i>Madonna Enthroned With Child</i> . 12 th Century. Wood covered in blackened silver, 66 cm. Rocamadour, France.	41
Fig.4.16: <i>Notre Dame du Pilier</i> . 15 th Century. Stone. Chartres Cathedral, France.	41
Fig.4.17: <i>Black Madonna of Breznichar in Bohemia</i> . 1396. National Gallery, Prague.	42
Fig.4.18: Attributed to St. Luke the Evangelist. <i>Black Madonna of Częstochowa</i> . 13 th Century. Painting on wood, 122.2 x 82.2 x 3.5 cm. Monastery of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa, Poland.	42
Fig.4.19: Majak Bredell. <i>Black Madonna – Goddess of Beginnings</i> . 2008. Fabric and oil on masonite, 120 x 180 cm.	43
Fig.4.20: Majak Bredell. <i>Black Madonna I, II and III</i> . 2009. Oil on masonite, each 97 x 127 cm.	44
Fig.4.21: Majak Bredell. <i>Virgin - Black</i> . 2009. Etching, 38 x 57 cm.	44
Fig.4.22: Majak Bredell. <i>Annunciation - Virgin</i> . 2009. Fabric and oil on masonite, 60 x 180 cm.	45
Fig.4.23: Majak Bredell. <i>Eve – Not Guilty, and Magdalen – Not Guilty</i> . 2008. Oil on masonite, each 60 x 180 cm.	46
Fig.4.24: Majak Bredell. <i>Chthonic Eve and Chthonic Mary</i> . 2009. Oil on masonite, each 60 x 180 cm.	47
Fig.4.25: Majak Bredell. <i>Black Madonna and Sisters</i> . 2009. Oil on shaped masonite, 120 x 240 cm.	48

Fig.4.26: Duccio di Buoninsegna. <i>Rucellai Madonna</i> . 1285. Tempera on wood panel, 450 x 290 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.	49
Fig.4.27: Master of San Martino. <i>Madonna and Child</i> . c.1270-90. Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.	50
Fig.4.28: Tracey Rose. <i>Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – La Messie</i> . 2003. Lambda photograph, 148 x 102 cm.	51
Fig.4.29: Tracey Rose. <i>Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – Fucking Flowers</i> . 2003. Lambda photograph, 54 x 80 cm.	52
Fig.4.30: Tracey Rose. <i>Ciao Bella – Lolita</i> . 2001. Lambda photograph, 119 x 119 cm.	52
Fig.4.31: Tracey Rose. <i>Ciao Bella – Cicciolina</i> . 2001. Lambda photograph, 117.5 x 118 cm.	53
Fig.4.32: Tracey Rose. <i>Ciao Bella – Venus Baartman</i> . 2001. Lambda photograph, 119 x 119 cm.	53
Fig.4.33: Tracey Rose. <i>Ciao Bella – Lovemefuckme</i> . 2001. Lambda photograph, 118 x 118 cm.	54
Fig.4.34: Tracey Rose. <i>Bunny</i> . 2002. Lambda photograph, 118.5 x 119 cm.	54
Fig.4.35: Tracey Rose. <i>Mami</i> (detail). 2001. Lambda photograph, 119 x 119 cm.	55
Fig.4.36: Tracey Rose. <i>Regina Coeli</i> . 2001. Lambda photograph, 127 x 127 cm.	55
Fig.4.37: Tracey Rose. <i>Ciao Bella – MAQEH</i> . 2002. Lambda photograph, 118.5 x 118.5 cm.	56
Fig.4.38: Tracey Rose. <i>Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 - L'Annunciazione (After Fra Angelico), c.1434-2003</i> . 2004. Lambda photograph, 124 x 156.5 cm.	57
Fig.4.39: Fra Angelico. <i>Annunciation</i> . 1451-1452. Tempera on wood, 38.5 x 37 cm. Museo di San Marco, Florence.	57
Fig.4.40: Tracey Rose. <i>Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – The Messiah</i> . 2003. Lambda photograph, 148 x 102 cm.	58
Fig.4.41: Tracey Rose. <i>Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – Annunciation Context</i> . 2003. Lambda photograph.	58
Fig.4.42: Christine Dixie. <i>The Interior</i> . 2006. Linocut, woodcut, latex and thread, 300 x 347 cm. Photograph by Brent Meistre.	59

- Fig.4.43:** G. Blaeu. *Map of Africa* from *Grooten Atlas*. 1648-1665. British Library. 60
- Fig.4.44:** Christine Dixie. *Parturition – Mucosa*. 2006. ‘Reliquary’ with woodcut on silicone, thread, found objects and electrical light, 90 x 47 cm. 61
- Fig.4.45:** Ernest Barrias. *Nature Unveiling Herself to Science*. 1899. Marble and polychrome onyx from Algeria, grey granite pedestal, malachite scarab, lapis lazuli ribbon, 200 x 85 x 55 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris. 62
- Fig.4.46:** Christine Dixie. *Parturition – Umbilicus*. 2006. ‘Relinquary’ with woodcut on silicone, thread, found objects and electrical light, 90 x 47 cm. 63
- Fig.4.47:** Christine Dixie. *Parturition – Vestibule*. 2006. ‘Relinquary’ with woodcut on silicone, thread and found objects, 90 x 47 cm. 64
- Fig.4.48:** Christine Dixie. *Parturition – Lactéal*. 2006. ‘Relinquary’ with woodcut on silicone, thread, found objects and electrical light, 90 x 47 cm. 65
- Fig.4.49:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Bellini’s Madonna and Child*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 66
- Fig.4.50:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Bellini’s Child with Saints*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 66
- Fig.4.51:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Mantegna’s Holy Family*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 67
- Fig.4.52:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Masolini’s Maria Lactans*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 67
- Fig.4.53:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Van Cleve’s Nursing Virgin*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 68
- Fig.4.54:** Christine Dixie. *Blocking Van Eyck’s Paele Virgin*. 2008. Woodcut on paper, 650 x 990 cm. 68
- Fig.4.55:** Charles Estienne. Anatomical study from *De dissectione partium corporis humani*. 1545. Woodcut. Getty Research Institute, Research Librabry, Los Angeles. 69
- Fig.4.56:** Wim Botha. *Carbon Copy (Madonna del parto col bambino)*. 2001. Anthracite, liquid petroleum gas, height 110 cm, installation dimensions variable. Sasol Collection, Johannesburg. 70
- Fig.4.57:** Michelangelo Buonarotti. *Bruges Madonna*. 1501-1504. Marble, height 128 cm. Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk, Bruges. 70

Fig.4.58: Wim Botha. *Mieliepap Pietà*. 2004. Maize meal, epoxy resin, life size. 71
Installation view, Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York. Spier Collection, Cape
Town.

Fig.4.59: Wim Botha. *Apocalumbilicus*. 2006. Linoprint on tea-stained Hahnemühle, 72
wood, brown paper tape, coffee and water, 197.4 x 80.5 cm.

Fig.4.60: Joseph Beuys. *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. 1965. Photograph from 73
the performance on 26 November 1965.

Fig.4.61: Conrad Botes. *Pietà*. 2007. Installation including 10 roundels. Oil-based paint 73
on glass, dimensions variable.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Fig.5.1: Anonymous. [Sa]. *Arch Wood Icon – Sacred Heart of Jesus*. Painting on board 74
and wood, 9.1 x 11.4 cm.

Fig.5.2: *Icon of Mandylion of Edessa*. 18th Century. Egg tempera with resin glazes on 74
wood, 40 x 32 cm. The Royal Collection Trust, Hampton Court.

Fig.5.3: Master of Saint Veronica. *Saint Veronica with the Sudarium*. c.1420. Oil on 75
walnut, 44.2 x 33.7 cm. National Gallery, London.

Fig.5.4: Diane Victor. *Little Deposition Picture*. 2002. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 200 76
x 150 cm.

Fig.5.5: Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Pietà*. c.1498-1500. Marble, height 174 cm. Saint 77
Peter's, Vatican City, Rome.

Fig.5.6: Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Risen Christ*. c.1514-1520. Marble, height 205.1 cm. 77
Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome.

Fig.5.7: Diane Victor. *Eight Marys* (panel 5). 2004. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 170 x 78
51 cm. Hollard Collection.

Fig.5.8: Wim Botha. *Commune: suspension of disbelief* (back view). 2001. Carved Bibles 79
and Bible text, surveillance equipment, installation dimensions variable, figure life-sized.
Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection.

Fig.5.9: Wim Botha. *Commune: suspension of disbelief* (front view). 2001. Carved Bibles 79
and Bible text, surveillance equipment, installation dimensions variable, figure life-sized.
Johannesburg Art Gallery Collection.

- Fig.5.10:** Wim Botha. *Commune: suspension of disbelief* (detail, CCTV monitor feed). 2001. Carved Bibles and Bible text, surveillance equipment, installation dimensions variable, figure life-sized. **80**
- Fig.5.11:** Wim Botha. *Commune: suspension of disbelief* (installation view). 2001. Carved Bibles and Bible text, surveillance equipment, installation dimensions variable, figure life-sized. **80**
- Fig.5.12:** Wim Botha. *Premonition of War (Scapegoat)*. 2005. Burnt African hardwood, resin, eco solvent inks on satin paper, gilt. Sculpture 188 x 152 x 64 cm; Installation 202 x 653 x 64 cm. **81**
- Fig.5.13:** Wim Botha. *Scapegoat*. 2005. Anthracite, epoxy resin, wood, eco-solvent inks on satin paper, resin, gilt. Installation view, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. **81**
- Fig.5.14:** Wim Botha. *The Avenger* (detail of *Tremor*). 2005. Oil on canvas, 110 x 81 cm. **82**
- Fig.5.15:** Wim Botha. *Tremor* (detail showing *Tree of Knowledge*). 2005. Stained glass frames, 360 x 236 x 22 cm. **83**
- Fig.5.16:** Wim Botha. *Blastwave*. 2005. Linoprints on tea-stained paper, each 48.5 x 49 cm. **84**
- Fig.5.17:** Wim Botha. *Tremor*. 2005. Mixed media installation, ceiling 85 x 780 x 355 cm. **85**
- Fig.5.18:** Wim Botha. *Vanitas* (detail of *Tremor*). 2005. Oil on canvas, 52 x 62 cm. **85**
- Fig.5.19:** Konradski (Conrad Botes). Cover of *The Best of Bitterkomix, Vol.1*. 1998. **86**
- Fig.5.20:** Conrad Botes. *Here Comes the Law*. 2003. Reverse glass painting, 60 x 60 cm. **87**
- Fig.5.21:** Conrad Botes. *Good Shepherd*. 2003. Reverse glass painting, 60 cm diameter. **88**
- Fig.5.22:** Anonymous. [Sa]. Jesus and the lamb. **88**
- Fig.5.23:** Conrad Botes. *Forensic Theatre: Empire of Error*. 2004. Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas, 500 x 200 cm. **89**
- Fig.5.24:** Conrad Botes. *Terrible Things Are About to Happen*. 2003. Reverse glass painting, 60 cm diameter. **90**
- Fig.5.25:** Conrad Botes. *Pietà*. 2006. Installation including 15 roundels. Oil-based paint on glass (work in progress), dimensions variable. **91**
- Fig.5.26:** Conrad Botes. *Pietà* (details). 2006. Oil-based paint on glass. **91**

- Fig.5.27:** Leonardo Da Vinci. *Last Supper*. c.1495-1498. Oil and tempera on plaster, 460 x 880 cm. Refectory, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. **92**
- Fig.5.28:** Lawrence Lemaona. *The Discussion*. 2005. Digital print on cotton rag paper, 112 x 173 cm. Edition of 10. **92**
- Fig.5.29:** Lawrence Lemaona. *Defenceless*. 2008. Textile and embroidery, 155.5 x 111 cm. Edition of 2. **93**
- Fig.5.30:** Lawrence Lemaona. *Last Line of Defence*. 2008. Pigment inks on cotton paper, 77.5 x 125 cm. Edition of 10. **93**
- Fig.5.31:** Lawrence Lemaona. *The One*. 2006. Digital print on cotton rag paper, 59.5 x 42 cm. Edition of 10. **94**
- CHAPTER SIX:**
- Fig.6.1:** Wim Botha. *Premonition of War (Abraham and Isaac)*. 2005. Eco solvent inks on satin paper, bronze, resin, gilt. Installation 244 x 330 x 27.5 cm. **95**
- Fig.6.2:** Wim Botha. *Premonition of War (Abraham and Isaac) (detail)*. 2005. Eco solvent inks on satin paper, bronze, resin, gilt. Bronze 23.5 x 35 x 18 cm. **95**
- Fig.6.3:** Jan van Eyck. *The Virgin with the Canon van der Paele*. 1436. Oil on wood, 122 x 157 cm. Musées Communaux, Bruges. **96**
- Fig.6.4:** Hieronymus Bosch. *The Adoration of the Kings (Epiphany Triptych middle panel)*. c.1495. Oil on wood, 138 x 72 cm. The Prado, Madrid. **97**
- Fig.6.5:** Hieronymus Bosch. *The Adoration of the Kings (detail)*. c.1495. Oil on wood, 138 x 72 cm. The Prado, Madrid. **97**
- Fig.6.6:** Ghiberti. *Sacrifice of Isaac*. 1401. Bronze relief. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. **98**
- Fig.6.7:** Donatello. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. 1418. Marble. **98**
- Fig.6.8:** George Segal. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. 1973. Plaster, 213 x 274 x 259cm. Mann Auditorium, Tel Aviv. Donated by the Tel Aviv Foundation for Literature and Art to the City of Tel Aviv-Yafo. **99**
- Fig.6.9:** George Segal. *In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State: Abraham and Isaac*. 1978. Painted plaster, rope and metal, 213 x 304 x 127cm. The John B. Putnam, Jr. Memorial Collection, Princeton University, New Jersey. **99**

Fig.6.10: Christine Dixie. <i>The Binding</i> . 2010. Installation.	100
Fig.6.11: Christine Dixie. Installation accompanying <i>To Dream</i> (detail). 2010. Plastic toy soldiers.	100
Fig.6.12: Christine Dixie. <i>Burning</i> (Installation view). 2010.	101
Fig.6.13: Christine Dixie. <i>To Sleep</i> . 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	102
Fig.6.14: Christine Dixie. <i>To Dream</i> . 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	102
Fig.6.15: Christine Dixie. <i>To Dream</i> (detail). 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	103
Fig.6.16: Christine Dixie. <i>Bind</i> . 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	103
Fig.6.17: Christine Dixie. <i>Burning</i> . 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	104
Fig.6.18: Christine Dixie. <i>Offering</i> . 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	104
Fig.6.19: Christine Dixie. <i>Blind</i> (detail). 2009. Etching, collagraph, 197 x 125 cm. Edition of 10.	105
Fig.6.20: Christine Dixie. <i>Blind</i> (Installation view). 2010. Plastic toy soldiers.	105
Fig.6.21: Conrad Botes. <i>Cain and Abel</i> . 2008. Lithograph, 105 x 75 cm. Edition of 30.	106
Fig.6.22: Conrad Botes. <i>Cain Slays Abel</i> . 2008. Oil based paint on reverse glass, series of 15 panels, 25 x 25 cm (framed).	107
Fig.6.23: Conrad Botes. <i>Cain and Abel</i> . 2008. Oil based paint on reverse glass, powder-coated steel frame, lead. 6 panels, 241 x 100.5 cm.	108
Fig.6.24: Conrad Botes. <i>Cain and Abel</i> . 2008. Oil based paint on reverse glass, powder-coated steel frame, lead. Diptych, 12 panels, 145 x 241 cm.	108
Fig.6.25: Conrad Botes. <i>On Earth as it is in Heaven</i> . 2009. American walnut, glass, lead, fluorescent lamps, 247 x 98.5 x 32 cm.	109
Fig.6.26: Rubens. <i>Fall of the Damned</i> . 1620. Oil on canvas, 286 x 224cm.	109
Fig.6.27: Tympanum of St. Lazare, Autun, France. (detail). c.1130-35.	110

- Fig.6.28:** Diane Victor. *Stained Gods*. 2004. Charcoal stain on paper, each 150 x 80 cm. SABC Collection. 111
- Fig.6.29:** Diane Victor. Untitled. From the series *The Recently Dead*. 2006. Smoke on paper, 42 x 30 cm. 111
- Fig.6.30:** Diane Victor. *In Smoke and Stain – The Recent Dead*. Detail. 2006. Smoke drawings, each 59 x 42 cm. 112
- Fig.6.31:** Diane Victor. *The Good Preacher*. 2006. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, charcoal stain, smoke and razor cuts, 200 x 100 cm. Sasol Collection. 113
- Fig.6.32:** Diane Victor. *The Good Doctor*. 2006. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, charcoal stain, smoke and razor cuts, 200 x 100 cm. 114
- Fig.6.33:** Diane Victor. *The Honest Politician*. 2006. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, charcoal stain, smoke and razor cuts, 200 x 100 cm. 115
- Fig.6.34:** Diane Victor. *Minder, Mater, Martyr*. 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, each 200 x 100 cm. Editions of 10. 116
- Fig.6.35:** Diane Victor. *Mater*. 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, 200 x 100 cm. 117
- Fig.6.36:** Diane Victor. *Upstream*. 2002. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, 100 x 200 cm. 118
- Fig.6.37:** Shrine Figure – *Mami Wata*. Nigeria, Ibibio, Annang. 20th century A.D. Wood, kaolin, pigment, paint, 87 x 61 x 25 cm. Gift of William S. Arnett. Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. 118
- Fig.6.38:** Diane Victor. *Minder*. 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing. 200 x 100 cm. 119
- Fig.6.39:** Titian. *Penitent Magdalen*. c.1531-33. Oil on wood panel, 84 x 69 cm. Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. 120
- Fig.6.40:** Diane Victor. *Martyr*. 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, 200 x 100 cm. 121
- Fig.6.41:** Pietro Perugino. *St. Sebastian*. c.1495. Oil on wood panel, 170 x 117 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris. 122
- Fig.6.42:** Power Figure (*nkisi*) Kongo people, Central Africa. Dimensions not available. Biblioteca do Museu Antropológico, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal. 122

Fig.6.43: Diane Victor. *Practicing Poise*. 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, 200 x 150 cm. Edition of 10. **123**

CONCLUSION:

Fig.7.1: Diane Victor. *4 Horses: Bearer*. 2010. 105 x 199 cm. Etching and digital printing, Ap. i/ii. **124**

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Brenda Schmahmann, for her constructive criticism and invaluable guidance throughout this process. I also extend thanks to the artists in this study, particularly Diane Victor, Christine Dixie, Majak Bredell, Tracey Rose, Wim Botha, Conrad Botes, and Lawrence Lemaana, all of whom willingly gave their time in interviews and answered endless questions by email or telephone and who sent or sourced good quality images for me to use. Lastly I would like to thank my daughter, Mia, for her help in proofreading, editing and all the practical aspects of compiling the final document; and my husband, Bengt, for his patience with my preoccupation for the past four years.

INTRODUCTION

The image by Max Ernst entitled *The Virgin Mary Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter* (1926: Fig.0.1) is neither South African, nor a contemporary artwork, yet it appears as the first image in this study because it encapsulates the concerns of this document and contextualises the themes within a wider art-historical discourse. The iconography displays a self-reflexive example of the role that art can play in disrupting entrenched patterns of thought and resulting modes of behaviour that have been inculcated through religious dogma and substantiated by religious imagery. The image is both humorous and transgressive from a religious point of view as it represents the traditionally sinless Christ with a fallen halo, being spanked for some misdemeanour by his normally mild, adoring mother. This scenario cuts to the heart of Christian dogma, apparently rendering Christ's death on the cross invalid because, according to the Bible, it required a sinless saviour to pay the price for the transgressions of humankind (see 1 Peter 3:18 or 1 John 3:5).

In a historical context this image expresses the spirit of disillusionment that grew out of the First World War and initiated the Dada movement, which nihilistically attempted to overturn everything held sacred by western civilisation – art, culture, logic, learning, and belief structures.¹ Ernst was a member of the Dada group and later became part of the Surrealist movement. Surrealists believed that personal freedom and enlightenment originated in the unconscious mind (Breton 1972:11-14),² so the dreamlike irrationality of this image combines both a Surrealist 'truth' and the anarchic iconoclasm of Dada. This image is therefore a response to specific events and ideas at the time of its creation, much as the examples in this thesis respond to the ferment of political and ideological change in post-apartheid South Africa. In Ernst's work, the three artists peering through the window indicate the role art plays in uncovering and overturning long-held beliefs and behaviours that have been based on them. Andre Breton was the leader of the Surrealist movement, a writer of prose and poetry and author of the Surrealist Manifesto, Paul Eluard was also a Surrealist poet and Max Ernst was a painter,

¹ In his paper titled "The New Iconoclasm", Theo Salemink (2007:451) identifies early Dada manifestations as "extreme forms of the iconoclasm of the Avant-garde" where old images are not merely replaced by new, but the very existence of art and culture is questioned.

² Andre Breton discussed the importance of dream states in his Manifesto of Surrealism, first published in 1924.

so in presenting the status quo as ‘nonsense’, art in all its manifestations becomes the catalyst for an alternative truth and witness to that process.

The artists to be investigated in this study have employed their art to reveal entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour that restrict the development of a just and equitable society. As such they take on the position of Ernst and his contemporaries as both ‘whistle-blower’ to society and the initiator of ideological change. Post-apartheid South Africa is still in a transitory phase of readjustment as Annie Coombes explains in her introduction to *History After Apartheid* (2004:1): “The first democratic elections of April 1994 finally ushered in the formal demise of apartheid in South Africa. However, the difficult task of setting up a workable economic, political, and cultural infrastructure that adequately represented the transition to democracy had only just begun.” Coombes’ book argues that cultural manifestations both reflect and *affect* this change in social structures and relationships. Transition is a difficult state to occupy; often beliefs or behavioural practices are so normalised that change is virtually impossible without a catalyst to shake us out of complacency and awaken us to the possibilities of alternative practices and thoughts.

I would argue that the art to be discussed in this study functions as just such a catalyst for social change in South Africa. The artists I have selected engage with Christian iconography in a transgressive way rather than for the purposes of indicating any devoutness on the part of their makers. Many examples parody well known artworks: Diane Victor’s *Little Deposition Picture* (2002: Fig.5.4), Wim Botha’s *Mieliepap Madonna* (2004: Fig.4.58) and Conrad Botes’ *Pietà* (2007: Fig.4.61), for example, all invoke ironic reference to Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (1499: Fig.4.57). Others refer to Christian rituals or historic practices, such as Christine Dixie’s pseudo-reliquaries, which she made for her *Parturient Prospects* exhibition in 2007. Some merely invoke the generic symbolism of Christianity such as Lawrence Lemaoana’s ironic haloes on his rugby players. All of them, however, use these references to comment on societal structures or, more specifically, unequal relations of power in South Africa, and many focus specifically on gendered or racial prejudice to address the inequalities still rife in contemporary South African society.

Christian iconography is a useful communicative tool because it has permeated many cultures over centuries, and the meanings it carries are thus accessible to large numbers of people. In this sense then, representations of religious icons, such as Christ and Mary or various saints and church dignitaries, have the potential to be widely understood. They also evoke deep emotions amongst many people, so images that are bluntly transgressive run a risk of causing considerable offence. A Byzantine illuminator in the ninth century who compared the effacement of a painted image of Christ, by means of a sponge, with the crucifixion itself (Latour and Wiebel 2002: 91) perhaps had sentiments not unlike that of at least one viewer of Victor's *Little Deposition Picture* (2002: Fig.5.4). A parody of Michelangelo's famous *Pietà*, Victor's *Little Deposition Picture* no longer presents a serene and perfectly beautiful Virgin but a rather wanton looking Mary Magdalene type cradling an extremely anti-classical 'Christ' figure on her lap crowned with a baseball cap in place of the ring of thorns. He is neither limp nor dead, but merely displays a minor injury in his hand and a penis incongruously tied up with string. This image was considered so offensive when it was first exhibited at an arts festival in Paarl, that an unidentified vandal tore the drawing in half (Victor 2006a). Victor (2006a) considers such extreme reactions complimentary as they indicate, she believes, the success of her attempts to present provocative imagery that disrupts complacent viewing. While most other artists have sidestepped controversy, this is not due to a less provocative treatment of subject matter, it seems, but rather the outcome of their works being shown in contexts where subversive imagery is more likely to be tolerated.

The approach of the artists in this study finds precedence in theatrical examples dating from medieval times, where Christian content was used in a transgressive manner for political and social satire. The medieval *giullari*³ were itinerant street performers in Europe who busked to the peasants, often as side shows to officially sanctioned mystery plays which promoted Christian dogma in terms that the uneducated masses could understand. The *giullare* were the

³*Giullare* is the Italian equivalent of the French *jongleur* or the English *juggler*. Originally (in the ninth century) the term referred to a wide variety of performers who could sing, dance, mime, tell stories and perform acrobatic feats (Mitchell 1999:5). This type of performer was later appropriated by the courts and transformed into the court jester, for the entertainment of courtiers rather than peasants, so wit and quality replaced bawdy vulgarity and aggressive provocation. The *giullare* are thus, in Mitchell's (1979:7) words "the popular, unofficial mouthpieces of the people...essentially idiosyncratic and rebellious" in opposition to the more mainstream canons of *commedia dell'arte* and court jesters.

spokespeople for a poor, dispossessed counter-culture of the Middle Ages. Tony Mitchell (1999:5) explains that they performed “unofficial ‘illegitimate’ theatre” in which they satirised mainstream religion and the oppressions of both church and state power. A more recent example of this tradition can be found in the performances of *Mistero Buffo* by Nobel Laureate playwright and actor, Dario Fo.⁴ The title, *Mistero Buffo*, can be translated as *Comic Mystery* and the play begins with an explanation of this term:

The term ‘mystery’ was already in use by the second and third centuries AD. It means a play, a religious representation, a performance.

We still hear the term used nowadays, during the mass, when the priest says: ‘In the first glorious mystery...in the second mystery...etc.’ The word ‘mystery’ means a ‘religious performance’; comic mystery, on the other hand, means a grotesque performance.

The comic mysteries were invented by the people (Fo 1988:1).

Thus right from the beginning the divergent relationship between the people and the church is made clear, and continues in the following excerpt:

So, the people entered the church, and there, in the transept, stood the bishop. The bishop would remove all his trappings, and hand them over to the chief *jongleur*. The chief *jongleur* then went up to the pulpit, and began to preach, imitating the bishop’s own style of preaching. He would imitate not only the bishop’s mannerisms and his style, but also the content of his sermons. In other words, he stripped bare the whole mystification and hypocrisy; he revealed the operations of power for what they were (Fo 1998:4,5).

The nature of *Mistero Buffo* is extremely diverse, it includes lengthy prologues to each section (from which the quotes above were taken) presented as discursive lectures often illustrated with visual imagery such as medieval artworks to ‘set the scene’ for the various sketches, and to indicate the historical traditions from which these strategies arise. The play continues with parodies of biblical events, including political satire and bawdy comedy in the clowning tradition (*giullare* or *jongleur*) and interspersed by discursive comments directly to the audience. Fo’s use of discontinuity and direct interventions with the audience are, according to Mitchell (1999:11),

⁴Dario Fo is an Italian satirical playwright and actor who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1997 for more than 70 iconoclastic and irreverent plays that frequently attack the church, current politics and academic narrow-mindedness in an effort to expose abuses of power and injustice in society. The award caused controversy amongst academic snobs who did not consider that his comedic work, based on oral traditions, merited the lofty ideals of Nobel Literature. His political and religious targets also expressed their outrage and the Vatican in particular was affronted because the Pope is a regular object of his satire (Jenkins 1998:22).

similar to the alienation strategies of Brecht, “allowing the audience to detach itself from the historical frame of reference of the pieces and make contemporary analogies”. The biblical parodies and satirical references to church dignitaries all function in a similar manner to parodic inversions employed by artists in this study, thus indicating that they continue in a tradition of transgressive interventions using religious prototypes (whether images or stories) for the purposes of freeing the intellect from the chains of historical prejudice and tradition.

Although there is a substantial body of discourse on Christian iconography in art historical literature, surprisingly little research has been undertaken on this subject in relation to South African art. The most comprehensive study of South African art from a religious point of view is John W. De Gruchy’s *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological aesthetics in the struggle for justice* (2001), which examines South African art in light of its interface with religion and politics during and after the struggle against apartheid. The emphasis in this book, however, is from a religious perspective so the spiritual content of an artwork is seen as a defining factor in the aesthetic relevance of the work under discussion. There has been some consideration of religious subject matter as a vehicle for liberation imagery in South Africa, particularly with reference to some of the Rorke’s Drift artists, but no sustained and in-depth study has been carried out on Christian imagery as a vehicle for subversion and particularly as a critique of social power structures in contemporary South Africa.

Internationally, the bulk of publishing on religious imagery also tends towards a concern with spiritual rather than transgressive content. The title of Samuel Brandon’s book *Man and God in Art and Ritual: A Study of Iconography, Architecture and Ritual Action as Primary Evidence of Religious Belief and Practice* (1975), for example, is indicative of the angle most often taken by researchers who are interested in art and religion. Similarly there is a huge range of books considering either the spiritual content of art or its relationship to contemporary religion, such as John Dillenberger’s *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (2004), Keith Walker’s *Images or Idols? The place of sacred art in churches today* (1996), Patrick Sherry’s *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (1992) and George Pattison’s *Art, Modernity and Faith: Towards a Theology of Art* (1991) to name a few. Conversely, the discourse on religion and art also engages with tracing the spiritual content of

contemporary and often seemingly secular art. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (1989:ix), in her introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, explains this approach as one taken by “art historians who have considered the religious impulse in the artistic process”. This particular collection begins with Wassily Kandinsky’s seminal work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (first published in 1911), which sets the tone for the many scholars who have followed his lead, particularly in relation to modernist aesthetics.

It appears, therefore, that there is a paucity of academic research on the appropriation of religious images for non-spiritual purposes; and of those studies in existence none has considered the content of South African art, nor of the way that South African artists might respond to a post-apartheid context through the parodic use of religious iconography. This study is an attempt to address this topic and hopefully to add to the knowledge of South African art and its response to a particularly unique time in our history. I am not aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of South African art that utilises religious imagery, as the material is too vast and complex for one study. I have instead focussed on a particular selection of works that engage with a cross-section of personal, social and political constructs in South Africa through the medium of religious iconography. In doing so I hope to engage with the intersection of historical expectations promoted through Christian iconography and the current exigencies of life in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa.

Foucault’s theories on power and regulation

Important to this study and its approach are Foucault’s theories regarding the functioning of church and state as regulators of power and the means and necessity to critique such structures by those who are being controlled. James Elkins (2004:5-7) considers that the earliest forms of art were only religious or ritualistic, and this function continued through the Middle Ages, in Byzantium and during the Renaissance (also in much of the recorded history of China, India, Africa and Mesoamerica). This could be reductive however, as he is concentrating on the notion of spirituality in art, whereas even the earliest forms of art (shrines or fertility figures for example) were aids for the social ordering and functioning of early societies. As civilisations developed, the direct correlation between primitive beliefs in the power of deities or

natural/spiritual forces and their imagery was refined, and the purposes of religious art shifted and aligned with other modes of social control. For example, according to Foucault (2000: 201-202) the classical models of power and social control in western societies turned on issues of sovereignty and law, and thus required a figurehead (God or a king or ruler) to wield that power and control the masses by identifying and removing oppositional or marginal groups. The inclusion and conformity required for state control is historically demonstrated by Constantine's expedient declaration of Christianity as an official state religion in AD 325. Through this decree he brought the two most powerful, and at the time opposing, regulatory mechanisms of his day into a cohesive patriarchal hegemony which has underpinned social power in the West for centuries. A visual demonstration of this can be seen in the Byzantine mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, where the image of Emperor Justinian (successor to Constantine) is placed to one side of the altar amongst the priests and courtiers (Fig.0.2). He functions in this image as both priest of the new religion and ruler of the Roman Empire. He is holding the communion loaf and being handed the crown of Victory by Christ who is seated on the world in the centre of the apse (Fig.0.3). Both placement and gesture serve to confirm and sanctify the rule of Justinian – therefore both power of state and power of the church are conflated in this image. The rule of religion and the rule of law, although possibly antithetical in their original manifestations, are adapted by the state in this image to promote political control. It is clear that as early as the fourth century AD it was understood that the strength of emotion contained in religious imagery could be a powerful tool for the state to manipulate in the formulation of political law and for controlling social hegemonies.

Foucault (2000:46) explains that the continued integration of state and church practices during the Middle Ages was by means of a form of inquisition or enquiry (*inquisitio*) which originated in church practices and had a twofold purpose. Firstly, it was to investigate sins, crimes and spiritual transgressions and, secondly, it assessed the management of church property, distribution of profits, collection of tithes and so on. Foucault (2000:47) proposes that this “spiritual and administrative, religious and political” church model, which was constituted originally for the management and control of souls, was appropriated by the state judiciary. It became the means to determine prosecution in matters of law so that by the twelfth century “[d]oing injury to the sovereign and committing a sin” (Foucault 2000:49) began to merge. This

demonstrates that the core business of both institutions (church and state) lies in ordering and controlling the populace. David Morgan (2005:52) appears to agree with this when he defines religion as:

...configurations of social relatedness and cultural ordering that appeal to powers that assist humans in organising their collective and individual lives. These 'powers' may be supernatural or entirely circumscribed within the domain of natural phenomena. In either case, religion is a way of controlling events or experience for the purpose of living better, longer, more meaningfully, or with less hazard.

Social control therefore can be identified as one of the core strategies in the history of Christianity, which can be read in Foucault's terms as a history of power and regulation of the masses. Religion is one of the "morally and intellectually validated schemes of social improvement, therapy and order" noted by Colin Gordon (2000:xvii) "which operate by identifying and correcting various forms of individual deviation from a norm". The administration of these precepts is illustrated in terrifying images of hell and destruction in the tympanums of many Romanesque churches, or the hell panels of altarpieces by Hieronymus Bosch, where the imagery appears designed to frighten people into compliance. Deviations from the norm are physically demonstrated in monstrous bodies and punished by devilish torture.⁵

The sovereign conception of power has, however, changed in contemporary society to a form related to the 'production' of *normalised* bodies rather than the 'suppression' of the abnormal (Foucault 1979:194). The beginning of this change can be noted in art where control through fear was slowly replaced by control through aspiration. The Italian Renaissance, for example, abounds with images of serenely beautiful Madonnas cradling cherubic babies, apparently reflecting an upsurge of humanism. These are subtly insidious, however. In their design to promote worship of the ideal, such iconography advocates modesty and restraint, submission and piety in women and thus functions as a regulatory yardstick. It is not the spirituality of religious iconography but the underlying social messages in such imagery that is brought into question by contemporary artists. In this way I propose that they are following the precepts of Foucault by

⁵ See any of the hell panels by Hieronymus Bosch for example, or his triptych, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, where the righteous St. Anthony is the only completely human person in the images, all other creatures have become abominations. They display physical deviations that outwardly reflect their polluted minds and souls, and indicate their distance from the ordering principle of God.

producing what he termed an “ontology of the present” (Foucault 1986:88-96), in other words an investigation of the particular historical conditions that result in ‘truths’ and values underpinning our society today. As Alec Mc Houll and Wendy Grace (2000:60) explain:

To produce an ontology of the present involves detaching oneself from one’s cultural surroundings. It poses a series of questions intended to undermine the familiarity of our ‘present’, to disturb the ease with which we think we know ourselves and others.

While Foucault deployed this method to investigate the ‘scientific’ truths used to bolster state power, I suggest that it is equally suitable to investigate the ways in which religious iconography has been bound up with the regulation of society. It is these regulations specifically that are the focus of works by the artists to be investigated in this thesis, who employ what I would identify as a form of religious ‘iconoclasm’ to topple the false idols of social and political power.⁶ The diversity of their approaches, however, and the wide range of concerns that they address, indicate the dynamic nature of power and resistance that Foucault (1990a:92,93) has described as a network or web, in that these power relations support or undermine the ruling hegemony in a fluid, ever-changing manner. He explains that the sovereign or head of state is merely a terminal point in this multiplicity of force relations. The crystallisation of power in laws, rules and social expectations is always unstable and vulnerable to replacement through the actions of dissidents and revolutionaries of one sort or another. Artists are just such dissidents; they raise awareness of certain injustices promoted by current structures of power and perform the vital function of disturbing society’s conscience by revealing an ‘ontology of the present’. At the same time they are part of this present society and work within its structures, as Foucault (1990a:94) explains: “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter.” This understanding is important for what might be termed contemporary iconoclasm, in that the works to be discussed in this thesis could be said to question not only the ‘sacred’ value of the images that they parody, but also the meanings conveyed by those images.

⁶ When referring to the artists in this study I use the terms iconoclasm and iconoclast as defined by Dario Gamboni (1997:255) who explains that iconoclasm in the mid nineteenth century was allied with the progressive aims of *avant-garde* artists, so an iconoclast was defined as one who attacks “cherished beliefs or venerated institutions on the ground that they are erroneous or pernicious” rather than one who physically smashes religious icons.

In their introduction to *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm: Struggle for Religious Identity*, Willem van Asselt, Paul van Geest, Daniela Muller and Theo Salemink (2007:1-2) point out that:

...physical iconoclasm and conceptual iconoclasm were closely linked with a search for certain identity-giving parameters for diverse religious communities, providing ideological justification for their continued existence in the face of rival religious movements that were disqualified as dissidents, heretics, or gentiles.

Iconoclasm functions, therefore, as one of the points of dissidence in Foucault's web of power relations. Morgan (2005:116), in his discussion of iconoclasm, explains that an image chosen for destruction must be understood as a "locus or crossroads, a site in which long narratives of cultural history take shape". The identification of imagery that promotes historical values that permeate society and create 'truths', is thus fundamental to understanding the purpose for a transgressive reinterpretation of such an image.

Morgan's (2005:117) discussion of the history of iconoclasm points out that the destruction of one image is necessary, not just to remove it entirely but in order to replace it with a new construction or tradition, so iconoclasm becomes a "strategy of replacement". Boris Groys (2002:283) reinforces this in his essay on iconoclasm as an artistic device, by insisting that iconoclasm functions as "a mechanism of historical innovation". Groys extends his discussion beyond religion to include more recent examples of the destruction and replacement of political 'icons' such as those of socialism for example. He notes that by removing the old to make way for the new, iconoclasm fulfils one of the requirements of modern society which is the craving for innovation, creativity and forward progress (Groys 2002:283). Ann McClanahan and Jeff Johnson (2005) concur, and in their introduction to *Negating the Image: Case studies in iconoclasm* they explain that "a surprising common thread is the ultimate productivity of objects and images often stimulated by iconoclasm: its capacity to renovate existing cultural forms and materials or to inspire new projects." This emphasis on replacement forms the catalyst for a new order, new interpretations, new rules within the system, and ultimately a shift of power. There is a proviso to this replacement of rules, power, and their icons, as Foucault (1977:151) explains:

Rules are empty in themselves, violent and unfinalised: they are impersonal and can be bent to any purpose. The successes of history belong to those who are

capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who have used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them: controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules.

The artists employing a strategy akin to iconoclasm in their approach to religious imagery are those who, as Carol Becker (2002:54) puts it, “refuse to accept the rules about what is shameful” and who wish to provide access to new avenues of thought and action by provoking disturbances in the status quo. They do this by perverting or usurping the rules/icons to work against their original intention, and they redirect them in the sense of Foucault’s statement above. Their iconoclasm thus aims to assist in the forward progression of social or political ideologies.

The importance of parody

Many of the artists whose works are analysed in this study employ parody as their strategy in creating a transgressive or subversive effect. Parody works through a system of quotation or repetition. It is a form of self reference that has become a popular aspect of post-modern artworks as the re-use of a work in another context automatically carries the nuances of that work from its original manifestation while simultaneously imbuing it with new meaning in its borrowed form. Ziva Ben-Porat (1979:247) has defined the parodic code in semiotic terms as:

...a representation of a “modelled reality” which is in itself already a particular representation of an original “reality.” The parodic representations expose the model’s conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message.

Parody thus allows for conceptual richness in works of art through this layering, which Linda Hutcheon (1985:6) has defined succinctly as “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” or “imitation characterised by ironic inversion”.

The kind of parody that Hutcheon identifies as crucial in contemporary artworks is “an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and ‘trans-contextualising’ previous works of art” (Hutcheon 1985:11). This does not rely on mere quotation or imitation but infers building up layered associative meanings that resonate with each other and with the original text through ironic ‘trans-contextualisation’ with each coded discourse. In this sense it is not unlike

the dragnet approach of post-modernism that relies on references to past images or ideas, each of which resonate with the other, thus the cognitive effect of the end result is more than the sum of its parts. Hutcheon (1985:38-40) notes that parody implies intent on the part of the artist, it functions as a form of “authorised transgression” (Hutcheon 1985:104) where the author/artist acknowledges the contribution of the original work and its meaning in the ultimate understanding of the parody, thus clearly differentiating parody from plagiarism. There is a problem with this notion of authorial intent in the light of post-modern ideas about the ‘death of the author’ which suggest that the reader/viewer of a work is fundamental to determining meaning (and therefore to determining the parodic content of a work). This is why it is also vitally important for the functioning of parody that the viewer has knowledge of the original. In fact, the success of parody is dependent on a culturally sophisticated viewer who is able to identify the textual references and understand the ironic inversions with which they are employed. As Hutcheon (1985:34) explains: “if the decoder does not notice, or cannot identify, an intended allusion or quotation, he or she will merely naturalise it, adapting it to the context of the work as a whole...such naturalisation would eliminate a significant part of both the form and the content of the text.”

The use of irony is critical for discerning differences between original and parodied texts. Hutcheon (1985:32) notes that irony is not necessarily a negative term but “can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive.” One of the results of this critical constructiveness results from the metaphorical value of parody where, through irony, a second meaning is constructed from the text and its referent. It is the ironic distance that allows for this further layer of meaning that would not be present in a mere quotation or imitation of the original. In her subsequent book, *Irony's Edge*, Hutcheon (1995:122) notes that “the ironic intentional function is one activated and put into play by the interpreter” thus, like the intentional aspect of parody discussed above, it is incomplete without an informed recipient. As Hutcheon (1995:22) states: “Irony is always...a modality of perception – or, better, of attribution – of both meaning and evaluative attitude.” Irony, therefore, is not intrinsically present in a text but only exists as a result of interpretation by an outside reader/viewer who “works within the context of interpretive assumptions” (Hutcheon 1995:122).

Parodic quotation resulting in an ironic interpretation need not always imply ridicule of the original, but the differences are deliberate and certainly carry meanings not contained in the original works and often designed to directly challenge original content.⁷ Furthermore, as Hutcheon (1985:103) explains, a satirical element employed in parodic critique can be used to question the ethical standard of an original ideology: “From this point of view, parody acts as a consciousness-raising device, preventing the acceptance of the narrow, doctrinaire, dogmatic views of any particular ideological group.” In such instances parody can function as a vehicle of satire to expose contemporary shortcomings. A proviso must be added, however, that one needs to be cognisant of the complex interaction of parody and satire, and while they may overlap they are not identical. While critical distance through the contrasting function of irony is employed in both satire and parody, satire is inherently more negative and uses that distance in a pejorative way to poke fun at, caricature, or even destroy the object being satirised. This is not necessarily the case in contemporary parodies where the original texts are sometimes used “as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny” (Hutcheon 1985:57). It is this aspect of parody that might dovetail with Foucault’s call to investigate the past with a view to understanding (and perhaps improving) the present. As Hutcheon (1985:116) states:

Through interaction with satire, through the pragmatic need for encoder and decoder to share codes, and through the paradox of its authorised transgression, the parodic appropriation of the past reaches out beyond textual introversion and aesthetic narcissism to address the “text’s situation in the world”.

Christian iconography, as noted above, is replete with ideological meanings, interpretations and expectations that have imbued religious imagery over centuries. Such meaning is familiar to most western people, even if they are not currently religious, and many of the images are also familiar through reproductions in art history books and popular publications. The first requirement, that the ‘original’ should be known and understood, is therefore fulfilled in most of the examples in this study, so religious imagery is a perfect vehicle for parodic reinvention. The strength of meaning inherent in the original also ensures that parodic transformation would create an equally powerful impact on the viewer as there appears to be a direct correlation

⁷ Hutcheon (1985:103) notes that parody may even use the original text as a positive model for an alternative message, rather than merely to attack the original. She thus points to the need to carefully identify the ‘target’ of a parodic artwork and be mindful of the inclusive and exclusive modes of irony as pointers to the intended end result and its possible reception.

between the effect of religious content in a work and the ironic effect of its parody. While many of the works in this study employ direct parody of familiar artworks (such as Michelangelo's *Pietà*, or Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*), others refer to more generalised accoutrements and symbols of Christianity (such as halos and reliquaries) or identifiable protagonists of biblical lore including angels, Adam and Eve, and Satan for example. Whatever form it takes, however, this self-reflexive mode of art-making engages both the past and the present in what is often a critical response to both. Such an approach thus disrupts the entrenched mould of thought and tradition that hampers mental development and in this way, as Hutcheon (1985:115) points out: "Parody today is endowed with the power to renew" in much the same way as iconoclasm is a strategy of replacement and renewal.

Structure of the thesis

The first chapter begins with a consideration of selected examples of transgressive Christian iconography from Europe and America that have raised heated debate about the 'sanctity' of religious imagery and the clash between artistic freedom and religious sensibilities. Examples include Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), Angus Fairhurst's *Pietà* (1996) and Sarah Lucas' *Christ You Know It Ain't Easy* (2003). These works form a context from which to address the South African examples that make up this study, which engage with similar issues yet, apart from a few examples, have not incited the same level of reaction from visiting public or the media. Possible reasons for such a discrepancy in reception will be discussed in this chapter, followed by a brief, literary based, historical overview of Christian religious imagery, to explain the strength of feeling evinced by religious images even in a contemporary and largely secular society.

In the second chapter, selected examples of religious content in South African art prior to 1994 are analysed in an effort to consider how such examples might differ in type and intention from more recent works. Azaria Mbatha's work, for example, promotes the Christian message from a black point of view, with an inversion of white and black protagonists in his interpretations of biblical stories. There are also martyr-like figures featuring in works by Charles Nkosi and Paul Stopforth, which function as generic allusions to victims of state torture. But both Nkosi and

Stopforth's anti-apartheid statements and Mbatha's Africanised illustrations clearly deploy Christian iconography with greater reverence than the contemporary artists whose works I am considering. In contrast to the early examples, this chapter also evaluates works made during the transitional phase of South African politics (the late 1980s up to 1994) by a selection of the artists who form the main thrust of this study. Such works indicate the beginning of a shift in approach from a broad-based liberation theology (speaking for the masses) that accepts and re-employs the religious message, to individual and personal attitudes towards identity, society and politics that utilise inherent religious meaning for secular purposes, and may even appear critical of religious content.

Subsequent chapters form iconographic and iconological analyses of contemporary transgressive Christian imagery and are arranged according to subject matter. Chapter Three considers images of Adam and Eve; Chapter Four is focussed on images of Mary, Virgin and Madonna; Chapter Five engages with Jesus Christ; and the final chapter includes martyrs, saints and church dignitaries. Despite the unifying theme in each chapter, both the content and the range of issues that the images engage with are extremely diverse. Topics that form the content of these works include (among others) sexual repression and original sin, homosexuality, feminism and identity construction, the social expectations of contemporary motherhood, repressive role models, masculinity, metrosexuality, Afrikaner heritage, political and social change and its effects, colonial power, sacrifice, murder, rape, and violence in South Africa, abuses of power by role models and politicians, rugby, heroism and patricide.

It appears that the level of transgression employed in these images is often relative to the gravity of the offence that is the subject of the work. An increased focus on reworking Christian imagery as well as the more provocative aspects of this imagery may be influenced by the right to "freedom of artistic creativity" enshrined in the post-apartheid South African Constitution and a reworking of censorship laws. Such shifts by no means explain the choice of this subject matter, however, and one of my tasks in this study will be to consider why transgressive religious imagery has become increasingly popular by unpacking the thematic threads of content and ideology expressed in these works. The focus in each chapter is thus on the power of parody and

satire to disrupt viewing complacency and the specific reasons in each instance for this particular strategy to be employed.

CHAPTER ONE

Mechanisms of power and subversion in Christian imagery

[Contemporary art] mirrors social reality or ignores it; it can help define social conventions or defy them. Art might be a balm or an irritant, bringing people together or wrenching them apart. Whether it inspires reverence or admiration or provokes disdain, the reaction to art in the late twentieth century is often a strong one (Dubin 1994:1).

Steven Dubin's statement was clearly demonstrated in the events of 1989 when the Corcoran Gallery in Washington refused to go ahead with a planned Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. The resulting debate about obscenity in art and the use (or misuse) of public funding for such exhibitions caused a media furore over the content of art that polarised the public for many years.¹ In a subsequent example, the public outcry and protests at the *Sensation* show when it was exhibited in London in 1997 are testament to the fact that visual images can inspire strong reactions if they are understood as trespassing on values or ideals that are held sacred by members of the viewing public. These exhibitions were objected to mainly on the grounds of moral taboos, which are imbued through cultural constraints and social rules.² If the further constraints imposed by religion are engaged then a more intense level of reaction might be expected. In their introduction to *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, David Morgan and Sally Promey (2011:2-3) emphasise the power of images to communicate, to reinforce allegiances, to organise memory and to form (or concretise) meanings or ideals. Yet one of the major functions of contemporary art is also to challenge and disturb viewers. When these attributes clash with the strength of religious beliefs it is understandable that intense and seemingly irrational responses may be aroused.

¹ See Margaret Quigley's article "The Mapplethorpe Censorship Controversy" (2010) for a detailed explanation of the arguments and consequences of this censorship. A subsequent exhibition entitled *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* was held at the Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati in 1990 and was indicted on grounds of obscenity within hours of the opening. There was a well-publicised trial at which the director, Dennis Barrie, was acquitted, but the exhibition added fuel to a heated debate over public funding for the arts that lasted throughout the 1990s (Demaline 2000).

² Mapplethorpe's work was objected to and identified as obscene on the grounds of its homoerotic content. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* exhibition, for example, included seven portraits showing sadomasochistic acts (Demaline 2000). *Sensation* also included various images of a sexual nature; some implying paedophilia, and other works that portrayed graphic violence or tastelessness. This exhibition will be explained in more detail in this chapter as part of the discussion on the work of Chris Ofili.

This chapter begins with a discussion of selected British and American examples that provoked extreme responses to ‘transgressive’ Christian imagery. Their inclusion provides a framework from which to consider the reception of South African images in subsequent chapters. The potential for provocation appears to fluctuate from region to region and examples exhibited in America have raised levels of debate and outrage that far exceed responses in Europe, even though the issues raised are pertinent to European viewers. South African public reaction tends to vacillate between these two extremes, so an analysis of the underlying causes for varying reactions elsewhere in the world may help to explain why artists in South Africa would also select religious iconography as a tool for social commentary. This investigation of reception and reaction will lead to a brief history of religious iconography, explaining how and why it expresses the core of religious values and how the resultant strength of feeling could be appropriated for the purposes of conflating state and religious control.

Transgressive Christian Imagery in Britain and America

In 1987 Andrés Serrano exhibited a Cibachrome photograph of a plastic crucifix, which had been submerged in a vat of his own urine, and called it *Piss Christ* (Fig.1.1). This image was part of an exhibition of 13 other photographs, all of which feature bodily fluids such as blood, milk, urine and semen and four of which contained generic mass-produced religious imagery; but none of these caused as much controversy as *Piss Christ*. The photograph is aesthetically beautiful with soft focus and rich colour, the scale is large (60 x 40 ins / 152 x 101cm) and the work has been described as “lustrous” with an “impressive presence” evoking a “sense of majesty and spirituality” (Dubin 1994:98). However the title, referring as it does to the possibility of pissing on Christ,³ resulted in heated debate⁴ about the ‘sanctity’ of religious imagery and the clash between artistic freedom and religious sensibilities. Andrés Serrano (2009), in e-mail correspondence with me, stated that he was raised as a Catholic although he now categorises himself as a Christian (as distinct from a Catholic), and he considers himself to be a “religious

³ Serrano’s *Madonna and Child II* is a Gothic representation, also immersed in urine, but the title does not refer to this. Presumably the image can therefore be taken by the public at face value, as merely a beautifully coloured version of a generic religious statue.

⁴ See the debate between Casey D. (2004) and Casey M., Fisher, A. and Ramsay H. (2004) in consecutive issues of *Art and Opinion* for example.

artist” although he is a believer with “certain disbelief and distance” (Serrano 2009). Serrano thus does not appear to criticise spirituality *per se*, but his works nevertheless comment on traditionally entrenched structures and practices in organised religion that he identifies as problematic. Serrano (2009) explains that works such as *Piss Christ* function as a commentary on Catholicism, Christianity and religion in general, and he therefore believes that, far from being blasphemous, his art is “a homage to Christian belief and art”. In this case such homage would function through his stated intention “to redeem the exploitations of the image of Christ” (Becker 2002:53). In his review of the exhibition in the New York Times, Michael Brenson (1989:C28) suggests that this happens through a re-evaluation of the image, initiated by the viewer’s shocked or uncomfortable response to the title. The clichéd plastic figurine thus becomes something ‘other’, inherently altered by a mental shift of focus generated by the title. He goes on to say: “The photograph then becomes an icon that, for Mr. Serrano, replaces the false icons in his work.”

Serrano (2009) further states: “My work has been spoken of in terms of the sacred and the profane like it has to be one or the other, and I say why can't it be both? After all, you can't have one without the other.” What Serrano seems to be implying through this statement is that the ‘sacred’ image of a religious icon (a plastic crucifix) is ironically understood as profane by the artist because it has become a kitsch representation of church profitability. Conversely Serrano challenges the notion of bodily fluids as inherently disgusting and ‘profane’ through the beauty of his imagery, and questions the fundamental societal taboos relating to defilement as discussed in the book *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas (2007, originally written in 1966).⁵ Douglas identifies cultural taboos regarding pollution (or what constitutes dirt and therefore disorder) as fundamental to the ordering of both religion and society. Dirt is identifiable only because it is out of place; it has transgressed a physical and/or social boundary. The identification of what is dirty or unacceptable is therefore socially and culturally specific (Douglas 2007:xvii). The taboos relating to dirt and defilement developed from very practical beginnings, because many items identified as ‘dirty’ such as faeces, dead bodies, pus and blood for example, are indeed

⁵ Eleanor Heartney (2000:60) has proffered an alternative interpretation for bodily fluids that attempts to imbue them with religious significance. Heartney identifies “the blood of Christ, the milk of the Virgin and even, somewhat more obscurely, the semen of God, as the elements through which the miracle of Christ’s incarnation made human redemption possible.”

substances which could cause disease in otherwise healthy people if they are not treated with care. Religious or state conventionalising of taboos against such ‘dangerous’ pollutants ensured the survival of society. Douglas (2007:xiii) explains: “Taboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations. It threatens specific dangers if the code is not respected.” The role of social, religious and other regulatory bodies lies in delineating a clear boundary between these two states, evidenced in a biblical injunction against mixing the pure and the impure that relates particularly to the imagery in *Piss Christ*. The taboo in this work engages with boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable substances in relation to the integrity of the body, as such substances cause anxiety if they are displaced in any way.⁶

It appears that Serrano is working from the premise of art being deliberately provocative in order to expand the possibilities of cultural understanding. The artist would thus function in terms of Lewis Hyde’s notion of the trickster who unsettles cultural norms by transgressing both sacred and profane borders. As Hyde (1998:9) explains: “The origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures requires that there be the space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on.” By linking the ‘sacred’ and the ‘unclean’ so clearly in *Piss Christ*, Serrano examines cultural and religious taboos which are underpinned by widespread fears of defilement leading to death. It is from this almost primitive, or visceral, level that the public response has erupted, illustrated by the examples below.

United States of America Senate records from May 18, 1989 (Comments on A. Serrano, 2006) document the senatorial furore that arose when Senator D’Amato of New York tore up a reproduction of *Piss Christ* and then listed the number of complaints he had received and described the work as “a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity”. He put on record a letter to the acting chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Mr. Hugh Southern, where the work is described as shocking, abhorrent and undeserving of taxpayer’s money. The republican senator from North Carolina, Jesse Helms, then responded by stating that The National

⁶ Douglas’ writings became the inspiration for Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, which is explained in her essay, *Powers of Horror: an essay in abjection* (1982). Bodily abjection is identified as anything which was once part of the body and is now displaced. It would include blood, sweat, tears, faeces, urine, semen, hair, nail clippings or indeed anything which oozes, breaks or disturbs bodily integrity in any way. It therefore also depends on a clear delineation of (bodily) boundaries to identify what is acceptable and what is not.

Endowment, who funded the exhibition, “do not know what they are doing. They are insulting the very fundamental basis of this country” (Comments on A. Serrano, 2006). Helms also sent a letter to his constituents on 17 July 1989, stating that “Piss Christ [was a] sickening, abhorrent, and shocking act by an arrogant blasphemer” (Dubin 1994:97). This outcry resulted in restrictions being placed on the National Endowment who now may not use any of their money on works which the agency judges to be obscene (Brenson 1989:C1). Perhaps this response indicates a continuation of the problems of mistaking an image for a religious truth, which was identified in the impassioned debate around the fundamental nature of images that initiated a Byzantine iconoclastic controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries. The persistence of religious meaning engendered by a Christian icon overshadowed alternative interpretations, so debates on this work centred on issues of blasphemy rather than functioning as a means to question a broader social context.

Piss Christ continued to cause more controversy in Australia, where it was on display at the National Gallery in Victoria in October 1997. Firstly a 51 year-old man, John Allen Haywood, removed the photograph from the wall and kicked it. After his court case he remarked that he would like to punch the artist on the nose (Art Crimes 1997). This incident did very little damage to the work but the following day the image was struck eight times with a hammer, in a carefully planned attack by two teenagers. The exhibition was closed shortly afterwards. What is interesting is that the teenagers also attacked a picture of the Ku Klux Klan, stating later that they were responding to the “racist and blasphemous nature of the exhibition” and pointedly remarking that they feared the KKK might take over Australia (Art Crimes 1997). The media, however, reported this incident as an attack on *Piss Christ* and the title of the second vandalised work was never even mentioned. This omission suggests a certain expediency on the part of the media in relation to the commercial value of disturbing content in their reporting. It would seem, therefore, that there is something inherently shocking or sensitive about the transgressive manipulation of religious imagery that even supersedes sensitivities around racism or other forms of bigotry.

A similar act of vandalism was carried out more recently on Enrique Chagoya's colour lithograph/woodcut, *The Misadventure of the Romantic Cannibals* (2003).⁷ The artist's publisher, Shark's Ink, describes this work as a multi-panelled codex that includes "comic book characters, religious iconography and imagery, appropriated engravings, ethnic stereotypes, Mayan symbols and figures, automobiles, airplanes, book excerpts and elements of US currency" (Shark's Ink [Sa]). Chagoya uses unusual juxtapositions of these cultural symbols to make socially and politically provocative statements that raise questions about the exploitation of minorities and ongoing cultural controls. In this instance the inclusion of Jesus engaging in what appears to be oral sex raised outrage and week-long protests in Loveland, Colorado, where the work was part of a group exhibition at the Loveland Gallery (Ng 2010). Chagoya explained that the content was a response to the reports of child abuse committed by priests in the Catholic Church. "My work is about critiquing institutions and politics," he said. "I wasn't trying to portray Christ; it's a collage of cutouts from different books." (Whaley 2010). Loveland City Councilman Daryle Klassen described the work as smut and wanted to remove it or at least place a warning sign near it. He also noted that he had received over 1700 emails in support of his condemnation of the work and hundreds of antagonistic constituents attended a City Council meeting to demand its removal. On 6 October 2010 a 56 year-old woman, Kathleen Folden, entered the museum with a crowbar and smashed the plexiglass casing of the work, after which she tore up the print because she believed it was blasphemous (Frosch 2010). Unfortunately the public protests ensured that the work was not replaced on the exhibition, indicating that in certain parts of America strength of religious feeling can still outweigh freedom of expression.

Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996: Fig.1.2) also has an interesting history with reference to its reception, which differed markedly from country to country. It is an image of a black Madonna, spotted with carefully placed resin-covered elephant dung and surrounded by what look like angels, but on closer inspection are found to be collaged images from pornographic magazines showing female genitalia. Like Serrano, Ofili comes from a Catholic background and was not aiming specifically to offend with this work but to re-evaluate traditional expectations of religious imagery from the viewpoint of his culture and ethnicity (Plate 2002:2). The work was

⁷ Enrique Chagoya is a Mexican born artist now working as a Professor at Stanford University's Department of Art and Art History. His works comment on colonialism, oppression, xenophobia and the clash of cultures he experienced in his move from Mexico to America (Enrique Chagoya [Sa]).

one of the exhibits at the Royal Academy in London, in a widely publicised group show entitled *Sensation* that ran from 18 September to the 28 December 1997. The show initiated a media frenzy denouncing the content and execution of many of the works, which ironically engaged public interest to the degree that a total of 284,734 people saw the exhibition in London alone (BBC News 1997).⁸ Marcus Harvey's portrait of the notorious child murderer, Myra Hindley, entitled *MH* (1996-98), which was composed from children's handprints, for example, was considered particularly tasteless, as was the Chapman brothers' ostensibly paedophilic *Tragic Anatomies* (1995), consisting of fibreglass mannequins of young girls, many with phallic noses and rectums or vagina mouths. *Great Deeds against the Dead* (1994), also by the Chapman brothers, offended in a different way, with gory life-size castrated and decapitated people referring to Goya's etching of the same name from his *Disasters of War* series. John Molyneux (1988) considered these and other Chapman brothers' works to be "genuinely offensive to human values". The shock or sensational value, therefore, mainly lay in works that flouted bourgeois social sensibilities by using gore, kitsch, sex and vulgarity. The Hindley portrait was vandalised⁹ during the exhibition (BBC News 1997), protests were held outside the venue, windows of the Royal Academy (Burlington House) were broken during the exhibition, but Ofili's work, in comparison, went unnoticed by the British public and press alike.¹⁰

It was only in New York, while the *Sensation* show was on display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art from October 1999, that Ofili's work received public notoriety when it was denounced by the Mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, as "anti Catholic" (Online News Hour 1999). On 16 December, 1999, it was defaced with white paint by a 72 year-old Catholic man, Dennis Heiner, because he believed it was blasphemous (Becker 2002:43). In America, because of the Ofili work, the exhibition caused ongoing debates in the media, and lawsuits from both sides of the

⁸ *Sensation* was shown at the Berlin Hamburger Bahnhof museum (30 September 1998 – 30 January 1999) and proved so popular that it was extended past its original closing date of 28 December 1998. The show subsequently went to New York and was shown at The Brooklyn Museum of Art from 2 October 1999 to 9 January 2000.

⁹ The Hindley picture was splattered with ink and eggs (Becker 2002:44) and required protection behind a perspex screen. Some of the Academy staff also resigned because of the controversy this exhibition caused (ICONS [Sa]).

¹⁰ There is a lengthy and particularly scathing review written by John Molyneux (1988), for example, where he discusses many of the 110 works by 42 different artists on the show in some depth (the ones Molyneux considers significant in both negative and positive terms) but he makes no mention at all of Chris Ofili's work.

fracas (Rapp 1999) largely due to Giuliani threatening to remove funding from the Brooklyn Museum (Davis 2007). There is a question mark that hangs over the reason for this reaction in America and not in England¹¹ or Berlin (where the exhibition was also shown). Despite the separation of state and religion in America, Dubin (1994:79) identifies religion as one of the main points of discourse referred to in America whenever social standards and practices are being debated, noting that “Religion remains a primary source of values and identity”. Perhaps a residue of fundamentalist Christianity pertains in America that no longer exists in the arguably more secular society of Britain and Germany. In the introduction to *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art*, for example, Neil MacGregor (2000:7) states that “most of the National Gallery’s visitors today, like most of the population of Europe and America, are not believing Christians”. Conversely Sam Harris, in his book *The End of Faith* (2005:154), notes: “Many members of the U.S. government currently view their professional responsibilities in religious terms.” Harris goes on to give numerous examples of Christian dogma used to legitimate decisions made in the American government and to uphold restrictive laws that prevail in many states, thus indicating the continuing adherence to Christian principles in so called ‘secular’ America.¹²

To support this apparent national difference in religious sensibilities one might consider another British example, such as Angus Fairhurst’s *Pietà*, (1996: Fig.1.3) which is a photographic parody of Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (1499), showing the artist naked as if he was a dead Christ, cradled in the arms of a Gorilla. No mention is made of blasphemy or even irreverence when Michael Glover mentions this work in his review of the Angus Fairhurst retrospective exhibition at the Sadie Coles gallery in London (Glover 2009). Similarly Sarah Lucas’ crucified Christ made of cigarettes entitled *Christ You Know It Ain’t Easy* (2003: Fig.1.4) has featured in an article on the pros and cons of smoking (Williams 2004) and is mentioned in passing as one of the exhibits in the show *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*¹³ (see Terry Kirby [2004], for example, or the Tate Gallery

¹¹ This is ironic as Britain is one of the few countries in the world to have a law against blasphemy in any form, dating from the early seventeenth century. The British government can thus ban “any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ or the Bible’ that is presented in an indecent and intemperate way.” (Quoted in Dubin 1994:82).

¹² See chapter 5, *West of Eden*, in Harris (2005: 153-169) for a detailed discussion of specific examples.

¹³ This show was held at the Tate Britain from the 3 March to the 31 May 2004.

website). But no-one in the British press appears interested in the religious implications of this image, and it certainly does not seem to carry as much 'shock value' as Lucas' trademark sexually suggestive images.

To return to Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* and its reception in America, Becker (2002:46) points out that the image itself as an artwork "both sacred and profane, capable of manifesting herself as white, black and brown" engendered very little debate in the media. S. Brent Plate (2002:2) explains that the use of dung as something dirty, in Douglas' terms a 'taboo' substance sullyng the purity and holiness of the virgin, became the incendiary aspect for western viewers.¹⁴ Becker (2002:46) concurs and further notes that the possibility of race, as a more provocative aspect than the use of dung, was never even suggested.¹⁵ Michael Davis (2007) suggests that Giuliani's response appears to be "based on the narrow definition that art should only be beautiful and an equally narrow picture of a Virgin Mary who looks like Ingrid Bergman" (Davis 2007). There is still a query, therefore, over whether the controversy is due to a genuine disturbance of religious sensibility or to the expedience of a canny politician exploiting a niche agenda. Cynics have pointed out that Giuliani used his very public condemnation of the work to win the Catholic vote for his political aspirations (Becker 2002:46) so the artistic merits of the image were sidelined for a personal agenda. The ensuing media debate was entered into by high profile church and political figures as well as entertainment personalities. This not only aided the purposes of Giuliani but it also ensured the museum a maximum number of viewers.

Cynicism aside, the fact remains that, by raising the spectre of iconoclasm with reference to a religious icon, Mayor Giuliani was able to tap into what is obviously a sensitive issue amongst a substantial number of his constituents. His condemnation engendered heated debates in the media and in subsequent academic articles. This furore equalled if not surpassed the more

¹⁴ Plate (2002:2) notes that in this way there is a link between both Serrano's use of urine and Ofili's use of dung as they both reinforce biblical injunctions against mixing the 'pure' and the 'impure'. The adverse reaction to both works can thus be understood in relation to the cultural taboos discussed by Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (2007).

¹⁵ Becker (2002:54) notes that Ofili was presumably intending to provoke with this work: "As a black artist in a predominantly white art world, he is aware that there is an expectation that his work will in some way reference blackness. He plays with this and takes it to an even further point, back to the elephants of Africa, a place so primal and unexpected that either people accept the work as African and exotic, or they question why he insists on using dung everywhere, even to portray the Virgin Mary."

understandable reaction in Britain over what might be seen as tasteless paedophilia and gratuitous violence evidenced in many of the other works on the show. The outcome was so incendiary and successful for Giuliani's purposes that he repeated the exercise in 2001 by attacking an image by a Jamaican-born photographer, Rene Cox, who created a contemporary reworking of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The image shows a nude black woman standing with outstretched arms in place of Jesus, and surrounded by eleven black apostles and one white. It is titled *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (2001) and was also displayed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. In an echo of his earlier diatribe Giuliani called this work "outrageous...disgusting...and anti Catholic" (Plate 2002:53). In a televised debate the artist also met the head of the Catholic League for Legal and Civil rights, Dr. William A. Donohue, who described her work as "Catholic-bashing 'propaganda' and 'morally objectionable'" (Raab 2001).

Both Serrano's and Chagoya's religious imagery likewise provoked religious sensitivity in America, as indeed did Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988, which was vilified merely because it portrayed a Jesus who was uncertain of his purpose, riddled with doubts and tempted by fleshly seductions. In Scorsese's film, Jesus appeared to be more human than divine, fallible rather than perfect, which cuts to the heart of his message of redemption because, as mentioned in my introduction, the sacrifice of the cross required a 'sinless saviour' to atone for the sins of the world. The many protests in America wherever it was screened,¹⁶ however, displayed public distress at any disruption of a limited, accepted idea of who and what

¹⁶ Alan Segal (2007: 212) recounts how nuns were praying outside the cinema and people were picketing on the day he went to see the film, with the result that there were more protesters outside than viewers inside. Dubin (1994:90-92) notes that the Rev. Donald Wildmon claims that he distributed three million letters condemning the film, that MCA/Universal (the distributors) received 122 000 protest letters in one day, and, prior to the film's release, that 25 000 people protested at the studio. The numbers may be inflated but the film continued to excite public protests outside cinemas while one theatre was vandalised and another burned down by arsonists. Universal studio's suffered a disastrous fire in 1990 and an evangelist, Pat Robertson, hailed this as an example of divine retribution.

Jesus was¹⁷ and, in Dubin's words (1994:91), "reveal[ed] an intolerance of ambiguity and an insistence on the sanctity of received wisdom".¹⁸

The work of South African artist, Diane Victor, also initiated controversy in America when her drawings of *The Eight Marys* (2004: Figs.4.8 and 4.9) were exhibited in New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine as part of the *Personal Affects* Exhibition in 2004.¹⁹ There they engendered public criticism from a Catholic schoolteacher, C.J. DeStefano (2005), who was outraged by this work and its presentation in what he considered to be a "sacred space". He wrote to the Episcopal Bishop of New York, Mark Sisk, to say how he and his students were "sickened" at the choice of works and to ask "why art that not only disrespects some of our sensibilities but also demeans our beliefs is being officially sanctioned by the Episcopal Church?" Diane Victor's *The Eight Marys* was singled out for comment as the most disturbing and distressing of the works on display:

Bringing shock value into one's art does not intrinsically incorporate artistic integrity or a decipherable message. Ms. Victor is slighting dogma to jumpstart a less than productive career...One aspect that sets the Episcopal theology apart from some other religions is its reverence for the Blessed Mother. How does the Episcopal Church expect its own members or others to have a semblance of respect, when it provides a forum for those that make profane use of our symbols? (DeStefano 2005)

Bishop Sisk's reply was circumspect and stated that while there were controversial aspects to the exhibition it was "not blasphemous or demeaning to religion" (DeStefano 2005). Mr De Stefano

¹⁷ Harold Bloom (1991:32) in his discussion of post-Christianity in America, notes that what he terms the American Religion which "masks itself as Protestant Christianity yet ceases to be Christian" has retained a very limited idea of the figure of Jesus as an icon of spirituality. He is "a very solitary and personal American Jesus, who is also the resurrected Jesus rather than the crucified Jesus or the Jesus who ascended again to the Father". So even an evolved contemporary Christianity in America, which Bloom identifies as a form of Gnosticism, would balk at the depiction of their religious icon as a fallible human.

¹⁸ Surprisingly the 2006 film and the book of *The Da Vinci Code* caused some outrage in religious quarters but was not considered nearly as offensive as *The Last Temptation of Christ* despite the fact that, as Segal (2007:214) points out, the scandalous content in both is the same: that Mary Magdalene married Jesus. Segal ascribes the different level of response to the fact that *The Last Temptation of Christ* had a scene depicting Jesus and Mary in bed together (although it was made clear that this was an imaginary event) whereas *The Da Vinci Code* merely describes him as a husband and father. Ironically, a graphic display of Christ's sexuality (even if it is imagined) far outweighs, in shock value, an inference that not only was Jesus married and had sexual relations, but the church conspired to conceal this fact for thousands of years (Segal 2007:214-215).

¹⁹ The *Eight Marys* is discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

then wrote to the Reverend Tom Miller, Canon for Liturgy and the Arts, whose enlightened reply included the understanding that Victor's work "is an autobiographical critique of the way in which feminine imagery has been manipulated to suppress and control women in many cultures". He goes on to explain that "these works are rooted in the artists' truthful engagement in South Africa's struggle and in their experiences not only of hope, but also of the suffering from which this hope is revealed as grace upon grace". The artists may not have intentionally sought to engender a spiritual interpretation but it is an example of the wide-ranging effect of thought-provoking art that artistic intentions do not limit the work's reception.

In deference to the sensibilities of religious viewers, the Canon placed a cautionary sign near the works. This move did not appease DeStefano, however, and his criticism with its response from Bishop Sisk, as well as Sisk's similar response to queries from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, were repeated in the Catholic League's Arts section of their 2005 report on anti-Catholicism (Catholic League 2010). In this publication the *Personal Affects* exhibition, and Diane Victor in particular, appear at the top of a long list of anti-religious expressions identified in theatre, cultural events and art exhibitions. The executive summary report of this volume clearly indicates the limited approach of the Catholic League in vehemently denouncing any form of cultural expression that does not uphold Christian principles. President of the League, Dr. Donohue, makes a revealing statement in the introduction when he says:

...we make no attempt to weigh the motive of the offender. Why? Because in most cases it is impossible to discern with any degree of certainty what the intent was. What matters for us is effect. To put it differently, we must decide whether the outcome is sufficiently noxious as to qualify as bigotry (Catholic League 2010).

Similarly in South Africa there is still a residue in society of Calvinistic austerity and Christian influence despite what many people identify as a 'post-Christian' or secular era.²⁰ This can be seen in the extreme reaction to Diane Victor's *Pietà* (discussed in the Introduction), which can be likened to the vandalism that was perpetrated against Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, and Serrano's *Piss Christ*. There were also hostile responses to an exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in

²⁰ Anton Houtepen (2007:63) defines post-modern secularisation as "an epistemological revolt against the referential character of religious imagination...Not only religious images, but religious beliefs as such had to disappear in the long process of de-mythologisation, ending up with the proclamation of the 'death of God' by Nietzsche."

2004 by Bittercomix artist, Conrad Botes, which included one image of the *Pietà*, but with the artist instead of Mary cradling Jesus, and another of Jesus as *Good Shepherd* (2003: Fig.5.21), but where He is depicted cradling a penis instead of a lamb.²¹ Botes (2009) explains that both these images are explorations of alternative approaches to male identity, but a viewer who attended his ‘walkabout’ at the gallery subsequently wrote him an outraged letter, which begins: “God has given you a great talent but you have wasted it by blaspheming him.” The letter continues at length in the same vein warning of hellfires for Botes and his entire family and likening him to Hitler, Mussolini and Idi Amin (among other global villains).²² Botes responded by reproducing the entire letter in one of his sketchbooks, accompanied by a satirical sketch showing the artist flagellating himself, with the caption: “Repenting through art, trying to give up my evil ways” (Fig.1.5).²³

One might understand why religious institutions defend their icons but why is there such a strong reaction to transgressive religious images in the contemporary, largely secular world of state politics and/or wider public opinion? Does it perhaps suggest a residue of irrational sentiment steeped in a past dogma that was aimed at reducing our capacity for thought and questioning? Becker (2002:48) asks: “If [artists] interpret an iconic image in a radically new way, is this not one function art should serve? If they challenge our assumptions about art, why do we not welcome this challenge and the dialogue that surrounds it? What are we so afraid of?” It appears that this sentiment towards religious iconography is the result of such a long tradition of worship and acceptance that even contemporary secularisation fails to break the cycle of reverence. James Herbert (2008:3) explains that religious sensibilities continue to permeate culture due to the

²¹ *Bitterkomix* is known for its cultural assault on Afrikaner nationalist ideals and on South African culture in general. It functions through satirical attacks on anything held dear by society, including politics, morals, religion, traditions etc. Much of the public condemnation has been aimed at works considered pornographic or exhibiting gratuitous violence (see essay by Andy Mason 2006) but the religious iconography has also initiated outraged responses from members of the public. Conrad Botes is therefore no stranger to controversy over his work.

²² Botes (2009) notes that a missionary from the Congo also came up to him at the opening of the exhibition and said he thought the work was extremely powerful and that he really admired it. To Botes these two extreme reactions to his work were an affirmation of what he is trying to achieve, where the work is a catalyst for rethinking one’s approach to the world and should awaken the viewer to the relevance of different responses.

²³ Both Botes and Victor have probably had the most public condemnation of their religious subject matter in South Africa. Interestingly, in the instances mentioned here, each has chosen to respond through their art, Botes in his self portrait and Victor by taking the torn image of *Little Deposition Picture*, and making a new work with a drawing related to the incident placed in between the torn halves.

saturation of Christian mysticism and metaphysics in western culture. He bases this position on the writings of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1999:43) who says:

Not only the capitalist economy...but all the principal traits of western civilization as well are structured by their relation to Judaeo-Christian Scripture, the text upon which this civilization is based. While our civilization no longer professes itself Christian but rather considers itself by and large a dechristianized, post-Christian, lay civilization, it is nevertheless profoundly shaped by that heritage at its source.

Even in our multi-cultural post-apartheid South African nation a surprising number of people ascribe to this belief system and frame of reference. In the introduction to an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, published in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper, Drew Forrest (2010:24) states: “More than 80% of South Africans describe themselves as religious and 70% of them say they are practising Christians.” This indicates a residue of colonial influence that continues to permeate national responses and social/political decisions, and may explain some of the extreme reactions to imagery by local artists that might be deemed blasphemous.

Morgan (2005:48), in *The Sacred Gaze*, a study of religious visual culture, notes that: “Seeing is a sacred practice in many different religions.” He also explains that vision is part of a cultural experience so a study of religious imagery must include an understanding of the strength of traditions, practices, attitudes and habits that inform the gaze and thus inform cultural responses to such a “social act of looking” (Morgan 2005:3). These habits and traditions are investigated in the next section, in which the historical reasons for the emotive intensity accorded to religious iconography are considered.

A historical contextualisation of religious iconography

In the texture of the Bible lies embedded a metaphor of vital significance for the Scriptures as a whole, that of man made ‘in the image of God’ and of Jesus in particular as ‘the image of the invisible God’. We can hardly expect to grasp the sense and the scope of this metaphor unless we have some fairly adequate notion of how art subserves the human search for meaning and truth. For these metaphorical utterances are appealing to none other than man’s experience of art (Nichols 1980:5).

The struggle over religious imagery and its significance in sacramental terms has had a complex history that has been the topic of many studies regarding the function of images and has ultimately led to the development of current non-religious studies in visual culture. Margaret Miles (2002:62,63) describes the original iconoclastic controversy as “the first debate over representation”, and notes that even today “many of the issues and arguments of iconoclasm are still detectable in...debates over the power of images in media cultures”. It is important to understand both the history and the reverence with which religious images are held, to be able to understand why there is such a residue of feeling attributed to such imagery today. As specified in the quote by Aidan Nichols, above, the religious icon as a visual motif is metaphorically connected to the core belief of Christian dogma in the presence of Christ as a physical, tangible, visual manifestation of spiritual force. Anton Houtepen (2007:49) suggests that the level of reverence accorded to a religious image grew from a long history of using symbols or signs as aids to engage with anything mystical or divine, that was beyond the scope of the physical world, and which comprised religious experience. Subsequent problems, leading to several iconoclastic controversies in the church, arose when religious adherents conflated the symbol with its referent in religious iconography. The church identified this response as idolatry, and the attempt to avoid it led to many debates and critical reflection on the distance between sign and signifier, and the use of iconography in church practice.²⁴

To further understand these convoluted issues raised by religious imagery, Willemien Otten, in “The Tension between word and image in Christianity” (2007:34), explains that the problem of idolatry is the origin of Logocentricity in the early church, and the subsequent prioritisation of text over image in Christian history. St. Augustine was responsible for attempting to balance text and image when he said the following in *On Christian Doctrine* (I.II.2.4 quoted in Otten 2007:43): “All teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs.” This indicates, firstly, the need for mediation of the scriptures in some form and, secondly, that the ‘word’ is only one sign among many, both verbal and non-verbal, thus emphasising the equal importance of having imagery to mediate the scriptures. Furthermore Houtepen (2007:66) points

²⁴ Idolatry is not, therefore, necessarily the worshipping of ‘false idols’ by unbelievers in the faith, but was originally a “self critical term about religious aberration within monotheism itself” (Houtepen 2007:50).

out, that icons can also be approached in a hermeneutic rather than an aesthetic fashion by concentrating on their ‘deictic’ function – they demand action and participation from the viewer. Houtepen (2007: 66,67) explains:

It is not our ‘aesthetic gaze’ that liturgy and icons want to evoke, nor artistic emotional pleasure or personal satisfaction, but a real ‘change of heart’, conversion or *metanoia*...The icon directs our gaze beyond the picture, the iconostasis brings our mind behind the screens, it attracts us to the holy of holy, to the heavenly sphere of the divine. It is a permanent performative, transforming and transfiguring symbol and that is precisely what its ‘deictic’ function means.

Even when the image itself is not worshipped, therefore, it is clear that the purpose of religious iconography is, and has long been, closely intertwined with the purpose of religion and is often equated, in terms of its effect, with the written text or Logos, which forms the heart of religious belief.²⁵

Nichols (1980:5) explains that after an intense and prolonged struggle the church ecumenical council eventually became aware of the theological possibilities inherent in religious imagery. They inferred that the icon could be more than just art because it has a “virtually sacramental power” (Nichols: 1980:5) to physically manifest the sacred and numinous in a way that brings it down to earth, so to speak, within the scope of understanding and apprehension of the common man, although to avoid idolatry the distinction needs to be made between icon and prototype. Building on this pronouncement, Antonius Sucquet’s popular seventeenth century treatise on meditation, entitled *Road of Eternal Life*, clarifies the importance of religious iconography as an aid to focussing the mind on spiritual matters.²⁶ As David Freedberg (1989:188) explains: “the mind can only grasp the invisible by means of, or with reference to, the visible.” In support of the icon as a legitimate aid to worship and receptacle of spiritual power, Leonid Ouspensky, in his study of the Orthodox Church’s response to religious iconography entitled *The Theology of*

²⁵ There is a divergence in belief here between the Catholic tradition and some protestant traditions. John Calvin, for example, “declared that images can teach nothing about Christian truth since they are the product of human imagination and therefore inherently inaccurate on matters of divinity” (Morgan 2005:11,12). Calvin also claimed that the written word of God (the Bible) was the only acceptable image of the Holy Spirit (Morgan 2005:12).

²⁶ About twelve editions of Sucquet’s book were published between 1620 and 1694 in Latin, Dutch and French (Freedberg 1989:473).

the Icon, explains how the icon is equated with scripture in importance and is completely integral to Christian liturgical practice (Ouspensky 1978:10). Alain Besançon (2000:137-140) in *The Forbidden Image*, further suggests that the icon holds a sacramental status because it presents a transfigured image (of a saint or Madonna or Christ) and is therefore “in itself an effective means of salvation”. The Orthodox Church thus accepts the icon as “an object of worship embodying divine grace” (Ouspensky1978:10), but only within rigidly circumscribed parameters which are defined by tradition. In other words icons must be painted “as they were painted by the ancient and holy iconographers” to ensure the authenticity of religious/spiritual content (Ouspensky 1978:13). Besançon (2000:224) explains that in Byzantine times the icon was thought to derive its power and efficacy directly from God. The artist, through prayer and meditation, could access spiritual animation for his paint, his colours, or the wood he was carving. The importance of tradition in religious iconography derives from the intervention of God, therefore, whose nature is described in the Bible as constant and unchanging, thus leading to the inference that the imagery he inspires should also display this sense of permanence and continuity.

The origin of the prescriptive nature of ‘sacred’ images is raised in these statements, which might explain one of the reasons for resistance against any disruption or transgression of Christian iconography. Much of the religious intensity of such work appears to lie in the artist’s spiritual intent and the devotional focus he employs during the creation of such work, with the proviso that the final image must conform to acceptable traditional parameters. An example of spiritual intent clashing with visual tradition can be found in a carved wooden statue c.1845-90 of a Madonna and Child on display in the Auckland Museum, New Zealand. This figure has been made in the style of a Maori Whakapakoko (human image) with the traditional *rauponga*²⁷ spiral carvings (Te Kakano [Sa]) and distorted bodily proportions (Fig.1.6). The information accompanying this image explains that the carver (possibly Patoromu Tamatea), who was a recent convert to Christianity, offered it as a gift to the local Catholic church. The church rejected the offering on the grounds of its unsuitability as a holy image, and in fact the local priest viewed it as “objectionable” (Te Kakano [Sa]). In other words it did not fit into the circumscribed parameters of a religious icon according to church tradition and therefore was not

²⁷ *Rauponga* is a traditional form of Maori carved decoration. The word means the “frond of a fern tree” and refers to the spiral patterns carved into statues and other cultural artefacts (Thornton 1959:41,42).

considered ‘spiritual’ in any Christian sense. The fear of pagan superstitions and non-Christian spiritual potency possibly seeping into the church through this Maori inspired image also cannot be dismissed, which could indicate a belief in the negative possibilities of slippage between icon and prototype. The power of the image for good or evil is thus ultimately identified in the image itself, particularly ironic in this case as the artist apparently intended to honour Christianity rather than undermine it.²⁸

Despite a long history of vacillation between iconophilia and iconoclasm in both church and secular arenas, and despite the strength of rational thought ushered in during the Enlightenment, there is a residue of belief in the sanctity of certain imagery. This might explain the persistence of a conflation between sign and signifier amongst the more conventionally religious, who invest the image with a ‘supernatural’ potency, as explained in Chapter Two of Freedberg’s book entitled *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (1989:27-40). However Freedberg (1989:30,40) points to the level of belief in the viewer as the deciding factor of whether a sign can become the living embodiment of what it signifies, and he asks: “When is belief undermined by consciousness so that the image is merely a token of what it represents? Perhaps it will be found that belief and response are never thus undermined or enhanced. Perhaps the undermining or enhancement forever remains secondary.” The strength of outrage expressed in recent responses at any perceived lack of reverence towards religious imagery, however, appears to indicate that such imagery remains inherently sacred for some viewers.

An example of the powerful effect of images in Church history, and the way this was exploited by the church, can be found during the seventeenth century when there was an escalation of religious fervour aided by ritual and imagery that began in Italy and spread across the western world during the era now identified as Baroque. Church buildings, sculptures, paintings, incense, music and singing and the glorious spectacle of procession by richly garbed celebrants formed a spectacle of complexity and grandeur designed to appeal emotionally to the church congregation. This profusion of media working in concert created a ‘total work of art’ (or *gesamtkunstwerk*)

²⁸ This attribute is also typical in African cultures where masks and figures are believed to contain a spiritual life-force under certain conditions (known as animism) and are therefore treated with reverence and respect within the culture. African imagery and its spiritual implications will be discussed further in relation to images by Diane Victor in Chapters Four and Six.

that aimed to transport the congregation into an ‘otherworldly’ religious experience. Such an appeal to the senses and emotions deliberately used every aesthetic means at the disposal of the church hierarchy to draw people back into Catholicism at a time of increasing protestant activity around Europe. The Church was thus promoting the spiritual efficacy of art expediently, for its own purposes (against rival religious offshoots) as much as it was promoting spirituality itself. Church teaching became secondary to ritual, and importance was placed on glorifying the Catholic Church, not only by producing impressive monuments but also, as Germain Bazin (1974:12) states “by all the means that lay in the power of the figurative arts, to attest to the truth of the Faith”. Emotive imagery seen in *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1645-52) by Bernini or Ruben’s *Descent from the Cross* (1611-14), for example, were equated with emotional fervour, ecstatic experience and doctrinal truth and this effect continued for centuries. Small wonder, then, that religious imagery continues to cling to traces of that emotive content for some viewers.

The study of religious art has taken various forms in the modern era, and Morgan’s essay, “Toward a modern historiography of art and religion” (2004:16-37) establishes certain categories for studies of religious art and the way it functions historically, socially, visually and spiritually. These studies are based on the production and reception of specifically religious images designed to enhance the spiritual life of the viewer, but this aspect of religious art has, since the enlightenment, moved into a sphere of philosophic discourse that attempts to discover the connection between spirituality and aesthetics in a broader sense.²⁹ It is important to understand how the attribution of aesthetics to an identification of spirituality in art, whether sacred or profane, underpins the responses to many of the works discussed in this thesis. Morgan’s essay plots the intersection of art and religion that led to a newly elevated ‘spiritual’ status for art, through the writings of European (mostly German) philosophers from the mid eighteenth century onwards. In an explanation of Winckelmann’s approach to aesthetics Morgan (2004:31) notes:

²⁹ See also Patrick Sherry’s book *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (1992), or Mark Taylor’s *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, (1992), for example. Besançon (2002:6) also notes that the genesis of abstract art “developed within a religious and, more precisely, a mystical movement”. Kandinsky’s treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, (1977 originally written in 1911) takes the mystical communion of spirituality and image and ascribes it to formal elements such as line and colour, rather than to the image of a spiritually significant being. Abstraction therefore is a new form of iconoclasm as it does away with the icon but, as Besançon (2002:7) explains, “their renunciation of reference to ‘objects’ and to nature did not stem from fear of the divine but from the mystical goal of providing an image that was finally worthy of it”.

“the work of art emerged as an expression of genius and the act of viewing its epiphany experienced empathetically by whomever had cultivated the taste or aesthetic capacity for such rapture.” The concept of the artist as a ‘genius’ presupposes a maker of art in tune with something beyond the reach of ordinary mortals and, as such, with status similar to that of traditional icon painters who were believed to commune directly with God to obtain spiritual direction for their images (Besançon 2002:224).

To continue this analogy, Morgan (2004:31) further describes the aesthetic experience as engrained by “an ethics of encounter that seems unabashedly mystical. Aesthetic contemplation is a form of transcendence and revelation, a communion with a higher being”. Art therefore, in subsequent aesthetic and philosophical discourses culminating in European modernism, is imbued with a reputation for spirituality, underpinned by notions of both the beautiful and the sublime.³⁰ This aesthetic doctrine appears to be at the heart of some of the criticism of recent works that parody art historical originals. A work that was produced by ‘genius’ and that is aesthetically beautiful and portrays the idealism of classical perfection, such as the *Pietà* by Michelangelo, would carry this aura of spiritual communion, particularly as its purpose was for religious contemplation. The parody of this work by Victor in *Little Deposition Picture* (2002: Fig.5.4) might therefore be seen as an attack not only on the image of the Virgin Mary as a person and on religion in general, but also on the sanctity of the creative urge, artistic genius, historical ideals, tradition and culture. This is not an image that must be absorbed in ‘rapt contemplation’ but must be comprehended rationally with intellectual knowledge of historical prototypes and their meanings, and in response to a current political or social context. It is therefore decidedly ‘worldly’ in purpose and effect.

Morgan (2005:130) notes that during the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, humankind’s quest for liberation from mental restrictions created by ignorance and superstition meant that the power of church and religion was limited, and governance became secularised. He states that “science and philosophy are the instruments of iconoclastic enlightenment” (Morgan 2005:130). The rise of rationalism should therefore have struck the

³⁰ This pertains to art that is secular as well as art made for religious purposes as seen in works by Kandinsky for example or those made by the American Abstract Expressionists.

death knell to power wielded by religious institutions. Nevertheless, as Morgan (2005:130) points out, “religion does not go away”; it continues to affect global politics, national governance, education, discourse, culture and the construction of national and personal identity. Harris (2005:223) concurs with the permeation of religious influence when he says: “We live in societies that are still constrained by religious laws and threatened by religious violence.” Both are speaking of many different religions but, as we have seen in the discussion of responses to Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary*, and Victor’s *Eight Marys* or *Little Deposition Picture*, Christian values still continue to exert an influence on cultural responses to works that are identified (however erroneously) as demeaning or blasphemous.

Conclusion

In his lecture on *Iconoclasts and their motives* Freedberg (1985:35,36) suggests that iconic images are invested with power through the associations they carry rather than through the dialectic relationship between the image and the beholder. As discussed above, the power of the religious icon is attested to by a long history of carefully controlled similar images, suggesting continuity and efficacy thus producing an aura of truth through repetition that is exploited by the institutions of both church and state. The continued strength of these religious associations and the ‘truths’ that they represent are identified in vehement public responses to works that are deemed transgressive. Morgan’s (2005:55) list of the functions of religious imagery and religious visual practices, demonstrates that amongst other things they “influence thought and behaviour by persuasion or magic [and] displace rival images and ideologies”. De Gruchy (2001:5) makes a similar statement when he says: “Images play a fundamental role in the shaping of cultural and religious identity, and in the construction, subverting and transforming of social reality.” This suggests that beyond purely religious purposes, power and social control can be constructed and reinforced through religious iconography. A study of religious images, therefore, must include their ability to forcefully propagate ideas and expectations for the circumscribed behaviour of their adherents, a purpose that has encouraged the appropriation of religious ‘truths’ reinforced by religious imagery as a political tool. Foucault’s (1979:194) notion of power in the modern world as something that produces ‘reality and truth’ therefore underpins my analysis of selected contemporary artworks in terms of discovering exactly what ‘truth’ is being presented in the

religious originals and how that 'truth' is being iconoclastically questioned or overturned through quotation and parody in the examples under discussion.

CHAPTER TWO

The integration of Christianity and Politics in selected images from the apartheid era

The church is deeply convinced of the fact that God, in His wise counsel, so ordained it that the first European inhabitants of this southern corner of darkest Africa should be men and women of firm religious convictions, so that they and their posterity could become the bearers of the light of the Gospel to the heathen races of this continent, and therefore considers it the special privilege and responsibility of the DRC¹ in particular to proclaim the Gospel to the heathen of this country (quoted in Bloomberg 1990:27).

The quote above comes from a statement made by the Dutch Reformed Church's Federal Council in 1935 and clearly demonstrates the patriarchal attitude held by European colonialists towards the colonised inhabitants of South Africa. This sense of divinely inspired superiority arose partly as a result of Boer military victories in battles against the local inhabitants, which the Boers ascribed directly to the protection of God (particularly the Battle of Blood River²). Their military prowess led to a belief that God had created the Afrikaner nation for a particular purpose, so, as Charles Bloomberg (1990:27) states, the Afrikaner nation believed that it had received a "divine mandate" that empowered it "to exercise authority over the heathen".³ The objective was to help blacks become self-supporting and themselves bearers of Christian

¹ DRC stands for the Dutch Reformed Church, which is the English translation of the Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerk.

² The Battle of Blood River was fought on December 16th 1838 between the Zulus and the Voortrekker Boers. The Boers prayed to God for victory and vowed to commemorate God's aid if they won by building a church and keeping the day as a public holiday. Their decisive victory against extreme odds meant that the Day of the Covenant became a religious holiday in South Africa until 1994, when it was renamed the Day of Reconciliation (eb.com. [Sa]).

³ It is interesting to note that as recently as 2009 such extreme views have been promoted. For example, Pastor Mark Downey (2009) has written a 'historic' account of the battle, underpinned by Christian scripture, as propaganda for the continuation of apartheid policies. His 'sermon' ends with: "Three to four thousand Zulu impis (the best of their warriors) lay dead. Not one White man or any of his animals were killed... The Afrikaners know their survival is completely dependent on divine intervention. Blood River has been called the mythical underpinnings of apartheid rule. The Christian Boers did not ascribe the military victory to their armaments; they interpreted the battle as a sign from God. With the battle behind them, they believed even more strongly that White predominance over Blacks is the will of God. Indeed, it is their mandate, it is OUR mandate to take dominion of the earth. And to that, we should all say amen."

civilization.” The stated religious imperative is only one side of the equation, however. As Jean and John Comaroff (1991:11) note in the introduction to volume one of their book, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in Southern Africa*: “the study of Christianity in Africa is more than just an exercise in the analysis of religious change. It is part and parcel of the historical anthropology of colonialism and consciousness, culture and power.” They understand the missionary thrust into Africa, therefore, to be as much a part of the colonialist imperative as it was in response to a biblical directive to convert the heathen over all the earth. To clarify this position, Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:198) state that “the missionary ...cast the native as a savage ‘other’, whose difference was to be ‘converted’ into the currency of the Christian commonwealth”. In other words, quite apart from the moral necessity of ‘saving the poor savages’, the influence of Christianity was hoped to imbue them with a Calvinistic work ethic, which would make them productive cogs in the colonial machinery. Their usefulness as units of labour would thus ensure that they became integral parts of a capitalist economy. Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:9) explain the reasoning of the church in promoting this view:

The impact of Protestant evangelists as harbingers of industrial capitalism lay in the fact that their civilizing mission was simultaneously symbolic and practical, theological and temporal. The goods and techniques they brought with them to Africa presupposed the messages and meanings they proclaimed in the pulpit, and vice versa. Both were vehicles of a moral economy that celebrated the global spirit of commerce, the commodity, and the imperial marketplace.

In the process of becoming both ‘saved’ and ‘civilized’, the indigenous population would remain forever beholden to the colonial master who had saved them from ‘hell and damnation’: freedom from sin came at the price of permanent inferiority and indebtedness. This reinforced the trope, introduced by early evangelists, of “a binary model of humankind, a model which not only opposed civility to savagery, light to dark, Christian to pagan, and so on, but also condensed all these contrasts into the polarities of a grand evolutionary telos” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:79).

Christianity was also actively engaged in the movement to abolish slavery that arose in the nineteenth century, which one might expect, as slavery is morally indefensible. However, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:118) explain, “abolitionism helped replace the chains of slavery

with the bonds of an imperialism based on the free market”. Such mercenary considerations are made clear in an argument supporting abolitionism on the grounds that “slave labour was costlier than free, since persons debarred from acquiring property had no incentive to work” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:119). This notion was presented by Adam Smith (1937:365) and reinforced by Wesley and the might of the Methodist Church, resulting in the official embracing of abolitionism in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:119). Like other ideologies, therefore, abolitionism was not only about human rights but arose within arguments about productivity and national interest and the forceful promotion of capitalism. It is interesting in this context to analyse the appropriation of Christian art and ideas into an awakening of black consciousness that had been actively suppressed, devalued and controlled through a manipulation of Christian beliefs, with the view to managing and maintaining a subservient and unquestioning work force. This is a point of view that was raised by Black Consciousness activist Stephen Biko (2006:61) who, in his paper given at a conference of black religious ministers in 1972, notes that the introduction of Christianity was originally corrupted by its adaptation as a tool for the “*colonisation* of people” but now the continuing interpretation and application of such principles makes Christianity “the ideal religion for the maintenance and *subjugation* of the same people”⁴ thus ensuring the perpetuation of black bondage.

It is ironic, in the context of Biko’s statement, that several apartheid era artists, both black and white, created work that employs religious iconography with a certain degree of reverence, adapting biblical teaching as a vehicle for ‘struggle’ commentaries - indeed for promoting freedom from an oppression that Christian teaching was culpable in enforcing. In this chapter I explore a selection of works of this type. I begin by considering some early works by black artists that illustrate the awareness of social inequalities and oppression through allegory. I then examine instances where religious iconography is adapted in the service of raising black consciousness against the suppression of apartheid but where the metaphorical framework of Christianity appears to have served as a device to avoid political censorship. During the last few years of apartheid and the ‘transition phase’, white artists were able to provocatively critique the fundamental role of religion and the use of Christianity as a mechanism of control over the population, due to the weakening constraints of apartheid policies. In the light of this shift I

⁴ These are Biko’s italics.

consider examples of transgressive imagery that function as a critique of social constraints and expectations underpinned by religious constructs.

Apartheid era artists and the black saviour

Azaria Mbatha was first a pupil and then a teacher at the Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre in KwaZulu-Natal which was allied to and funded by the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran church and which developed from their missionary outreach to Tuberculosis patients at the local mission hospital. Juliette Leeb-du Toit (1998:38) explains that at the time of Mbatha's emergence as an artist, the official church policy towards a possible conflict between religion and traditionalism in art was to encourage imagery that adapted biblical imagery to cultural analogies. At the same time there were breakaway African churches which "had elected to respond more freely to biblical teachings and drew selectively on those that found the greatest proximity to their own cultural values, practice and belief systems" (Leeb-du Toit 1998:38). Mbatha's work responds to these cultural nuances as well as the social and political implications of his time. He was brought up in a family that embraced both Christian and traditional values (Leeb-du Toit 1998:38) and the missionary context of Mbatha's introduction to art, while he was a patient at the Ceza Mission Hospital in 1962, may also have informed the content of his early works which were often his interpretation of tales from the Bible.

One of the first linocuts Mbatha created, in 1962, was entitled *David and Goliath* (Fig.2.1). It is a straightforward illustration of an Old Testament biblical incident, showing a black David holding a white Goliath's head while white soldiers are fleeing in the foreground watched over by a group of black Israelites in the background. On first encountering this image one might consider that Christian missionary teaching has merely been assimilated and adapted to suit an African idiom. Mbatha, however, appears to have made a political point by relating the power of the state with the 'invincibility' of Goliath and, as Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin (2003:174) point out, by inverting the traditional European convention of white as a metaphor for good and black for bad. To clarify his moral judgement of each group, the Israelites are dressed in religious robes while the Philistines are clad in what looks like Roman military uniforms. Goliath is not only white but is expressively exaggerated in both demeanour and garb to suggest a frightening

ogre, while David is a young, heroic African. It is not difficult to associate the underlying message in this image with the notion of Black Consciousness in South Africa, although Mbatha himself denied that this was his purpose (Mbatha 1998:57).⁵ Hobbs and Rankin (2003:174), however, see this, with its moral high ground and promise of victory and strength, as the beginning of an alternative approach in black artmaking, in opposition to “self pitying or sentimental images of poverty and suffering”.

Mbatha’s use of religious iconography in works like *David and Goliath*, and others such as his story of Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage (*The Story of Moses*, 1964), could be interpreted as themes of deliverance and the forging of a black national identity, acceptably wrapped in allegory at a time when overt political imagery would have invited censure or punishment. Leeb-du Toit (1998:39) notes that his works “pre-empted and anticipated Black Theology...due to their extolling of African values and their discourse of protest”. Mbatha extended his possible critique of the status quo by appearing to allude to more specific protagonists in works such as *Herod and the Wisemen* (1965: Fig.2.2).⁶ The holy family and shepherds are clad in Zulu traditional garb while the white Herod is not only associated by Mbatha with apartheid prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd (Hobbs and Rankin 2003:174), but is

⁵ In his preface to a collection of writings by Bantu Stephen Biko entitled *I Write What I Like*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2006:ix) connects the rise of black consciousness very clearly with the religious impulse in its ability to awaken a sense of self-worth in black people, to allow them to value themselves as God values each individual irrespective of ethnicity or colour. Tutu explains “Black Consciousness aroused in us the knowledge of our share in what St Paul called the glorious liberty of the Children of God, urging us to enter into that splendid heritage”. This social awakening was built on the political work of Biko who was, as Tutu (2006:x) asserts, “acknowledged as the father of the Black Consciousness Movement”. Biko began his campaign of political awareness by joining the National Union of South African Students in 1966. From this beginning, and through his membership of subsequent organisations, he remained an outspoken champion of the rights of black people to equality, dignity and freedom until his incarceration and death in detention on 12 September 1977 (Biko 2006:1,2). In his essay on “White Racism and Black Consciousness” Biko (2006:66-79) points to the adoption of the ‘People’s Charter’ in Kliptown in 1955 as the first sign of an emerging black consciousness where black people in South Africa were attempting to divest themselves of the control of Europeans and to “evolve a philosophy based on, and directed by, blacks” (Biko 2006:73). Thus, despite the fact that the Black Consciousness Movement had not been formally constituted when Mbatha was making his first artworks, it is clear that the underlying conditions for its formalisation were already in place in the awareness of many black people at the time. Also Hobbs and Rankin’s book on Rorke’s Drift (2003) clearly documents the efforts of Peder Gowenius, art teacher and director, to conscientise his pupils in both political and social areas by holding weekly discussions with them, taking them to scenes of Zulu achievement in battle and generally “set[ting] out to make his students aware of their situation – to enable them to take ownership of it” (Hobbs & Rankin 2003:163).

⁶ Mbatha’s criticism is nevertheless carefully couched in metaphor, and thus avoided the possibility of prosecution under the Publication and Entertainments Act of 1963. This act was ostensibly put in place to control “indecent, blasphemy and communist views” however opponents of the act noted: “the real aim was the wholesale control of dissidence” (Merrett 1994:61).

dressed in the ruffled collar, called a *plisser*, which was usually worn by the more traditional and conservative white missionaries in the area. Mbatha's work thus comments directly on the complicity of Christianity in the oppressive South African political regime (Hobbs and Rankin 2003:174). The child Jesus is, however, half white and half black, ostensibly to indicate a universal saviour. Mbatha (1998:58) explains:

I started to accept the image of a Biblical black God who originated in Africa and who was going to save black and white people alike. It seemed as if I had in mind both a black God as well as a white God. When I forged them together it was as a sign of being the product of a multicultural society, or as evidence of acceptance.

A more confrontational approach was taken by a 'coloured'⁷ Cape Town artist, Ronald Harrison, in 1961 when he painted *Black Christ*. Unlike Mbatha's careful use of allegory this image presents a literal rendition of Nobel Laureate Chief Albert Luthuli's crucifixion in the guise of a Christ figure, complete with loincloth and crown of thorns. At the time the painting was made Luthuli was leader of the African National Congress thus easily identifiable as a moral leader, freedom fighter and role model for the black majority; as Dr. Albertina Luthuli explains (2006:vii) he is the symbol of black suffering. He is flanked by Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd and B.J. Vorster, in Roman military dress, encapsulating both the inception and promulgation of oppressive apartheid policies so the revolutionary anti-apartheid message is explicit. *Black Christ* was made in response to the Sharpeville massacre of 1961 and the banning of Chief Albert Luthuli (A Ripple of Hope), and is thus overtly political in both conception and iconography. Despite this it was first exhibited in St Luke's Anglican Church in Salt River in 1962, indicating that this particular church was daringly aligning itself with a revolutionary branch of theological thought that resulted, later in the decade, in the Black Theology movement. The painting was almost immediately labelled blasphemous and subversive and was censored on the basis that "it was calculated to give offence to the religious convictions and feelings of a section of the population" (A Ripple of Hope). Before the South African government could have it destroyed the painting was smuggled out of South Africa and taken to St. Paul's Cathedral in London

⁷ Coloured is the term used by the apartheid government to identify anyone of 'mixed' race.

(Hamilton 2004) after which it toured England to raise money for the victims of apartheid.⁸ Ronald Harrison was then arrested by security police and repeatedly interrogated and tortured over a seven day period (Hamilton 2004). Perhaps this became a cautionary tale to subsequent black artists in South Africa as many of them, in their responses to the message of resistance promoted by Black Theology, couch their images in allegory and metaphor rather than blatantly depicting subversive political commentary.

The Black Theology movement emerged during the late 1960s as a religious base from which to oppose the oppression of apartheid policies. Theologians such as Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, D.D.L Makhatini and others contributed to disseminating a biblically based critique of racism and other colonial policies that erode indigenous cultures. As Leeb-du Toit (1998:42) explains: “In a virtual ‘preaching back to the centre’, the State, which saw itself as partly God-willed, was reminded, by black and white clergy alike, of the central revolutionary teaching of Christ...He represented a confrontational person who was ready to challenge all perpetrators of injustice, regardless of their status.” In his promotion of Black Consciousness at the time Biko (1997:26) affirmed that to reinstate the validity of cultural values Black Theology required a Christ who was not merely a passive recipient of injustice but one who was moved to anger and prepared to fight for truth and restitution.⁹ In response to this message the ‘black Christ’ is not just depicted as the passive martyr seen in Harrison’s painting, but also as a struggling victim of torture in images such as Charles Nkosi’s series of linocuts entitled *Pain on the Cross* (1976: Figs.2.3 and 2.4) and *Crucifixion* (1976: Figs.2.5 and 2.6) which appear to illustrate the situational interpretation of Black Theology suggested by Biko (2006:64) who explains: “It seeks to relate the present-day black man to God within the context of the black man’s suffering and his attempts to get out of it.”

Nkosi’s series were made in the same year as the Soweto uprising and an increasing militancy in black resistance groups, and these prints consequently exhibit a more insistent promotion of

⁸ *Black Christ* was returned to South Africa in 1997 and was kept in storage in the National Gallery in Cape Town (Hamilton 2004). It was exhibited as part of the Cape Town Arts Festival in 2007 and now hangs in the National Gallery (Lockwood 2007).

⁹ Black theologians saw ‘blackness’ as an identifying motif in the liberation theology of the 1960s. Blackness was a “life category” and “Christ [was] ‘black’ in being oppressed” (Hobbs and Rankin 2003:186).

political agendas than earlier works by Mbatha. They are not as politically confrontational as Harrison's image, however, with his identifiable apartheid perpetrators as villains, as Nkosi's message is portrayed purely through the symbol of a suffering Christ and therefore remains within the accepted parameters of religious interpretation. Nkosi indicates the struggle of the victimised Christ by means of dramatic angles, expressive distortion and various forms of torture or repression such as bonds and manacles or a grotesquely twisted and tied body, to forcefully depict extreme suffering in the visual tradition of artists such as Grunewald or Nolde. Often a cross is not visible but the hands clearly display stigmata to identify the victim. The religious identification of Christ as an innocent sacrificial victim, and the knowledge that He will rise again in power and glory, creates a particularly useful metaphor for the suffering of black people and the promise of their redemption and ultimate victory. As Richard Bauckham (1989:143) explains: "In relation to oppression, Christ offered conquest; in relation to material need he offered daily bread; in relation to exclusion, inclusion and in relation to enmity, reconciliation." The Christian doctrine of the resurrection is therefore fundamental to political impact here and such iconography was employed to this end by many black artists during the 1970s.

Another example of apparently direct 'borrowing' and re-use of doctrine can be seen in Paul Stopforth's graphite drawing *Elegy* (1981: Fig.2.7), which simply depicts the prone, naked, dead body of Bantu Stephen Biko after he was murdered by security police in 1977. This image bears a marked reference in both composition and effect, to Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521: Fig.2.8). Okwui Enwezor (2005:34) draws a similar comparison with Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ* (c.1500: Fig.2.9), pointing out the correlation of death, trauma, violation and martyrdom that makes the Biko work "both elegiac and heroic" (Enwezor 2005:34). He is responding to the overwhelming sense of a confrontation with mortality so that, as Christian Eckart (2000:39) notes: "The hierarchy that separates us and a more metaphysical representation of the son of God has collapsed." There is an insistent pathos in these images, despite differences in medium and execution, evidenced through the humanity of the dead Christ and which makes the resurrective message in Christ's biblical story more dramatic. For example, Eckart (2000:39) clarifies this effect in a discussion of Holbein's painting, when he describes the almost clinical realism of dead flesh and states: "If one comes away from it believing that the

body was henceforth resurrected, one is truly a believer and the ‘miracle’ of the resurrection has been made all the more profound.”

In Stopforth’s case, Biko’s corpse is not only dead but already looks ghostly due to his working method of scraping away the wax material to produce a ‘negative’ of Biko’s body. His form is rendered insubstantial through its contrast with the insistent flat red ground on which he lies. Red is a colour which not only refers to the violence of martyrdom but is associated with anger and defiance. It is allied to the red often used in resistance posters, and infers that this death is not the end. Christ’s death and resurrection again becomes a statement of political resurrection and triumph over apartheid, through visual congruences. This is also portrayed in another work from the same series entitled *Biko Series: Heels (negative)* (1980: Fig.2.10) where Biko’s naked feet are depicted as though they are those of Christ on the cross with the feet overlapping slightly. The Christian message is thus conflated with a political agenda, without any loss of reverential/religious meaning or need for alteration.

During apartheid co-option of such imagery reinforced the underlying Christian message of sacrifice and blamelessness, as these connotations were necessary for a suitable reading of Christian imagery in a political sense, even when following an agenda of liberation theology. Immediately post-apartheid the biblical metaphor is still employed to reinforce a message of resistance and triumph. Samkelo Bunu’s colour etching of *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* (1995: Fig.2.11), for example, illustrates the story of how one man’s faith can result in major social change. This becomes a contemporary allegory demonstrating how resistance to conquest and oppression can alter the course of history as displayed in the (then) recent democratic elections of 1994. It appears to be an almost direct appropriation of the religious message for social and political ends.

Stopforth employs religious traditional representational modes, rather than specific imagery, in a later series depicting mundane items and fragments taken from Nelson Mandela’s cell and the surrounding environment on Robben Island. These consist of detailed representations of objects like a cupboard hinge (Fig.2.12), or dustbins (Fig.2.13), or a folded prison blanket (Fig.2.14), and were created after he visited Robben Island in January 2001 (Klopper 2004:68). Stopforth

points out that “since 1994 Robben Island has become a quasireligious space, a place of pilgrimage for those seeking to honour the apartheid era saints and martyrs” (Klopper 2004:68). His images of extremely ordinary things are coloured by this greater perspective, that Coombes (2004:115) calls “the grand narratives of heroic resistance”. It allows them to take on the status of religious relics which Sandra Klopper (2004:70) suggests “transcend the political moment to which they owe their existence”. The appropriation of religious feeling, if not the specific imagery, carries a similar message, related to liberation theology and apartheid abuses of power.

The binary model dividing religious/spiritual from earthly/material concerns had been upheld by the church for centuries, through what Robert McAfee Brown (1988) has called “The Great Fallacy”. This is a view of the world and religion based in a Greek philosophical approach that forcefully promoted a division between the spiritual and earthly domain.¹⁰ McAfee Brown (1988:27) notes: “They believed that the body was evil and the soul good, that time was corrupt and eternity pure, that earth was to be shunned and heaven sought, that flesh was the seat of impurity and spirit the seat of blessedness.” The rejection of worldly gain for a spiritual reward became entrenched in traditional biblical teaching over the centuries. McAfee Brown (1988:30), however, suggests that the support for this world-view came largely from those in political, economic and ecclesiastical power. By promoting pursuit of earthly power and wealth as something that is diametrically opposed to spiritual growth, those in power maintained acceptance of the status quo by the populace rather than a questioning of injustices or discontent with inequality. The demolition of “The Great Fallacy” is therefore one of the first steps in traditional liberation theology and an integration of political, worldly and religious concerns as interdependent of one another, and equally important, is fundamental to the works discussed thus far. By ‘traditional’ liberation theology I am referring here, specifically, to a theology that addresses the political liberation of the oppressed indigenous people of South Africa, rather than the more open ended ‘liberation theology’ discussed by Marcella Althaus–Reid (2000) which she terms “Indecent Theology”. Althaus-Reid’s approach includes the liberation of sexual oppression and the questioning of western ‘grand narratives’ of Christianity which follow Foucault’s identification of a system that disciplines and orders rationality, sexuality, social and political

¹⁰ Although Christianity developed from a Judaic background and Judaism did not espouse the Greek world-view, the early Christian church was formed during a historic period that was predominantly ordered by and founded on Greek philosophical ideals, which were upheld by the Roman Empire (McAfee Brown 1988:27).

institutions and the control of capital to uphold these institutions (Foucault 1980:196-7). Such an alternative view of liberation theology is commensurate with the motives utilised by Victor and many other artists discussed in this thesis. The examples below, however, while using religious imagery to question the social and political status quo, cannot properly be categorised under the banner of liberation theology because they are overtly critical of the very beliefs that underpin Christian theology itself.

Diane Victor's response to politics and religion in the 1980s

Much of the visual imagery discussed thus far was subject to the possibility of censorship through the Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963 and the subsequent Publications Act of 1974. Magreet de Lange (1997:13) notes that censorship had been an integral part of the Nationalist Government since its inauguration in 1948. It could therefore be understood as an ideology that was intertwined with the ideology of apartheid which is demonstrated by its central elements: “dominance of Afrikaner interests, Christian morals, and the protection of the Afrikaner state” (de Lange 1997:16). The parameters by which an image was deemed ‘undesirable’ under this regime included categories based on moral grounds such as indecency and offensiveness, blasphemy, and anything considered prejudicial to state security (de Lange 1997:20,25). A bias towards Afrikaner interests is made clear in the first section of the Publications Act which, as de Lange (1997:17) explains “states that the function of the law is to uphold the Christian way of life” so artists like Mbatha and Nkosi were perhaps able to avoid censure on political grounds by reproducing biblical imagery in their work in a way that incorporates accepted Christian principles.

Black artists and writers were at greater risk of censorship because they were presumed to appeal to a possibly volatile black audience, as Christopher Merrett (1994:80) explains: “Whereas white writing evoked protest, that of blacks was in danger of inspiring action.” In 1978 the Publication Act was amended and Kobus van Rooyen was appointed Chair of the Publications Appeal Board in 1980. He broadened the censorship policy by moving away from a vaguely identified standard of the ‘average South African’ reader who, as Merrett (1994:81) points out “was automatically seen as white and male”. Instead he proposed the consideration of a “probable reader” of a work

which meant that from the 1980s onwards there was a greater degree of latitude dependent upon the target audience. Many white artists were working within the rarefied circuit of galleries and universities, with a presumably fairly restricted audience which could allow for greater freedom of expression and less probability of censure (or censorship). This could be one reason for the greater freedom of expression that is shown in works like Victor's, which display overt criticism of state power demonstrated through satirical references to Christian iconography.¹¹ Victor's work, however, has always been provocative on many levels with little consideration for either public sensibilities or the constraints of state, as seen in *The Problem with being a God These Days* (1987: Fig.2.15).

In Victor's work the Christian church, to a large extent, is seen as legitimising the Calvinist patriarchal regime espoused by the Nationalist party. Her approach allows for the location of areas of exclusion in accepted theological practice that accommodate various injustices and the exclusion of human rights. Ironically, by criticising the theological message in religious imagery to raise awareness of the need for social transformation, Victor is following a fundamental strategy of liberation theology which, as Althaus-Reid (2000:5) explains, "needs to be understood as a continuing process of recontextualisation, a permanent exercise of serious doubting in theology". Rather than accepting and re-using the religious message, therefore, Victor's drawing, *The Problem with being a God These Days*, parodies religious imagery for political purposes, and thus partakes in actively seeking out points of dissidence in Foucault's

¹¹ This does not mean that white artists were immune from censorship however, as evidenced in the case where the Nationalist Government intervened to withdraw two of Paul Stopforth's seemingly innocuous small graphite drawings that had been selected, with the work of other artists, to represent South Africa at the Valparaiso Biennial International Exhibition in 1981. The drawings were part of the series discussed above depicting Biko's damaged hands and feet ensuing from his torture and death in detention. Stopforth renamed them *Steve Biko* and *We Do It*, to ensure that, as Shannen Hill (2005:18) points out, the Chilean viewers would be cognisant of South Africa's culpability. The reason given for their withdrawal was their political content which the department did not wish to promote or finance overseas (Williamson 1989:112). The expected audience in this case would be international and possibly powerfully influential critics of South African politics and the titles of the works pointed too clearly to the South African government's abuse of human rights. Stopforth was asked to change the titles and instead he chose *Requiem for Allende I and II* which related them to the murder of a popular Chilean president during the 1973 coup that instated Augusto Pinochet as the country's leader. The South African Department of Education who was funding the South African contingent then decided that this would be offensive to the hosts, so despite the title change the works were still withdrawn, mainly because their human rights content was considered too political (Hill 2005:18). The banning in this case was not due to any form of blasphemy or criticism of the religious connotations of these images, but was purely a political decision to maintain an acceptable international profile for the South African Government.

web of power relations. It blatantly displays a critical response to the underlying power structures of organized religion and its connection with the political manipulations of patriarchal regimes. In a personal interview with me, Victor (2006a) stated that this particular image was influenced by a visit to Europe the previous year during which she was granted an audience with the Pope.¹² Her overriding impression of material wealth, pomp, ceremony and power that she encountered in Europe, underpinned by ecclesiastical and patriarchal regimes, entrenched her antipathy to organised patriarchal structures of control. In particular she abhorred the near godlike status of authority figures such as the Pope, who appears in her images not as the Pope, per se, but as any corrupt symbol of earthly authority (Victor 2006a). In this image Victor has presented him as a bloated, ludicrous, semi-naked patriarch with the face of John Vorster. His halo is made from the insignia of the South African Police force, who reinforced and maintained Vorster's political rule, emphasising the conflation of state and religious power. The police insignia is also floating in the upper register on the left encircling an anonymous face with a hand that is raised in blessing, posing as the traditional synecdochical head of God in heaven, which is a familiar image in Early Christian and Renaissance Art.

Heavenly power looks suitably onerous in its manifestation as black thunderclouds and rain falling on a blighted landscape while the oblivious John Vorster is ensconced precariously atop his ivory tower in the foreground. He is aligned with the altitude and viewpoint of the God on the left hand side, inferring the alienation of those in power and their lack of interest towards their subjects below. The cloak of stars also positions him as a figure naturally entrenched in the firmament and elevated from earthly matters. The tower is ringed by guns and grotesquely twisted bodies that perform the function of both isolating and protecting the demi-god from the oppressed masses. A rose is tucked into his chest in a parody of the flaming heart of Christ in Catholic imagery and at the same time reminiscent of the corsage habitually donned by Vorster for his public appearances.¹³ The traditional icon of a lamb held protectively by the saviour has

¹² Victor (2006a) explains that as part of her European trip she visited a relative who worked for the Swiss Guard at the Vatican. He was able to arrange for her to join a group of visiting dignitaries and take part in an audience with the Pope in his private apartments.

¹³ Victor (2007) worked from photographs of John Vorster for this drawing and noticed that both he and other men in power in the Nationalist Party at the time often wore a carnation in their buttonholes. She found this rather soft and feminine touch incongruous in the light of their rigid and often violent enforcement of inhuman policies and power structures.

been replaced by a dog with protruding tongue and wild eyes which digs its nails into the fleshy matrix of his naked thigh. He is presented as a corrupt symbol of earthly authority embodied in corpulent, decadent male flesh demonstrating his grotesque distended body as a product of overindulgence and inertia. Vorster's facial expression is the antithesis of a benevolent, concerned saviour. His lip is raised on one side in a sneer and his eyes peer through swollen lids as if the ugliness of both expression and exaggerated features visibly represent the rotting misshapen mind they harbour.¹⁴ Such a critical appropriation of religious reference presages a shift that is developed further in the approach of post-apartheid artists who often employ such imagery in a subversive way, to question its source and to unpack certain 'truths' and expectations that are promoted by religion.

Another quasi-religious work by Victor that satirises an apartheid politician is the etching and aquatint entitled *Adoration of St. Eugene* (1988: Fig.2.16). The physiognomy of Eugene Terre'Blanche, a radical right-wing politician, leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging and staunch upholder of apartheid, is accurately depicted. He is placed on a podium with phallic microphones as if he is at a press conference, but is dressed in a corset instead of his ubiquitous safari suit, and sprouts ludicrously small wings from his shoulders. The wings are held up by two pieces of string so they can appear functional, metaphorically referring to the tenuous support and small credibility of Nationalist government policies that supported an entire regime. The extreme distortion of his gestures and stance, as well as that of his acolytes, turns this image into a parody of both political fervour and religious ecstasy. The effects of his policies are seen in the landscape vignettes on either side of the central group where a turbulent firmament, blasted earth and maimed survivor can be seen, echoing the apocalyptic background scene in *The Problem with being a God These Days*. Victor's parody undermines the political leaders of the late 1980s; a viewer can look at these images and laugh while simultaneously feeling appalled at the truth of what they represent. The conflation of politics and religion is deliberate as one is upheld and legitimised by the other during the apartheid regime. There is no longer acceptance and

¹⁴ Victor (2006b) has said that she was fascinated by the nineteenth century 'scientific' studies of physiognomy as a physical example of intellectual and moral traits (the size and shape of the skull betokening intelligence or criminals having certain shaped features for example). A discussion of these studies, which were used to entrench racism in the nineteenth century, can be found in McClintock (1995: 49-51).

appropriation of the Christian message but now both religion and politics are put under scrutiny and depicted as wanting.

During the same year Victor also reinvented the image of a Christ who is neither an all-conquering hero nor a saviour in any sense of the word, seen in the drawing *He'll Steal More than Your Heart* (1988: Fig.2.17). The only way we identify this figure as that of Christ is by his stigmata and crown of nails/thorns. He is clutching a raw heart behind his back, and looking over his shoulder with a knowing leer. An oppressive atmosphere of death and darkness is created through the Gothic setting of church architecture, votive candles and overworked darkened surfaces with an angel of death hovering ominously above. The open wound in Christ's back is probed in a sexually suggestive way by the fingers of a grim faced matron (Madonna or Magdalene) who appears to be supporting him. Her hypnotically blank stare could infer mindless religious fervour, prompting the question 'is her mind and soul to be demanded in return for his heart?' There is neither good, hope of redemption nor salvation present in this image and Kendell Geers (1990) has described it as a climax of "*macabre psychosexual violence*".

Traditional images of Christ and Mary, particularly those from the early Renaissance onwards, adhered to a certain standard of physiognomic beauty that subscribes to the neo-Platonic ideal, equating inner goodness with outer perfection.¹⁵ This is not present in Victor's image where Christ's face appears debauched and knowing, while the Madonna figure supporting him looks positively ugly and old, certainly not the eternally youthful and beautiful Madonna found in Renaissance imagery. This work is disturbing in its entirety but the ambiguity of these figures and their lack of accepted religious attributes render them iconoclastic. This image could function as an allegory of the moral turpitude found in an apartheid society, based on treachery, theft and self-gratification, thus revealing an ugly 'truth' about South African society illustrated through the perversion of a religious 'truth'.

¹⁵ Richard Viladesau (2008:55,56) recounts Brunelleschi's condemnation of a crucifix made by Donatello because he felt it was not noble enough and Christ looked like a peasant. Brunelleschi then made another crucifix, which was deemed acceptable by both Donatello and Vasari. The point Viladesau makes is that all three artists ascribed to the premise that Christ "should be supremely beautiful". Viladesau (2008:58) goes on to explain that "His beauty was the effect of the incarnation: the overflowing of grace into Christ's physique as the sign of the spirit. This notion was reinforced by neo-Platonic thought, which saw physical beauty as an image of the soul and an impetus toward intellectual beauty, which is in turn an image of the divine".

The sexuality of Christ has been one of the most taboo topics in religious commentary and Christian thought as stated by Stephen Sapp in *Sexuality, the Bible and Science* (1976:51) and by Thomas Mathews in *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (1993:119). Rosemary Ruether, in her article “The Sexuality of Jesus” (1978:134), explains that most Christians find this subject so taboo that any consideration of it is blasphemous. One of the possible reasons for the consistency of this attitude, suggested by William Phipps in *Was Jesus Married?* (1970:38), is the fact that for many centuries the interpreters of religion have been celibate clerics. Leo Steinberg published a study on this subject entitled *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1996, originally published in 1983), which documents the ambivalence of people to any indication of sexuality, even in images of the baby Jesus. Over the years genitals have been painted over or, in sculptures, have been covered by plaster drapery or fig leaves. Such prudishness is also not attributable to a certain era or society. As Steinberg (1996:190) points out:

...it does appear that resistance to the freedoms of art is diachronic. The disfigurement of so much Renaissance painting and sculpture cannot be blamed simply on recent Comstockery, or on Victorianism, or on 18th century etiquette, or on Calvinist Puritanism, or on the bigotry that prevailed after the council of Trent. The affront from which these successive ages recoiled was deep enough to have given offense in some quarters even while these works were created.

The Ultimate Adoration (1989: Fig.2.18) by Diane Victor can be identified as an extreme example of religious iconoclasm in that it employs the ultimate icon of the Christian religion, the crucified Christ, coupled with the great taboo of religion – Christ’s sexuality, and then takes this one step further into the ultimate religious taboo of homosexuality. Victor (2006a) was inspired to address the sanitised sexuality (or lack of it) promoted by Christian teaching after an incident that occurred while visiting a church with a group of gay friends.¹⁶ One of the men remarked on the physical attractiveness of the crucified Christ, which made Victor realize that if one removed the religious taboos then this perfect body, presented with hardly any clothes on, could be viewed as a pin-up (Victor 2006a). Surprisingly there are several historical examples of the crucified Christ, which appear to be deliberately provocative in a sexualised way; one might

¹⁶ Victor made this drawing during a ten-month stay in Paris, which was the result of winning the Volkskas Atelier award in 1988.

consider for example a bronze of the crucified body of Christ from the mid seventeenth century (Fig.2.19) where the sinuous baroque curves of the figure create a stylised image of a writhing dance rather than the rictus of imminent death.¹⁷ A more extreme example of erotic attraction can be found in Georg Petel's ivory figure (c.1630-34: Fig.2.20), where not only the physical perfection of form and feature, but the attention to detail appears designed to imply sexuality.¹⁸ Christ's elegantly shaped and positioned legs hardly appear to be supporting his dead weight. Delicate veins are visible on his lower abdomen, and the convolutions of the loincloth, which barely covers the genital area, appears to be precariously slipping through the rope fastening as if total nakedness is imminent. The opened mouth could be gasping in '*le petit morte*' rather than physical death and the entire figure is physically idealised and erotic in every way, from the taut stomach muscles to the graceful contours of body and limbs.¹⁹

According to Robert Goss, in his book *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (2002), a homoerotic response to the represented body of Christ is fairly typical, and with such images available it is not surprising. He suggests that "Many Catholic gay youth have grown up on their knees, gazing erotically at the crucified Christ with His genitals covered and secretly wanting to lift off the loincloth and gaze erotically at those genitals" (Goss 2002:138). In a personal capacity Goss (2002:138) recounts: "Christ was an utterly desirable, bearded hunk, naked on the cross, and I entered the seminary to find union with him and make love with him." Despite a history of understanding Jesus to be celibate, as for many Christians sexuality is equal to sinfulness and Jesus was 'without sin', Goss (2002:113) notes that for fundamentalist Christians He has ironically become a model of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus Victor's representation of a sexual and homoerotic Jesus could be considered doubly blasphemous.

¹⁷ This figure is attributed to Leonhard Kern (1588-1662) a German artist from Hohenlohe. It is unusual in its extreme, almost balletic interpretation and forms part of the collection of Michael Hall.

¹⁸ This is also part of the collection of Michael Hall and was made in Germany (possibly Augsburg).

¹⁹ These examples may be the result of the Baroque striving for emotional impact that requires extreme realism, showing muscle, sinew and veins along with an idealistically beautiful victim to inspire the requisite sadness and loss in a viewer. A similar motive may be found in the plethora of good looking people starring in Hollywood movies because viewers are more likely to respond to and become emotional at the fortunes of a beautiful protagonist.

Victor's crucified figure of Christ is portrayed in a manner that seems to promote homoerotic interpretations. His facial expression, with the head tilted back rather than hanging forward in death, and the muscular tightening of his torso and fingers, might indicate sexual release rather than agony. Furthermore a male figure bending before the icon, presumably to place a votive candle in the rack below Christ, is positioned in a way that suggests fellatio. The homosexual reference is reinforced by his plastered and bandaged anus, referring to the taboos on homosexuality preached in many Christian doctrines. In the New Testament book of Romans, Paul condemns homosexual intercourse as unnatural and punishable by bodily affliction (Romans 1:26-27). Some theologians have understood this passage to identify homosexual behaviour as evidence of the depravity of fallen mankind. Joseph Fitzmyer (1993:276), for example, states: "Homosexual behaviour is the sign of human rebellion against God, an outward manifestation of the inward and spiritual rebellion. It illustrates human degradation and provides a vivid image of humanity's rejection of the sovereignty of God the creator." This passage in Paul's epistle to the Roman's is thus the origin of a teaching against homosexual behaviour that has permeated church doctrine and subsequently seeped into secular politics.

Foucault (1990a:101) notes that sodomy was called 'the' great sin against nature and was punishable by fire well into the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century discourses on homosexuality in all its forms arose in the more secular fields of psychiatry and literature as well as jurisprudence. Church control and regulation of homosexual behaviour was therefore institutionalised and adopted by many western social and political structures as part of the discourse of power.²⁰ *The Ultimate Adoration* might be criticised by some for its lack of subtlety and it is certainly one of the most provocative of Victor's early works, but for her it points to everything that is anomalous in Christian iconography – the mixture of violence, sexuality, power and control. Victor (2006a) believes that the breaking of such strong taboos around the figure of Christ to reveal these anomalies requires an extreme approach, an overstatement, aimed at jolting the complacency of Christian aesthetics.

²⁰ Victor may also be commenting on the repressive laws that existed during the apartheid regime, where the Immorality Act of 1957 condemned homosexuality in South Africa and people who engaged in homosexual liaisons ran the risk of criminal prosecution (Bell and Valentine 1995:62).

As shown in the works discussed here by Victor, made during the last days of the apartheid regime in South Africa, her use of Christian iconography is often downright transgressive, and has sometimes even been considered blasphemous. One of the reasons for this shift is the beginning of the political move to introduce a democratic dispensation in South Africa so the need for identification with a martyr-like figurehead is no longer deemed necessary. Once art is no longer in the service of traditional liberation politics, the notion of identification of any sort becomes problematised and this forms the subject of many post-apartheid works. Liese van der Watt, in her essay accompanying the *Personal Affects* exhibition (2005:46), explains that our identities were fixed in the binaries upheld by apartheid, indeed, as discussed here, the forceful promotion of black-nationalism was a recurring agenda in politicised artworks. Van der Watt (2005:46) goes on to point out, however, that identity now is fluid and may be actively claimed or discarded at will.

Such freedom allows us to question the structures that once upheld those identities and the social forces that exert pressure on us to conform. Thus a black Christ and saviour figure can be morphed into a gay pin-up by Diane Victor in *The Ultimate Adoration*, as early as 1989, or turned into a metaphorical commentary on the mechanisms of state power in *Commune: suspension of disbelief* by Wim Botha in 2001 (Figs.5.8 to 5.11). Their critical approach dovetails with Foucault's (1986:88-96) call to critically investigate the particular historical conditions that result in 'truths' and values underpinning our society today, as a necessary step towards re-inventing our position for the future. In an era of questioning, and an era of enormous social change, it is probably unsurprising that one of the socio-political regulatory structures to come under investigation is that of Christianity. As we have seen, at the outset it was one of the formative discourses to legitimise colonialism and inform certain policy decisions in the colonies, and ultimately was to underpin the apartheid political regime.

Christine Dixie's art made during the transitional era of South African politics

The shift away from appropriating religious imagery in order to promote a political agenda, and towards a criticism of societal ideologies upheld through religious teaching, can also be identified in images from the Old Testament made just prior to the first democratic elections held

in South Africa. Christine Dixie created a series of etchings in 1992 and 1993 for her Master's degree that question notions of culturally entrenched gendered power relations associated with the gaze.²¹ Her inspiration and source material comes from Gothic and Renaissance images of biblical women²² but the narratives are recontextualised by Dixie to reveal their patriarchal bias (Dixie 1993:29). In *Still the Gilt Frame Holds* (1991: Fig.2.21), for example, a figure identified as Eve by the snake wound around her and the apple in her hand, stands in a glass box as if she is on display. Eve is surrounded by onlookers who appear to be morally condemning her; some dressed in richly patterned and jewelled church robes as a contrast to her nakedness. Eve is stereotypically seen as the evil, naked woman,²³ in contrast to the ideal Virgin Mary who is nearly always clothed to indicate her sacred purity, the only exception being when her breast is exposed to feed the Christ child.²⁴

Although Eve stands in the centre of a dense group of people in the middle ground, the glass box places her apart, as if she is a work of art and therefore a suitable candidate for aesthetic consideration and judgement. Dixie points to the frame as a significant site of meaning and ideological construction and says:

...a woman's identity is framed by the abundance of images that define femininity. She is framed because she experiences herself as an image. She is forced to choose an image of femininity within certain cultural boundaries. She plays out the role of both viewed object and viewing subject, forming and judging her image against cultural ideals (Dixie 1993:28,29).

This etching comments on the patriarchal gaze and the sense of judgement inherent in that construct. Susan Bordo (1995:166) explains that the history of disciplining and 'normalising' the female body as a strategy of social control is possibly the only form of gender oppression that

²¹ Dixie's body of work was exhibited in 1993 under the title of *The Gendered Gaze* at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town.

²² Dixie (2008) explains that her father is a priest so her interest in religious imagery is very personal, and functions as a way for her to work through the church teachings that she was raised with, and to understand how they impact on her as a woman in South Africa.

²³ The symbolism and associations of Eve are discussed in more depth in Chapter Three.

²⁴ The delicate balance between sacred and profane in images of the Madonna Lactans is discussed in detail by Megan Holmes (2001) "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art."

has been exercised “across age, race, class and sexual orientation”. Stereotypes of ‘perfection’ or ‘normalisation’ in women, both physical and moral, have been visually reinforced over the years through the history of art, and biblical imagery has been clearly implicated in that process. The theme of judgemental looking is identified in *Still the gilt frame holds* through contemporary advertising images of women appearing in the collar of the man’s robe in the foreground. The juxtaposition of this woman and Eve implies that the power of ‘the gaze’ has not been diminished in contemporary society and women still constantly hold themselves up to scrutiny and judgement against a set of patriarchally defined ‘norms’ to which they will never quite conform. One of these norms is the thin model physique used ubiquitously in the advertising and fashion industries that is referred to in the collar and which becomes a metaphor for all indications of imperfection in women, both physical and moral.

Rosemary Betterton (1996:131) draws upon Bordo’s argument that “production of a ‘normal’ body is one of the central disciplinary strategies within our society”.²⁵ The ‘normal’ body is of course a myth, a virtually unobtainable ideal with vital statistics determined by a specific culture to suit specific fashion trends. Betterton suggests that male fear of the female body could be seen as one of the reasons for this emphasis on visual bodily control. The ideal of a slim body in contemporary culture reflects a moral and social desire to control the margins of the body – one could say to ‘frame’ the body appropriately. The attainment of this ideal results in the aesthetic acceptability of the female body; the failure thereof means that bodily excess is seen as a reflection of moral (and mental) instability. A bite of fattening food becomes as morally iniquitous as Eve’s bite of the apple. In her discussion of this problem Bordo (1988:93) says:

Plato, Augustine, and most explicitly, Descartes provide instructions, rules, or models of how to gain control over the body, with the ultimate aim of learning to live without it. That is: to achieve intellectual independence from...its illusions, to become impervious to its distractions, and most importantly to kill off its desires and hungers.

This doctrine has permeated contemporary western society so that control over physical desires, such as the desire for food, is confused with power by many women. A thin body is seen as

²⁵ Betterton is paraphrasing Bordo’s argument from “Reading the Slender Body” (Bordo 1995: 185-212).

evidence of self-control over the earthly prison of the 'corrupt body', and is accorded the status of a spiritual reward. Alternatively the body 'sculpted' through exercise can also become, in the words of Lynda Nead (1997:10), "a symbol of containment".²⁶ Although Dixie's Eve does not appear to be overweight she is obviously the subject of critical scrutiny resulting in an unfavourable judgment, if the expressions of the onlookers are analysed. The snake closely wound around her indicates her collusion in original sin and, like the apple, demonstrates this moral weakness. As a 'framed' work of art she is judged aesthetically and as a naked 'evil' temptress she is judged morally. Criteria for these judgments reside within patriarchal discourses that have been conceived of and upheld by both church and state working symbiotically to conserve their control over society.

Dixie inverts the notion of the 'gaze' in subsequent works such as *Bathsheba: looking on from a secret space* (1992: Fig.2.22) and *Potiphar's wife: pursuing his mirage* (1992: Fig.2.23). Dixie has selected female protagonists who, like Eve, are identified in the Bible with sex and sin. Bathsheba is an adulteress who conceives King David's child after he spies on her bathing and is overcome by lust (2 Samuel 11:2-4). In the visual tradition of church imagery, however, in images such as those by Sebastiano Ricci or Rubens, she is a vain woman who purposely displays her body thus tempting David to betray his conscience (in the tradition of Eve). David was not punished by God for the adultery but was ultimately punished for having Bathsheba's husband killed to avert a scandal; so the sin of succumbing to lustful temptation was seen as the root cause of all David's subsequent woes.

The Bible describes Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39. 7-12) in a one-dimensional way as a quintessential evil temptress, and Joseph, unlike David, as the man who is morally strong enough to resist her; so man, in this case, is given the moral high ground and ultimately rewarded with position and wealth. Sexual freedom of choice is thus problematised and these stories in their original manifestation become cautionary tales to reinforce compliance and to delineate acceptable male and female roles and sexual behaviour in a patriarchal society.

²⁶ See Lynda Nead's (1997:8-10) discussion of Mapplethorpe's photograph of Lisa Lyon (1983) regarding the 'framing' of the body and bodily perfection through exercise.

In Dixie's reworking of these stories Bathsheba is shown glancing to the left, through an opened window at David bathing; an ironic inversion of the biblical story. Potiphar's wife is one of the few examples in the Bible where a woman is in control of her desire and her sexuality, however in Dixie's etching her gaze, like that of Bathsheba, is furtive and sidelong. Nevertheless it is the woman's controlling gaze that directs a viewer's attention towards the male subject. In both images the woman is clothed and active while the male is naked and passively reclining, overturning traditional expectations. As in *Still the gilt frame holds*, the emphasis here is on the history of power relations between men and women. Dixie has fragmented the spaces they inhabit, using architectural divisions and patches of colour, to create a discontinuous narrative that opposes the patriarchally constructed notion of heroic historical continuity. They are small, intimate, private fragments of discovery rather than the coherent elements of 'God's grand plan' that is inexorably unfolding in biblical histories.

Another image by Dixie of the David and Bathsheba tale, *Ricci's 'Bathsheba bathing': as though the present was a spectator* (1993: Fig.2.24), refers directly to the visual tradition in art history of woman as temptress, and attempts to invert this by focussing on the woman's gaze as a "source of subversion" (Dixie 1993:60). Ricci's original version (1725: Fig.2.25) shows a virtually naked Bathsheba in the centre of the image surrounded by fawning attendants. The gaze can be identified as a central issue here because she gazes at her own reflection in a mirror, held by one attendant to the left, while all the others are gazing at her, allowing the viewer (who is by implication identified with David) uncontested access to her body. Bathsheba's expression indicates that she is rather pleased with her reflection so there is a suggestion of both exhibitionism and the sin of vanity in this rendering of the event, thereby implying her culpability in the temptation of David. The pictorial space and all depicted activity is coherently centred around the body of Bathsheba unlike Dixie's version where, as in her previously discussed works, the space is divided by architectural barriers and the protagonists are situated a-centrally. Bathsheba is enclosed in the upper left register of the image and looks back at the viewer while pointing to herself indicating that she is, in Dixie's (1993:60) words, "aware that she has been set up as an image to be looked at". The two large figures in the right foreground, looking at Bathsheba, are both male and female. While the male stares directly, the female only glances from an oblique angle with an anguished expression on her face, to indicate the

difficulties of fulfilling the roles of both viewing subject and viewed object (Dixie 1993:60). The foreground figures are watching the historical construction of a woman's identity from the present (as indicated in the title) so by implication art can now self-reflexively consider its collusion in helping to promote such unquestioned 'truths' about male and female identity.

Dixie (1993:39) chose these and the other stories in her series of prints to explore the male/female relationships in each tale.²⁷ She points out that the women have been used as a vehicle for moralising both by the church and in subsequent depictions by artists. They are presented one dimensionally as the passive motivation for male sin and are powerless to control their fate. In her images they peep surreptitiously from behind screens and windows, or they look sideways in anxiety, to highlight the problematic nature of women who control the gaze. Dixie (1993:12) notes that "The relations of power in looking are so embedded in social and cultural forms that even when roles are reversed the relations of power are not so easily changed". Hence one finds the inclusion of a sidelong look rather than a bold and uncontested stare.

Dixie is referring here to the psychologically based discourse on the gaze that was promulgated by Laura Mulvey in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in 1975. Mulvey (1989:21,22) differentiates between a fetishistic scopophilic gaze which idealises the object and a voyeuristic gaze which has links to sadism as it takes pleasure in "ascertaining guilt...asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness." The fetishistic gaze implies a direct stare but the voyeuristic gaze is more furtive and surreptitious, allied to the activities of a peeping Tom or a spy, a gaze that is searching for evidence. Hence the sidelong looks of Dixie's protagonists who appear to be aware of the illicit nature of their looking while still being subjects themselves, of an outside, voyeuristic, judgemental gaze.

Dixie's images indicate a history of power struggles between men and women in which both church and state are complicit, but which only becomes relevant as subject matter for artists in South Africa as the demands for political art making in the resistance against apartheid wane.

²⁷ The other relationships investigated by Dixie are between Samson and Delilah, Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and Adam and Eve.

The complexities of South African society under apartheid tended to marginalise Feminist content in art, partly because it was identified with white, middle class, western ideals, and labelled elitist. In a country where the majority of the population were dispossessed and oppressed both socially and politically, cultural activities were often biased towards activism, especially in the late 1970s. As Marion Arnold (2005:18) states:

Even [women] artists who disengaged themselves from direct socio-political commentary created artworks that refer obliquely to local circumstances and the inflections given to female creativity by the paralysing weight of racial identity, racist institutions and patriarchal authority.

Arnold goes on to explain that gender issues were notably absent from current political and social debates and it was not until the 1980s that gender began to emerge as a significant subject for cultural production (Arnold 2005:18,19). Nelson Mandela was released from prison on 11 February 1990 and with his release the end of the apartheid era was in sight. This was the catalyst for a shift of emphasis in the oeuvre of many South African artists from liberation politics to the constraints that society imposes on individuals, so issues such as gender, sexual orientation and the construction of identity (which would include racial identity) are embraced as legitimate subjects for interrogation in the move towards a post-apartheid era.

Conclusion

In conclusion, apartheid era artists like Mbatha and Stopforth ironically treated the Christian message with a certain amount of reverence by appropriating religious doctrine as a vehicle for 'struggle' propaganda. During the last few years of apartheid and the 'transition phase', however, white artists used their greater freedom to provocatively critique the fundamental role of religion and Christianity as a mechanism of control over the population, by using biblically inspired imagery as a vehicle for subversion. As Foucault (1986:88-96) maintains, we must first expose the fact that such controls are still firmly in place before we can move beyond them.

Since 1994 when the new democratic regime was ushered in, there has been a sense of anticipation in South Africa, a belief that we are on the verge of positive change with a dispensation that is based on equality and justice. Change is not so easy to institute, however, as

Arnold (2005:24) points out: “Promises can be made and paper constitutions can be printed, but for social transformation to occur, attitudes have to change.” Art is arguably a catalyst for such change. Artworks are able to raise awareness of entrenched attitudes and historical injustices that are overlooked because they have become ingrained in the nation’s psyche until they are accepted as the norm. By manipulating the emotive content of religious iconography and revealing the historical conflation of state and religion, the examples to be discussed in this study could impact on the struggle against complacent acceptance of the status quo. Christian dogma has pronounced definitively on the ordering and control of human behaviour, from identity, to sexuality to politics; yet each facet of existence, or ‘node of power’ in Foucault’s web of power relations, is challenged by the satiric/parodic inversions of Christian imagery encountered in the following chapters of this study; beginning with the biblical myth of humankind’s origin and the introduction of ‘original sin’.

CHAPTER THREE

Adam and Eve

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sexuality of Christ has become possibly the greatest taboo in religious doctrine. However it is not only the sexuality of Christ but sexuality in general that has been regulated by the church in an attempt to exert control over the populace: the origin of this form of control lies in the story of Adam and Eve. Foucault (1990a:24) explains the necessity to regulate sexuality and contain it within official discourse as a manifestation of the mechanisms of religious and state control: “Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures; it had to be taken charge of by analytical discourses.” Here state and church combined to regulate the masses. The church instituted procedures that ensured the populace could be monitored, through the documentation and regulation of events like birth rates, both legitimate and illegitimate, marriage with its inevitable property and wealth disposal, fertility and the resultant size of the population and what that might entail in terms of land and agricultural requirements. This was considered so vital to state management that control of sexuality was attempted through moral and religious means and fiscal measures, leading to specifically delineated behaviour in both economic and political spheres. The far reaching ramifications of this control can be seen in Foucault’s (1990a:26) statement that “In time these new measures would become anchorage points for the different varieties of racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”. Working in light of this perception, I investigate the implications of the Adam and Eve story and the religious, social and political controls that are reinforced through historical examples of both art and discourse. The historical version is countered by re-interpretations of Adam and Eve in contemporary examples of art, showing how such controls can be foregrounded and undermined through parody.

A Christian doctrinal context of original sin

The history of ecclesiastical attitudes to sexuality lies in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When first Eve and then Adam ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil they became aware of their sexuality, ashamed of their nakedness, and made fig leaf aprons

to cover themselves (Genesis 3:7). Augustine, in *The City of God* which was written in 413-26, pointed out that the aprons covered their genitals rather than their mouths or hands that actively committed the deed. “From this he reasoned that the knowledge they acquired was of an inner force, which he called *epithymia* (concupiscence). It affects all areas of life, he wrote, but particularly the sexual act, which cannot be performed without passion” (Warner 1983:54).

Steinberg in his book on the sexuality of Christ (1996:226) considers Augustine’s role in foregrounding the problem of evil in Christianity. Augustine decries views suggesting that evil was introduced by a “dark equivalent counterforce” and instead “attributes the persistence of evil to the just vengeance of an offended, all powerful God” (Steinberg 1996:227). This refers mainly to the general wretchedness of mankind but there is a link to sexuality as a manifestation of God’s retribution. Augustine suggests that in reprisal for mankind’s rebellion God turned his original blessing of “the great function of procreation” into bestial, irrational lust. The evidence of this was an involuntary erection when Adam saw the naked Eve (Augustine 1950:14.22). “Libidinous stirrings were instilled as a punishment, their manifestations designed to indict man by the testimony of his own body” (Steinberg 1996:227). Goss (2002:143) notes that Christian discourse therefore promoted the negative implications of desire/pleasure in order to “exclude it from social practice”. The reasons for this are mostly due to expediency as explained by Foucault (1980:191):

These two options, that sex is at the heart of all pleasure and that its nature requires that it should be restricted and devoted to procreation, are not of Christian but of Stoic origin; and Christianity was obliged to incorporate them when it sought to integrate itself in the State structure of the Roman Empire in which Stoicism was virtually the universal philosophy. Sex then became the code of pleasure.

Steinberg (1996:227) sums up the consequences of both the rebellion and religious interpretation of this succinctly:

For a thousand years, if not longer, this patristic incrimination of sex remained orthodox doctrine. All human wretchedness derives from the scourge of rebellious unreason, whose primal symptom is the sexual drive, ever manifest in the unruliness of the genitals, the body’s memento of Adam and Eve’s first

disobedience. It is in this sense that sexuality becomes hideously central to Augustine and to the doctrinal system he shaped.

The biblical punishment for Adam and Eve was their expulsion from the garden and ultimately death, so sexuality, sin and death become conflated, in church doctrine. The fourth century patriarch of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom, notes that as a result of their disobedience “they lost the happy life, beauty and honour of virginity...For where there is death, there too is sexual coupling; and where there is no death there is no sexual coupling either” (O’Faolain and Martines 1973:138).

Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1505-1510: Fig.3.1) is one of numerous historic examples of the visualisation of this doctrine. The left hand panel shows Eve being presented to Adam (sometimes known as the marriage of Adam and Eve). Even in Eden and in the presence of a Christ/God figure who sanctions their union, however, the presage of sin can be found in the foreground animals, some of whom display monstrous characteristics (three heads on a bird for example) and the first indication of death entering the world shown by the cat who has killed a mouse.¹ The reason for this is explained by Wolfgang Kayser (1981:32) who describes the left-hand panel of the triptych as “representing the creation of woman in Paradise – which the painter regards as the birth of evil (*vide* the crescent, symbol of heresy, on top of the fountain)”. Bosch created a central panel that reinforced the connection between evil, sex and death. Identified with sexuality and earthly pleasure, in some art historical texts this panel is even titled “The Garden of Lusts” (Kayser 1981:32,33). There is a fornicating couple on the central axis of the image contained within the fountain structure and all around them the inversion of scale and order indicate the consequences of their deed. The initial indications of disturbance of the natural order, that was seen below Adam and Eve in the first panel, is magnified exponentially in subsequent panels so in the central panel “a frightful mixture of mechanical,

¹ The application of moral judgement to physical traits has a long history but reaches its apex in the work of Hieronymus Bosch where monsters and deviations from the ‘normal’ body proliferate and are indicative of a breakdown of the natural order imposed by the laws of God. This Christian framework, prevalent in sixteenth century Netherlands, defines the ontological status of the ‘normal’ or encultured human body within the realm of what is right or ‘good’. Monstrous manifestations, therefore, represented an indication of man’s inability to live a structured existence within the enculturation imposed by the laws of the church. The encroaching breakdown of divine order is signified by Bosch’s increasingly transmogrified bodies and unnatural inversions that escalate in deviations from the norm as they progress across his triptychs; leading ultimately to the complete chaos of his Hell panels.

vegetable, animal and human elements is represented as the image of our world, which is breaking apart.” (Kayser 1981:33). Of course the end result is hell, which is depicted on the right-hand panel.

In the biblical story, Adam was blamed equally for his disobedience and punished equally with banishment from the Garden of Eden. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (1993:492) indicate that the shifting of blame to Eve alone can be seen in the light of a displacement of the ancient tradition of a mother Goddess with a patriarchal God. Marina Warner in her book *Alone of all her sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976:58) explains that “For the Fathers of the church, after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind.” Eve’s subsequent vilification is seen in the following quote from Tertullian:

Do you not realize, Eve, that it is you? The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world. Guilty you must bear its hardships. You are the devil’s gateway. You desecrated the fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you softened up with your cajoling words the man against whom the devil could not prevail by force. The image of God, Adam, you broke him as if he were a plaything. *You* deserve death, and it was the son of God who had to die! (Warner 1976:58).

This apportioning of blame was so widely accepted that in Renaissance times, when Michelangelo was painting the snake (Satan) in Eden on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, he made it look as if it was a rather muscular woman (Fig.3.2). Warner (1976:58) notes that “The fury unleashed against Eve and all her kind is almost flattering, so exaggerated is the picture of women’s fatal and all-powerful charms and men’s incapacity to resist”. The ‘sin’ of sexuality was therefore also largely considered a function of womanly nature and the emphasis on purity, sexual abstinence and preferably virginity was promoted in church doctrine to counter this.

So strong was the desire to promote asexuality in women that the church valorised and immortalised those women who died to protect their purity, many examples of which can be found in Renaissance paintings of saints. Saint Lucy, for example, was depicted by Francesco del Cossa (1473: Fig.3.3) with submissively downcast eyes and a flawless face set against a gold background to evoke holiness, with an elaborate filigree halo as a reward for her defence of her

virginity. The pair of eyes on a flower stem, held in her left hand, refers to her martyrdom. Committed to a brothel and condemned to be violated because she rejected offers of marriage, her body remained miraculously undefiled. She subsequently had her eyes torn out (or tore them out herself depending on which version one reads) and was executed for her recalcitrance (Morgan 1994:154). According to the Catholic website she is now, appropriately, the patron saint of blindness (Catholic Online 2008) and, according to Lawrence Cunningham's *A Brief History of Saints* (2005:149), the patron saint of eye diseases. Whatever her role and whatever the details surrounding her story, the unchanging 'truth' is that she was martyred and is now sainted because she chose to remain asexual.

Saint Agatha is shown at the moment of her torture in Sebastiano del Piombo's *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha* (1520: Fig.3.4). She too rejected a suitor to preserve her virginity, which she had consecrated to Christ, and was sent to a brothel for punishment. She resisted the sexual demands of the brothel keeper and was punished by torture on the rack after which both of her breasts were torn off. She was then roasted over live coals and subsequently died in jail (Morgan 1994:30-31). This repeated emphasis on maintaining the purity of women in church dogma is explained as a necessary expiation for the sins of Eve by Warner (1976:68): "Through the renunciation of the flesh, a woman could relieve a part of her nature's particular viciousness as the Virgin Mary had done through her purity." This is the inception of an ideology that identifies woman's sexuality as sinful and 'abnormal'.

The gender based distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' drew on the writings of Plato who began a philosophical discourse, further developed by Aristotle, of the binary distinction between matter and form, body and reason. Plato saw the body/matter as a prison for the soul/reason or mind and, in a hierarchical system of the body, he believed that its physical presence should be controlled or ruled by the mind. Aristotle developed this dichotomy between form (from the mind) and matter (body) by relating it to the reproductive process. The mother, he believed, provided the formless matter, which could be actively created into a human being by the father. Thus matter/body is related to negative, passive aspects and to femininity at the same time, and reason/form becomes male and positive, as well as active.

Diana Swancutt (2003:197) explains that in Greco-Roman medical texts the human physique was constructed on a multigendered or single sex model with man/male at the apex rather than two distinct genetically differentiated sexes. Male attributes would be “physical and political strength, rationality, spirituality, superiority, activity, dryness, and penetration. Females/women, on the other hand, were said to embody humanity’s negative qualities (physical and political weakness, irrationality, fleshliness, inferiority, passivity, wetness, and being penetrated)”. All bodies were thought to contain both male and female elements and the ‘perfect’ masculine body required constant vigilance and care to maintain its level of perfection. Imperfect males were identified in androgynes, dominatrices and effeminate that manifested their imperfections physically through fat, breasts, menstruation, weak sperm, or inverted/internal penises (Laqueur 1990:25-62).² Thus, as Swancutt (2003:198) explains: “The Greco-Roman cosmic hierarchy conjoined biological sex with gender expression, and defined sex/gender socio-politically as the natural, hierarchically-inscribed interrelation of masculinity or femininity (superior/inferior), societal status (more/less powerful), and sex role (penetrator/penetrated).”

This notion, as explained by Elizabeth Grosz (1994:5-6), has had enormous impact on the formation of gendered thought and identity. It has formed the basis of the science versus nature, or reason versus feelings dichotomy, which has devalued femininity and resulted in a female body that is a foil to the ‘normal’ male body. Carol Jean Vale (2003:xii), links this theme to the Genesis story of Eden in her foreword to *Balancing the Scales* when she notes:

Confident in the superiority of their intellect and will power, many men fear that which has the capacity to subvert the mind and subject it to matter. Instead of owning the complexity of their own emotional life, their drives and passions, men blame women for seducing them. The story of Adam and Eve is replayed constantly throughout history...Indeed, there is a subtle inference latent in the Eden myth that man succumbs to moral concupiscence **only** if he is provoked by woman...Man must then control woman lest he be controlled by her.

Female sexuality has therefore been a particular aspect evoking censure and requiring ‘normalisation’ through aesthetic control in both religious and secular art. In religious iconography, as explained, this is demonstrated by ascetic images of female saints, or the Virgin

² Ancient physiognomists such as Herophilus, Hippocrates and Galen conceived of women anatomically as men with imperfect/internal genitalia (Hanson 1990:309-38, 390-91).

Mary who are portrayed as serene, asexual, modest and beautiful women, untouched by time or emotion to emphasise their spirituality. Several contemporary South African artists have approached this particular aspect of religious teaching through their re-presentation of the original ‘sinners’, Adam and Eve, to raise awareness of the prescriptive and constraining role of women proposed by the church. There are also implications raised by Adam’s role in original sin, which allow for artists to question constructs about appropriate masculinity, both in religious terms and in relation to South African societal expectations. The discussion below engages with historical, social and religious constraints on the construction of contemporary South African identities: male and female, black and white.

A feminist agenda for Adam and Eve

Diane Victor has approached the stereotype of the ‘fallen woman’ in her Adam and Eve inspired diptych entitled *Strip* and *Teased* (1999: Figs.3.5 and 3.6). These two images, particularly when viewed together, counter the notion of Eve’s inability to redeem herself, by inverting the tradition of representing women as morally incapable of positive action. The Platonic notion of women as passive, negative, embroiled in feelings and sensibility, is denied. *Eve/Strip* is represented as active and positive, while *Adam/Teased* is a being subsumed by emotion and uncontrolled sexuality. It is possibly for this reason that many people may not be aware of these images as a diptych. The female figure (*Strip*) has been copiously discussed within the framework of feminist discourses on the integrity of the body and abjection and she has been reproduced in newspaper and magazine articles, while the male counterpart (*Teased*) has been consigned to obscurity and was never sold. Victor (2006b) assigns this dichotomy to the discomfort of looking at a male image with an expression of erotic ecstasy and an erection, and Michael Smith (2006:49) concurs, explaining that “as with Hollywood films, audiences will consent to consume graphic images in artworks only if a moral directive remains discernible. Pure indulgence in plethoric grotesque remains an acquired taste”.

The “plethoric grotesque” in *Teased* can be identified in the skin that is ‘teased’ away from his neck displaying his muscles. The result resembles a decorative collar or ruff that might be worn by a circus clown, making *Teased* look faintly ridiculous. The resulting pink bloodstain, an

ironically misshapen halo behind his head, indicates that he is presented, in feminist terminology, as ‘abject’³ because his bodily integrity has been breached. His abjection suggests a lack of control, which is reinforced by his closed eyes and a body that is displayed both internally and externally for the ‘scientific’ viewing gaze, which was traditionally a male prerogative. He thus takes on the powerlessness illustrated in so many representations of women in a patriarchal world in that he has been subjugated as a sexual object and has become the ‘viewed’ rather than ‘the viewer’ with his closed eyes. Particularly relevant in this instance are medical illustrations or medical anatomical models which are often eroticised in a similar way.⁴ Instead of displaying male dominance and reason his being is subsumed in eroticism, indicated by his facial expression of sexual extremis, the opened mouth, the weak supplicatory hand gesture and erect penis. He clearly demonstrates the danger of sexuality leading to death that was the curse of original sin.

Strip, on the other hand, has a slightly tarnished halo above her head and is actively pulling back her chest cavity as if to reveal the redemptive flaming heart that is displayed by Christ in Catholic traditional iconography. There is even a suggestion of shadowy flames peeping out above the folded skin. Her slightly tilted head and mournful gaze could also indicate identification with popular images of Christ. Her wound has the particular shape of a *vesica piscis* meaning ‘vessel of the fish’ in Latin.⁵ This shape is sometimes found surrounding images of the Virgin Mary in religious iconography (see, for example, Figs.3.7 and 3.8), but Jean Shinoda Bolen (1994:115-118) explains that this was an ancient symbol for the ‘Great Goddess’ (with the almond shape representing her vulva) before it became a Christian symbol. Victor’s use of this shape, therefore suggests the continuum of iconic women from the ‘Great Goddess’ to Eve to the Virgin Mary, united in a symbol of their sexuality which is manifest here in the

³ The term ‘abject’ in feminist discourse is used to refer to any matter that was once part of the body and is now removed from it – like bodily wastes, cut hair, nail clippings, tears, blood etc. in other words - that which transgresses the firm boundaries of identity. Kristeva explains this term in *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982).

⁴ The inspiration for these came from a visit to the medical museum in Vienna where, like much religious imagery, the displayed cadavers seemed to evoke both violence and sexuality (Victor 2006).

⁵ J.C. Cooper (1978:103-104) describes this form as “the ‘mystical almond’ which depicts divinity; holiness; the sacred; virginity; the vulva. It also denotes an opening or gateway and the two sides represent the opposite poles and all duality”.

abject⁶ humanity of the physical body of Eve. She does not appear to be presented for erotic display, however, particularly as her breasts have been hidden by her hands, and the muscle and flesh that fills most of her body belies any notion of sexuality through its abject qualities. She thus fails to fulfil patriarchal expectations for art to provide a desirable, whole, perfected body as an aesthetic subject for the male gaze.

Eden's forbidden tree of knowledge is inferred through a stylised backdrop of fertile growth and life, instead of the sterile white shroud that surrounds *Teased*. The tonal contrast gives *Strip* visual prominence so she appears more definite, awake and in control than her male counterpart. Her gaze at the viewer is contrasted with the closed eyes of *Teased* and, as Ruby Bogaard (2005:43) explains she is neither passive, frightened nor a suffering martyr, but an active participant in dispassionately revealing her physicality as a voluntary sacrificial gesture. She inverts not only the passive female/active male roles but, as her conflation with Christ indicates, she appears to be offering the salvation that Adam is clearly incapable of accepting. In this diptych Eve is the positive regenerative figure and Adam the weak, negative counterfoil.

The feminist emphasis in this and many of the works discussed in this study is interesting in the light of what might be termed a 'post-feminist' era. Victor, for example, has stated that she does not consider herself a feminist, yet her works display many of the strategies and concerns central to feminist art making. In terms of global theoretical discourses the 'post-feminist' era can be identified as an era in which the rights fought for by the first and second generation feminists are now supposedly in place. For example many young female students have opportunities not offered to their parents and take these rights for granted. They do not want to be identified as feminists as they see no need for militant action. Also in some cases feminism has taken on negative connotations (identified as anti-feminism) assisted by the misogyny in films such as *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* where women are seen as power-hungry, crazy/mentally unhinged, suppressors of men (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2002:290).

Within the framework of our post-apartheid South African political structure Jennifer Wilkinson, in her article "South African women and the ties that bind" (2002:345), explains:

⁶ Used in the Kristevan sense of the word.

South Africa has one of the most progressive and gender sensitive constitutions in the world, as well as the highest number of female parliamentarians, of whom several are cabinet ministers...Legislation is in place banning all forms of discrimination – including that based on gender – and, on paper at least, women have achieved the equality for which they worked so hard.

There are many doubts, however, about whether one can really describe our situation in South Africa as ‘post-feminism’. Despite the advances made politically in favour of women we still have one of the world’s worst records of violence against women and children,⁷ and there is a huge proportion of our population for whom nothing has changed. There is also a more subtle danger to the emancipation of women in our country found in our past President Mbeki’s call for an African Renaissance and a new embracing of African traditional values. Wilkinson (2002: 358,359) explains that feminism may become merely an adjunct to the renewal of African values where “there is a very real danger of a conservative interpretation of the African form of communitarianism as returning to tradition with women being persuaded to assume traditional roles of subservience in the name of preserving cultural values”. This traditional value system includes other practices that encourage outdated conceptions of women’s identity, such as paying *lobola* for a bride, the acceptance of patriarchal polygamy or believing that the primary role of a woman is to bear children.

As recently as July 2010 Pearlie Joubert (2010:8) reported in the *Mail and Guardian* that a deputation of rural women pleaded in Parliament for the removal of powers granted by the state to traditional leaders (*amakhosi* chiefs). They cited, among other problems,⁸ the abduction of pre-pubescent girls for forced marriages which is a tribal custom known as *ukuthwalwa*, the

⁷ Isak Niehaus (2005:65) notes that despite rape being one of the most under reported crimes in South Africa, 49 280 cases of rape and attempted rape were reported to the South African police in 1998. Niehaus further states that 41 percent of these victims were younger than seventeen. According to the Human Rights Watch (1995) this figure is among the highest reported for any country not at war. Rape has been identified in existing studies (such as those by Vogelmann (1990) Russel (1991,1997) Varga (1997) and Jewkes & Abrahams (2002)) as an act of power and an assertion of male dominance over women and is particularly prevalent in South African society because substantial gender inequalities persist despite constitutional decrees. These studies also point to certain masculine constructs in South African societies, which demonstrate an entrenched sense of sexual entitlement and control over women, resulting in various forms of domestic violence which is often exacerbated by the abuse of alcohol.

⁸ The other problems related to the blanket powers enjoyed by the *amakhosi*, which allowed for corruption and abuse of power in matters that would disadvantage the communities they were supposed to serve. An example cited was the desecration of sacred sites - turning them into tourist destinations for the profit of the Chief (Joubert 2010:8).

denial of land ownership for women, and the fact that women have to be represented by a man in the local courts and may not speak for themselves. This state-supported disempowerment of women shows that women in South Africa cannot afford to become complacent.⁹ In fact a disturbing counteraction to the pleas of the local people (mostly women) for the removal of this legislation is noted in the postscript to Joubert's article (2010:8) which states: "Today the National House of Traditional Leaders is making presentations to the Constitutional Review Committee asking that the Constitution be changed to do away with the elected local government and give the *amakhosi* the power to govern." Women in South Africa cannot afford to become complacent therefore, and the solution proposed by Wilkinson is that the African Renaissance must be appreciated within the forces of globalization. She says:

If women can come to see that contemporary feminism can be used to steer the African Renaissance away from conservative attempts to hijack it and towards renewal, then feminism will be able to take a lead in reconciliation as it consolidates and uses the values of communal solidarity to build the nation (Wilkinson 2002:359).

I would argue that, given South Africa's political history and present social climate, artists can justly revisit the main concerns of feminism, which is to raise awareness of inequalities and oppression based on gendered power structures. Such considerations taken into contemporary art making and framed within post-modern feminist discourses will include the awareness of racial and social differences, diversity, and constructed identities. Arnold (1996:131) proposes that this approach to eliminating injustice comes from an inherent understanding in South African contemporary society that, despite their ambivalent perceptions of feminism, patriarchy is a continued problem faced by both black and white women in South Africa:

In general, white women are persuaded that feminism denigrates their feminine sexuality; black women, that it is a foreign import which will dilute their racial heritage. None the less, in a post-apartheid society there is a growing consciousness that to be a woman is to understand womanhood on new terms,

⁹ Joubert (2010:8) notes that the traditional authorities were initially created by the South African government in 1951 through the Black Authorities Act. It was seen as a method of controlling the black rural population and has been identified as the last remaining apartheid legislation. Under Thabo Mbeki's government the *amakhosi* Chiefs were granted even more powers. As Joubert (2010:8) notes: "In 2003 the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act was promulgated, effectively entrenching the traditional jurisdictions created during the formation of the homelands, which many rural people do not recognise." Traditionalism is thus insidiously responsible for removing the freedoms that democracy should uphold.

to be able to formulate new goals, utter previously secret aspirations, and use opportunities to transcend imposed limitations (Arnold 1996:131).

Christianity is a patriarchal institution and has been incontrovertibly implicated in the control of women by promoting female submission, meekness and asexuality. Despite Victor's denial of a feminist stance, therefore, the combination of Christian imagery and feminist strategies to expose its shortcomings could legitimise a reading of her work within a feminist paradigm.

An overtly feminist approach to the suppression of female sexuality in church dogma has been taken by Majak Bredell who overturns religious restrictions by promoting the sexuality of women, in her post-Christian quasi-religious images of unashamedly sexual Goddesses and Madonnas, and also by presenting a positive image of male and female sexuality and the sexual act. In *Sacred Marriage I and II* (1997: Figs.3.9 and 3.10) we see examples of Adam and Eve in sexual congress presented as strong, equal and life affirming partnerships. An equality of both power and tenderness can be discerned that undermines the traditional division of roles and attributes that was raised as problematic in early feminism. The Platonic inspired notion of a gendered separation of nature versus culture was the framework for a first generation feminist construction of 'The Great Goddess' as a second Eve and a role model for women. She was presented as a wholesome and regenerative embodiment of emotional strength in opposition to the male attributes of reason and science but this construct, while tipping the balance of positive and negative attributes, tended to perpetuate and reinforce the notion of woman as 'other'. What can be seen in these images of mutually involved partners, however, is the breakdown of such binaries. Bredell instead promotes a post-modern approach to feminism, and presentation of two equals, male and female / God and Goddess / Adam and Eve. Along with this one can see the promotion of sexuality as positive and life-giving rather than a shameful act that must be hidden.

Bredell's images do not function as transgressive in the same way that Victor's and others might, because they ascribe to a deep religious content or spiritual dimension, albeit in direct opposition to Christian teaching. They aim to expose the prescriptive messages inherent in traditional Christian iconography. As Bredell (2009:10) states, "the figure in my work became central to a visual narrative that questions and objects to the historical and religious *placement* of women by those who assumed the authority to decide what that placement should be". Thus in Bredell's

Adam - Tree of Life, and *Eve – Tree of Life* (2009: Figs.3.11 and 3.12) the figures are presented almost identically with upraised hands in the stance of the Great Goddess, signifying the validity of her attributes for both male and female. The tree of life is entwined around Adam, ironically rooting him to the ground and nature (which is the antithesis of Platonic masculinity) while Eve's tree of life is embodied by her fertility indicated by the progeny that surround her. Both figures stand within a truncated cross, referring to the salvation of the Christian message but offering an alternative promise of immortality through procreation and fecundity. As Marija Gimbutas in *The Language of the Goddess* (2001:316) explains, the symbolism in Goddess imagery is always tied to nature and cyclical forces of life rather than a nebulous spiritual afterlife: "Immortality is secured through the innate forces of regeneration within Nature itself. The concept of regeneration and renewal is perhaps the most outstanding and dramatic theme that we perceive in this symbolism" (Gimbutas 2001:316).

Identity crisis

Conrad Botes creates a bleak alternative view of the tree of knowledge from the Garden of Eden in a sculptural piece from his 2007 exhibition - *Satan's Choir at the Gates of Heaven*.¹⁰ Botes constructed the *Tree of Knowledge* (2007: Fig.3.13) as a denuded, emasculated wooden tree, with severed branches that bear neither fruit nor leaves. The tree is painted white to emphasise its clinical sterility and the severed ends of the branches are pale fleshy pink as if there is not even enough life left in them to bleed properly. The figures below the tree are no longer Adam and Eve, but two men, possibly Cain and Abel,¹¹ the inheritors of Adam and Eve's transgression. One, shirtless, leans backwards with clenched fists and looks up at the tree in amazement, as if he can hardly believe that he has missed his opportunity to gain any kind of knowledge and understanding. The other hits his head against the trunk in frustration. This is mankind without hope, without redemption and without knowledge, man in an existential crisis, as Ivor Powell (2008:3) explains: "The spiritual stratum that Botes mines is an archaeological and largely

¹⁰ This was Botes first solo exhibition, held at the Michael Stevenson gallery in Cape Town from 3 May to 2 June 2007. Botes is well known for his graphic artworks in *Bitterkomix* which is an ongoing collaboration with Anton Kannemeyer, and this exhibition saw him take that dark humour and comic book style into alternative media like painting on glass, and sculpture.

¹¹ I have suggested Cain and Abel as these two characters play a large role in subsequent works by Botes, who sees them as agents of violence and metaphors for the depravity of mankind (Botes 2009).

decomposed mulch of broken images, holy books, and shattered votive statues - the detritus of the imagery of the Christian religion, left over when God died.” They inhabit a world without meaning; they are dysfunctional, redundant, and hopeless.

Botes, in a personal interview, explains that he makes work that responds to the conservative Afrikaans culture, the repressive patriarchal structures and Christian morals that were the defining features of a society in which he grew up (Botes 2009). However, Michael Stevenson (2007a) notes that in this particular show there is a theme of masculine identity in crisis that runs as a thread through most of the works. This is clearly evident in *Tree of Knowledge* where, despite the sense of distress indicated by their gestures, the figures themselves are surprisingly passionless in feature and appear to be merely ‘going through the motions’ all the while aware of the impotence of their angst. Their childlike proportions and blank simplicity evoke cartoon characters, reducing them to stereotypes as metaphorical representations for the crisis of white male identity in a post-modern, post-feminist, post-existential wasteland, embodied by the bleak white tree. As Powell (2008:3) notes:

Botes' symbols are cut off from their symbolic reference and the version of the world that guaranteed their meaningfulness in the first place. They are crippled and radically dysfunctional - manifesting more their own redundancy than anything else, no longer capable of transcendence, or even of saving themselves.

The dead white tree appears to make reference to the discourse of whiteness in post-colonial South Africa. It embodies the demise of apartheid - a once powerful strategy of social development that was rooted in white privilege. Both the tree and the desperate figures below it demonstrate the results of, and responses to, what Melissa Steyn (2001:155-162) identifies as loss of home, loss of legitimacy (guaranteed by skin colour), loss of autonomy, loss of honour and loss of face. These losses, to a certain degree, face many white South Africans who grew up under the apartheid system with a sense of inherent entitlement in their ideological dominance. There is a particularly strong reaction, however, from a small group of right wing Afrikaners who retain a narrow view of what Steyn (2004:71) refers to as “the organic ‘volk’” which presupposes a unified and coherent “language, race, culture, and nation”. Their ‘knowledge’ of a

God-given destiny of superiority has now been cut off and is metaphorically represented in the truncated version of the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of this tree to gain such knowledge, yet now their children are faced with an existential crisis as they impotently confront the demise of once definitive categories of right and wrong. It is not only Afrikaners who bear this guilt, however, but all white South Africans, hence the emphasis on white-skinned figures and a white tree in Botes' image. Steyn (2001:160) points to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a turning point for the demise of white self-respect and sense of historically based, God-given rightness. The stories told by the "previously voiceless" mean that "whites have to deal with having a shared positionality that wronged others, of having benefited at others' expense" (Steyn 2001:160).

The discourse of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa is thus fraught with complexities and laden with guilt. Botes' figures do not display guilt, however, as much as impotence and desperation. They appear to be acknowledging a loss of direction and power that was once their birth-right in a patriarchal Afrikaner society, as Steyn (2004:83) points out: "Post-apartheid Afrikaner 'whiteness' is characterised by a great deal of self-preoccupation." At the same time the comic book proportions give them a gently humorous mien so the presentation of race and gender in crisis is never overwhelmingly bleak, despite the referential details and joyless irony of these two figures. They are dolls, and one cannot take them seriously. The head-banger is particularly humorous with his combination of passionate gesture and deadpan expression. This blankness reflects the constraints imposed by a Calvinistic, patriarchally sanctioned repression of male emotions whose only acceptable manifestations are rage and anger, usually for war or revenge. Thus Botes allows us to reflect on the teachings of past generations, and the structures that upheld them in society, and to laugh them away, dismiss them as irrelevant and find a new way to negotiate the difficulties of the present. Perhaps the tree of knowledge is not as barren as one first thought.

Homosexuality

Tracey Rose employs post-modern strategies to address gender issues that have been reinforced by religious iconography. She subverts Christian dogma by entirely reinventing the biblical story

of creation and redemption in a series of photographic artworks entitled *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1*. The title refers to Lucifer and to Lucie – the first hominid and therefore an alter-ego of Eve, as well as to her pubic hair (fur) which indicates her role as the mother of all humankind. In Rose's story it is Lucie, rather than Adam, who is seen as the progenitor of the human race. To reinforce this pre-eminence of the first woman, Rose's retelling of biblical mythology begins with a homosexual couple who therefore cannot be responsible for the genesis of the human race. Adam and Yves in the Garden of Eden, (*Adam and Yves, BC,2003: Fig.3.14*), are apparently hiding from God after eating the fruit, as they are already adorned with fig leaves, although ironically 'God' is a small Hindu inspired statue placed innocuously under a bush as if he is hiding from them. In this image the role of woman as temptress and harbinger of original sin is humorously negated by Rose's ironic gender inversion, but her protagonists carry more serious implications. Rose, in a personal interview with me, stated that the reason for her illustrative reinvention of Christianity was to "subvert racism, homophobia and exclusion" (Rose 2009). Adam and his partner are thus both black and gay. The racial identification of these figures refers to the exclusionary nature of the pictorial tradition of western Christianity and the hegemony of whiteness. Their sexual orientation, however, is tied up with not only Christian religious taboos but also the attitude of many traditionalist African cultures towards homosexuality.

It may seem surprising that Rose considers the need to present homosexuality as a topic for subversion, particularly in view of the equality clause, expressly prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, which is written into the Bill of Rights (1996) in our South African Constitution. Benjamin Roberts and Vasu Reddy expand on South African's constitutional advantages in the introduction to their social attitudes survey carried out in 2008, entitled "Pride and Prejudice: Public attitudes toward homosexuality":

Progressive decriminalisation through law reform since the mid 1990s enabled lesbians and gay men to claim their citizenship as equal South Africans. Far-reaching judgments in respect of medical aid parity, sodomy, custody of children, adoption, insurance, immigration and inheritance have benefited lesbians and gays. A decade later, the signing of the Civil Union Act in November 2006 brought legal recognition of gay marriages, positioning the country as the first to do so in Africa and the fifth to do so internationally.

The survey itself, however, indicates that it is not possible to change entrenched attitudes merely by passing a law, and “gay and lesbian identities continue to be characterised as ‘un-African’...[which] conceals a moral and cultural view that African societies are somehow unique and therefore immune to what is perceived to be a western and European import” (Roberts and Reddy 2008). This lack of tolerance has been publicised over the years in pronouncements made by several African leaders, for example in 2010 Uganda proposed a bill in parliament to impose the death penalty for homosexual acts. Instead of condemning this suggestion our President, Jacob Zuma, proposed sending an “acknowledged homophobe” (Jones 2010), Jon Qwelane, to Uganda as South Africa’s ambassador. This decision suggests to onlookers “a tacit endorsement of the repressive stance Uganda is taking on homosexuality” (Jones 2010). Jacob Zuma has also reportedly promoted an anti-homosexual stance by stating that same sex marriages were “a disgrace to the nation and to God” (IRIN 2006) at a Heritage Day public meeting in KwaZulu-Natal in 2006. At the same meeting he stated: “When I was growing up *unqingili* [homosexuals in the Zulu language] could not stand in front of me” (IRIN 2006).

Adam and Yves thus respond not only to western interpretations of original sin and woman’s part in it, but also to the ongoing persecution of homosexuality in South African society that has led, in some instances, to violent hate crimes, such as the rape and murder of black lesbians that have been reported in Cape Town and Johannesburg from 2007 to 2009.¹² Through her humorous approach and by taking us back to the mythical origins of humankind, Rose is able to raise a sensitive issue in a way that encourages the viewer to investigate and question the validity of the origins of these social taboos.

¹² The International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission website (IGLHRC 2009) has a report on the trial of three men who gang-raped and stabbed a South African lesbian Eudy Simelane in April of 2008. Only one of the three was convicted of the murder and the report states that he showed no remorse. Moreover Monica Mbaru, IGLHRC’s African Program Coordinator, notes that she was appalled at the level of homophobia in the courtroom when she attended a hearing on the matter in July, to the extent that the Judge, Ratha Mokgoathleng, objected to the use of the word ‘lesbian’ in court. The report goes on to explain that Eudy Simelane is one of several examples of lesbian victims who were murdered execution style or by stoning, in both Johannesburg and Cape Town between 2007 and 2009, indicating a deep-rooted intolerance for homosexuality despite South Africa’s Constitutionally entrenched freedoms and rights (IGLHRC 2009).

Colonialism and exploitation

A similar sense of irreverence and humour is taken by Johannes Phokela in his 2005 work *Prozac* (Fig.3.15), which shows Adam and Eve looking anxious while a monkey with a plastic red nose hands Eve a banana. This is a post-fall scenario, as Eve is clutching an apple in one hand while both protagonists are attempting to cover their nakedness, although, unlike the previously discussed examples, this painting is not focussing on religious prurience and the restraint of sexuality. Phokela is known for his focus on racial stereotyping, colonial controls and western exploitation in Africa and these are themes that recur in this image.

Phokela works with parody, satire and irony in his re-interpretations of ‘Old Masters’ and in particular Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century paintings, so the abundant fleshiness and contrast of light skin against darkness is directly reminiscent of a painter like Rubens, for example. Suzanne de Villiers-Human (2010:33) explains that Phokela chooses oil painting, a medium entrenched in western historical values that promotes “official narratives”, to ironically produce “historical paradoxes entailing aspects of race and otherness”. Parody is used here in terms of Hutcheon’s (1985:6) “ironic inversion” to highlight the differences from the original, although ‘the original’ in *Prozac* refers to a particular lush, painterly and dramatic Baroque style of representation rather than a particular painting. Sue Williamson (2009:236) points out that Phokela’s appropriation of Baroque style is a deliberate reference to the time of the Enlightenment which saw the advent of European colonialism with “its happy marriage to modern capitalism”. Acknowledging the parodic re-use of both iconography and style, Niren Tolsi (2007:2) described Phokela’s work as “insouciant...mischievous out-takes of familiar images – humorous, yet with...visceral interrogative power...bringing new allegorical import to the old image”. Humour is therefore used to leaven the seriousness of his subject matter without diluting its impact.

While *Prozac* is not a reworking of a specific seventeenth-century painting, one becomes aware of the incongruences in this re-presentation of Adam and Eve because of their generic similarities to so many previous examples. Their penitence and shame, however, becomes parodic because it is so exaggerated, and because the usual details of context have been removed

leaving the body language and expression of the protagonists quite literally highlighted against a flat, dark ground. Phokela, in this way, foregrounds their white skin, reminding the viewer that in western tradition whiteness is seen as the originator of all present civilisation, as Adam and Eve are identified as the forefathers of mankind. The monkey, however, is reminiscent of Africa, and he proffers an African fruit to these European icons, ironically reminding the viewer that anthropologists have identified Africa, not Europe, as the cradle of mankind. Adam appears to be pleading for mercy (to whom, one wonders – is he asking the monkey’s forgiveness for his new-found knowledge of Europe’s exploitation of Africa?) as Eve holds tight to her traditional apple while straining away from the banana and its non-European implications.

The red nose on the monkey is a repeated motif in Phokela’s works and arises from an event, many years ago, when he bought a red nose from a charity organisation in England, called Comic Relief, only to discover it did not fit onto his African nose. Phokela sees this nose now as a motif for “the West’s attitude to charitable intervention in Africa” (Tolsi 2007:2) so it becomes indicative of the gulf between intention and effect, or a symbol of cultural difference. This nose enhances the monkey’s ambiguity - is he an alternative Satan or perhaps a parody of God? Or is Africa, embodied in the monkey, the plaything of God – God’s jester perhaps? He is offering fruit of another sort of knowledge that is not based in a western hegemonic framework entrenched in colonial discourse. His knowledge aims to expose the bias of this discourse, which was constructed in a comparative manner with the purpose of evaluating Africa and the African from the framework of European patriarchy, as wild, savage, and in need of the civilizing intervention of the West. It is no wonder that the white Eve attempts to spurn this enlightenment while clinging to the symbol of white knowledge systems and the hierarchies they support.

The construct of an inferior African developed from a virtual mania in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for collecting, describing, classifying and comparing the fauna, flora and even the physical traits of human beings from the colonised lands. Debates arose within the fields of science and philosophy relating to the way the human species fitted into nature, how man differed from animals and how one race of man differed from another. Man attained his superiority over animals through the power of reason, and consequently reason was the criterion for the division of humanity into a hierarchical, linear model of categorisation. Added to this was

the formal study of biological classification, firstly through skin colour, then external physiognomy and finally by relating biological features to mental and moral aspects. This passion for categorisation was bound up with racial discrimination. Sanctioned and reinforced by 'science', it created a hierarchy of humanity that had European man as its apex and the Negro race as barely a step above the apes - both physically and mentally. Coombes (2003:215) for example, notes that anthropological developments in the early twentieth century equated the Khoisan people of Southern Africa with the orangutan in particular, which was believed to be the highest form of ape. Stephen Gould (1986:294) further notes that the seventeenth-century Dutch term *Bosmanneken* or 'Bushman' could be "a literal translation of the Malay word 'OrangOutan' or 'man of the forest'". Scientific discourse therefore not only classified difference, but placed definite value judgments on 'the other' in terms of both gender and race. The European scientific community drew a direct correlation between racial physical characteristics and evolutionary development that allowed for the exercise of power over those of 'inferior' status (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:98-105).

European superiority is entrenched by this method in both moral and physical terms, with difference constructed as inferiority, and in this way texts on Africa were used to legitimise colonialism. The nature and function of colonial discourse was, therefore, never to attain an objective depiction of the other but to construct that other in a way that would sanction western intervention, control and exploitation. The monkey could either be a satirical representation of the African or is representing an African perspective of life that the Europeans are desperately trying to avoid. His forceful gesture towards the woman, accompanied by his bared teeth, signifies wildness and a lack of restraint that embodies the fears of many Europeans towards untamed, unevolved Africa and its inhabitants. The banana, according to Phokela (Kaminju 2009) "signifies banana republic, a term coined by the American author O'Henry, referring to unstable countries with large-scale unsustainable plantations". It is being offered as a consumable item to the white Eve, peeled and ready for her to bite, as a metaphor for the exploitation of Africa through the colonial imperative.

Phokela has painted fine white frames within the borders of the painting to isolate Adam and Eve in their solitary emotional anguish. Phokela (2009) notes: "We put frames on everything in our

lives. We look at things from windows, from a specific frame of mind and from a specific perspective.” The monkey is painted over the line as if he inhabits a separate reality, or embodies a separate time and point of view. He appears to be the future engaging with the past in an attempt to disturb historically entrenched patterns of thought. As Paul O’Kane (2009:66) suggests, the line indicates a hiatus in the historical continuum, a modernist device asserting the picture plane while cutting through historical illusionism, where the realities of historical injustice are conveniently forgotten. O’Kane (2009:66) further notes:

There is a hoop to jump through here, a hurdle to negotiate, a mountain to climb, the white line compels or interpolates, calls upon some responsibility in the viewer, in the world today, to do more than just look, more than just look at a painting, more than just *look at* history. But what is that ‘more’? To think again? To act? As a response to history?

Prozac as a title could refer to religion as the ‘opiate of the masses’, alternatively it could point to the complacency and general well-being of European nations, helped by their achievements in all spheres, including medical advances, that cushion them from the harsh realities of third world countries. Perhaps the knowledge of good and evil is the knowledge of one civilization’s barbarity towards another, a knowledge that has been suppressed by the Prozac of social propaganda. Adam and Eve are employed here in the service of re-awakening the colonial conscience in a post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

The implications of contemporary parodic re-imagining of Adam and Eve, as shown here, can cover topics ranging from feminism, masculine identity, sexuality, colonialism and racial exploitation. Marie Conn (2003:1) in her essay on “Pandora and Eve: The Manipulation and Transformation of Female Archetypes” notes that “Creation myths provide insights into a society’s ethos, its root beliefs, and provide the basis for many of its customs and even its legal system”. She points out that the humans in the creation myths are relevant “not because they are first (prototypes), but because they represent what is essentially human (archetypes)” (Conn 2003:2). The Garden of Eden myth therefore has helped to shape a self-image of humanity that is disobedient, morally corrupt, and sinfully sexual. This notion of sin is applicable to a wide range

of perceived contemporary ills and Adam and Eve are instantly recognisable as universal perpetrators.

The reception of these contemporary representations of Adam and Eve, by the South African public, has ranged from disgust and horror (explained in the discussion on *Teased*) to humour, with audience response largely dependent on the level of transgression employed. Phokela's work probably appears the least confrontational initially because it is presented in a manner closest to the stylistic tradition of an Adam and Eve rendition. However it invites contemplation through parody and addresses issues as far reaching and pertinent to contemporary South African society as those raised in the other examples discussed here. The images thus engage with a web of historic oppressions (in Foucault's terms) to provide points of resistance, areas of dissonance and fracture that allow viewers to shift the paradigms of their understanding of what a social or political 'truth' might be.

Images of Adam and Eve and stories of the creation myth have a broad base of application for transgressive commentary as they engage both genders and a common 'origin'. The following chapter, however, concentrates on the specific persona of the Virgin Mary/Madonna and the topics that are engaged with, for the most part, are focussed on particular issues relating to women or a woman's role in society.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mary, Virgin and Madonna

Images of Mary as Virgin, Mother of God, and Heavenly Queen have been employed by the church over centuries to present an impossible role model for women. Mary's perfection is demonstrated in religious iconography through a calm beauty untouched by transience, which supposedly reflects her superior inner qualities. This accords with the content of sermons by the twelfth-century monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), who states that Mary was chosen as mother of God because of her "appearance and beauty" (Schafer 2002:157) and this physical idealism can be identified in many examples of Renaissance Madonnas. Her chastity is demonstrated in a lack of disarray in her clothing so even when her breast is exposed to feed the Christ child the remaining clothes are unruffled, as seen in the *Virgin and Child* paintings by Rogier van der Weyden and Robert Campin (Figs.4.1 and 4.2) for example. Her body is only exposed for the purpose of nourishment and sexuality remains subsumed.¹

Humility is manifest by serene idealised features and modestly downcast eyes or a gaze directed in worship at her son evident in many of Raphael's Madonnas such as *Madonna in the Meadow* and *The Bridgewater Madonna* (Figs.4.3 and 4.4), or in van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin* (Fig.4.5) or van der Weyden's *Virgin and Child in a Niche* (Fig.4.6). These are typical of the many images of an icon apparently designed to advocate female subordination. Organised religion's patriarchal conspiracy in encouraging the veneration of such a role model is exposed by Warner (1983:338) who notes:

The Virgin Mary is not the innate archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God given code.

¹ The delicate balance between sacred and profane in images of the Madonna Lactans is discussed in detail by Holmes (2001) in "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art." Margaret Miles (1992) has also written on this subject in "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Nudity, Gender and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture".

Warner (1983:338) further examines the prejudices towards women that are inculcated through the worship of Mary. Her queenly status, for example, is conferred only because of her son so it is not a birthright, her chastity and humility are interpreted as submissiveness, her motherhood is a vehicle for self sacrifice; indeed, in terms of contemporary feminist thought she is the ultimate exploited 'doormat' yet is presented to women as a perfect role model. Surprisingly enough it was only in 1854 that the Catholic church gave the Immaculate Conception the status of dogma, which Julia Kristeva (1986:105) suggests was in response to the rise of female emancipation in the nineteenth century and an attempt to subversively engender control over women by institutionalising a chaste, submissive virgin as the mother of God. This attitude appears to have been endemic at the time if one considers the cautionary handbook on human sexuality called *Satan in Society*, written in the late nineteenth century by a physician named Nicholas Cooke (1876:87), who proposed that an absence of sexual desire in women was the foundation of a healthy society.

Kristeva (1986:102) explains that the notion of a pure and perfect Mary comes from apocryphal² literature, and takes the form of creating a biography for the Virgin Mary that parallels the life of Jesus, from 'immaculate' conception to sinless life, to assumption rather than death,³ to power in heaven (as Heavenly Queen) and ultimately the need to worship and love her as one is supposed to love God. According to this doctrine, Mary takes on an active role of redeemer by giving birth to God in human form. Without her consent for this plan, therefore, salvation would have been impossible. Peter Schafer (2002:148-149) explains that as early as the fifth century AD the church came close to a deification of Mary, believing that because she was the willing instrument of God's plan of redemption, it follows that "it is only 'through her' that the Holy Trinity is venerated; it is only 'through her' that the fallen creation returns to heaven; it is only 'through her' that the dead rise from death, and so on". The Benedictine nun, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-

² The definition of apocryphal is 'hidden, or secret' but in fact the documents that make up the apocrypha were all written in the first few centuries after the birth of Christ and are related to the stories in the Gospels by embellishing or reinterpreting or completing them in some way. There are numerous examples, some which have been highly rated as truthful while some contradict the biblical teachings and were influenced by second and third century Gnosticism. They are termed apocrypha because they were not accepted as an official part of the biblical canon by the early church, but many of these writings instigated and shaped the cult and worship of Mary (Ebertshauser, Haag, Kirchenberger and Solle 1998:19,20).

³ The legends about Mary's assumption into heaven arose directly after she was given the official title of "Mother of God" at the council of Ephesus in the fifth century (Ebertshauser et.al. 1998:20.21).

1179), reinforced this view through her poetry, extolling the Virgin and relating Mary's predetermined role in salvation to the extent that she almost welcomes the fall of Eve because it allowed for "the process of salvation, put in motion by God becoming man through Mary" (Schafer 2002:168).⁴ There is a traditional hymn, dating from the Middle Ages but still sung in some Anglican churches, that encapsulates this point of view:⁵

Adam lay ibounden, bounden in a bond,
Four thousand winter thought he not too long.
And all was for an apple, an apple that he took,
As clerkes finden written in their book.

Ne had the apple taken been, the apple taken been,
Ne had never our lady a been heavene queen
Blessed be the time that apple taken was!
Therefore we moun singen "*Deo Gracias!*"
(Luria and Hoffman 1974:147)

This attitude results in Mary being given the title of *salvatrix* or "saving Lady" (Schafer 2002:168) and Hildegard of Bingen describes her as the mirror of God's beauty who not only heals but recreates the world, thus inferring that she is God's equal (Schafer 2002:165). By mending Eve's sin through her actions she manages to heal and bless both heaven and earth and is therefore worthy of glorification and ascension into heaven. The worship of Mary as a Heavenly Queen was promoted by the Franciscan order in the Middle Ages and supported by the *Golden Legend*, written between 1255 and 1266.⁶ This book was an immensely popular clerical guide for sermon preparation and included a synthesis of current Marian mythology relating to the major religious feasts during the year (Wright 2006:84-85). Despite the fact that Mary's

⁴ Schafer (2002: 157-163) points out that Hildegard von Bingen was championed by the influential Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), who was also responsible for a surge of enthusiasm for Marian veneration in the twelfth century through his sermons extolling Mary as the mediator, *salvatrix*, and *coredemptrix*. He named her the guiding star, the Queen of Heaven, the 'woman robed with the sun' (from Revelations 12:1). His student, Gueric (c. 1070/80-1157) also states that once she has ascended to heaven "she resides in gilded apparel as the crowned Queen to the right of the King" (Schafer 2002:161).

⁵ I have modernised some of the spelling to make this easier to read and understand.

⁶ The apocryphal gospels dealing with the infancy of Christ and the life and death of Mary dated from as early as the second century and were in general circulation by the end of the sixth century. They were subsequently compiled as the *Golden Legend* by the Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine in the 1260s (Wright 2006:13).

ascension was only officially proclaimed as doctrine by Pope Pius XII in the 1950s,⁷ there are many Renaissance paintings depicting the ascension of the Virgin to be found in churches as altarpieces, a well-known example being Titian's altarpiece, the *Ascension of the Virgin* (1516-18) in the church of S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice. This indicates that by the sixteenth century the notion of a pure and perfect Virgin, as the mother of God and a woman worthy of veneration in heaven and on earth, was woven into the daily fabric of church politics. Rather than raising the status of women by association, however, this worship merely entrenches the stereotype of submission and suffering as an ideal example of womanhood. The worth of Mary's divinity is also in question as it is conferred by association and obedience rather than a birth-right.

The manipulation of Mary's mythological life-story as a patriarchal mechanism of control over women is clearly illustrated in the nineteenth century painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (c.1848-1849: Fig.4.7) where the Virgin is shown sitting passively with her mother, learning the appropriately 'womanly' accomplishment of embroidery (rather than studying mathematics or geography). Her place is indoors, protected by her father outside who is erecting a barrier between her and the possible taint of sin from the outside world. The pile of books on the floor is a collection of the 'virtues' rather than tomes of intellectual learning. The lily and angel indicate her spiritual connections and purity thus reinforcing her apocryphal biography.⁸ Rossetti used his mother and sister as models for this painting, inferring the possibility that such virtues could be attained by contemporary women, so the painting was understood in its day as aspirational. This unambiguous promotion of pure, passive and obedient women was socially inspired by the rise of women's emancipation and the resulting loss of control felt by men in the nineteenth century, the same inspiration that legitimised the Virgin

⁷ Pope Pius XII defined the dogma that Mary, the Virgin mother of God, was assumed body and soul into Heaven in "Munificentissimus Deus" (Washington D.C. 1950) as quoted in Warner (1979:374). Four years later he officially proclaimed Mary Queen of Heaven in an Encyclical letter, *Ad Caeli Reginam*, October 11, 1954 (Warner 1979:375).

⁸ There is no information in the Bible about Mary's birth and childhood so most of the information on this comes from the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James. In this 'gospel' Mary's mother is told of her forthcoming pregnancy by an angel of God, so even her conception mirrors the biblical story of the annunciation of Christ's birth (Ebertshauer et.al. 1998:22).

status of Mary into church dogma.⁹ The cult of the Virgin and her power as a tool of control over women is built, therefore, upon her identity as divine and not human.

The images to be discussed in this chapter are made by both men and women, and engage with religious prototypes of the Virgin Mary and Madonna for different reasons and with varying effects. I begin this chapter with those examples that can be read in the light of feminist concerns.

Diane Victor: *The Eight Marys*

Diane Victor's *The Eight Marys* (2004: Figs.4.8 and 4.9) was mentioned in Chapter One as the subject of controversy when it was exhibited in New York in 2004. *The Eight Marys* consists of eight panels, drawn in charcoal and pastel on paper presenting us with a very individualistic interpretation of the major transitional stages in the life of a mythical Mary/Victor/everywoman. Victor's drawings were made for the exhibition *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, which was held in New York in 2004. The venue for the exhibition was the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which had a bearing on Victor's choice of Mary (traditionally 'Virgin' and 'Mother of God') as her protagonist, and provided a sacred setting for these decidedly irreverent images. Victor used her own body and face as raw material to re-interpret the roles that females have been allocated within Christianity however she stated (2004:159) that she did not intend outright offence with her interpretations, but wished to push the boundaries of viewer expectation enough to provoke a re-evaluation of the traditional images of Mary and their implications for women. I would therefore argue that in this so-called 'post-

⁹ The rise of feminism in the 1960s created similar insecurities but in this instance visual art was one of the tools employed by women to further their cause. First generation feminists made an attempt to invert the power bases of religion by promoting the 'great goddess' as an alternative to the omnipotent God, or the subservient Virgin. This resulted in a rather simplistic overturning of Platonic oppositions where the goddess evoked nature as opposed to the male domain of culture, and intuition or feelings in opposition to patriarchally valued order and rational thought. Works like Mary Beth Edelson's *Goddess Head* (1975) or Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series (Anima)*, 1976, for example) indicate this inversion. In these works the goddess is presented as a positive, wholesome and regenerative symbol of woman, regaining power by inverting the power bases without actually deconstructing the binary oppositions set up by patriarchy. Subsequently, however, this essentialist goddess was considered irrelevant as a more complex notion of identity was accepted, based on an understanding that people are culturally, socially and historically constructed and are too complex to be categorised by gender alone.

feminist' era Victor's representations profitably employ the strategies of feminist art making in such a way that they expose ongoing mechanisms of patriarchal control.

By reinventing Mary, Victor is engaging with the patriarchal Catholic myth of the 'one perfect woman' and thoroughly demythologizing her, ironically from within the institutional framework of the mythologisers themselves. In opposition to the ideal construction of the Virgin's identity Victor's drawings emphasise the human aspect of Mary, not least because they bear an uncanny resemblance to Victor herself, suggesting an ambiguity that conflates Mary with the life-experience of women in general and Victor in particular. They thus undermine traditional patriarchal and ecclesiastical control of representations of the Virgin that are designed to advocate female subordination. Victor's Mary is not a virgin but a complex sexualized being; not the pure, meek, perfect woman constructed by the Christian church as the only woman worthy enough to be venerated by men. These Marys are abject and earthy – the Virgin Mary restored to humanity - and consequently could be seen as iconoclastic images.

For the exhibition the drawings were individually inserted into a framework of stone niches on either side of the ambulatory that runs behind the main altar and provides access to the smaller chapels of St. Boniface and St. Ambrose. The height of the niches was about three meters from the ground so the Marys were ironically set in a position where they had, quite literally, to be 'looked up to'. Victor (2006b) explained to me that this venue was a last minute alteration that required some adaptation of her original intentions for the drawings.¹⁰ She had initially been offered another venue in a chapel that had a stone reredos in the space, containing six stiff, formal, male figures carved in stone, with more rigid male figures above them in stained glass.¹¹ The chapel was suddenly closed for restoration and no longer available but the choice of multiple images of Mary was originally informed by the fact that they would be able to face the stone figures and engage with the space in a way that was the antithesis of a controlled and imposing

¹⁰ Victor (2006b) explains that she had to simplify the drawings because of the height of their position in the ambulatory. She also only used colour very sparingly, whereas the original intention was to use enough colour to respond to the stained glass images in the chapel that was first allocated to her for the exhibition.

¹¹ Victor (2004:159) states that one of the reasons for her original choice of the chapel as a venue was because the sheer scale of the cathedral was daunting and she was looking for a more intimate (domestic?) and approachable space to display her works.

male demarcation of place. Victor (2004:159) intended to express the unregulated, messy and abject aspects of a woman's life in her drawings and thus to expose the controlled artificiality of the formal stone and glass figures that normally occupied the space. Ultimately, however, the last minute adaptation to an ambulatory, which is a passageway and therefore a transient space, rather than the more formal presentation in a chapel, is entirely appropriate as an expression of the traditional marginalization of women in a man's world.

The drawings themselves are performances of a woman's/Mary's stages of identity during her life, from child to mother to crone. The first four panels document her development from pre-pubescent child to sexually awakened woman, presenting an anarchic view of a figure that has traditionally been imbued with asexual meaning. The next four images present stages from fully mature womanhood – depicted as a parody of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in panel five - and ending with an aged, pitiful, naked crone in a wheelchair in panel eight. Feminist strategies for undermining patriarchal control in the representation of women can be identified in several ways and will be discussed panel by panel.

Sexuality is a pervasive theme, which seems particularly inappropriate in an ecclesiastical setting.¹² A dog appears twice as a sexual surrogate: in panel one with the young Mary, and comfortably ensconced under her dress as if replete and fulfilled in panel three. Dogs have had an ambivalent role in art history, often being seen as symbols of fidelity or unconditional love, as in van Eyck's *Marriage of Jan Arnolfini* (1434), whereas “Greek and Roman sources associated the dog with sexual offenses and Medieval authors...referred to canine promiscuity and lechery” (Rowland, 1973:58). Victor's use of the dog appears to evoke the sexualized side of symbolic reference. In panel one, for example, the young Mary has very long plaits which, as Victor (2006b) explains, are included for their snake-like form and the resulting connotations of sexual temptation. Temptation is literally played out in the image as Mary dangles a plait teasingly in front of the dog enticing him to approach between her legs. This gesture performed by a young girl sitting on a high stool is reminiscent of Rapunzel, who is contained in a high and inviolate tower (implying virginity) and ‘rescued’ by allowing a young man to climb up her enormously

¹² Hence the outrage expressed by visitors to the cathedral, discussed in Chapter One.

long plait. The story is a metaphor of sexual awakening and a similar inference can be identified in the young Mary with the dog as a surrogate prince. Allied to the theme of sexual awakening is the bleeding girl in panel two who could be categorized, in feminist terms, as ‘abject’, and could either be menstruating or attempting to perform an abortion (alluded to by the coat hanger in her left hand and the bucket in the lower register of the image). The abortion allusion is particularly provocative when displayed in a church and related to the figure of Mary.

The image in panel three comprises unusual and conflicting iconography including an African carved figure studded with nails, commonly known as a fetish.¹³ This figure is cradled against Mary’s stomach like a surrogate child, while a ‘real’ baby appears just behind her shoulder on the left hand side of the image as if it is being carried on her back in the traditional African manner. The cradled figurine could refer to a custom in Yoruba communities in which *ere ibeji* figures are carved to house the disembodied spirit of deceased twins. If one twin survives the *ere ibeji* of the dead twin is carried around, tended and fed as if it were a live child (Harris 1996:27) and sometimes it is given to the live child to play with to “maintain their togetherness in life and death” (Lawal 2002:112). Documentation exists of Yoruba women carrying the live child on their back with the *ere ibeji* held in front, as in this image by Victor. The ‘live’ baby could be identified with the infant Jesus through his juxtaposition with a flaming heart on Mary’s sleeve (the ‘sacred’ or flaming heart is a ubiquitous symbol of Christ in Catholic iconography) yet ironically he is inextricably linked with African beliefs through the *ere ibeji* reference, as the Yoruba believe in the “spiritual oneness of twins” (Lawal 2002:112).

The African figurine also appears to be an *nkondi*, which is the term for an *nkisi* or power figure, which is dominated by nails. In terms of a ‘cross pollination’ of symbols, the nails studding the ‘fetish’ could be seen as prefigurations of the crown of thorns or nails of the cross, and would thus continue a long tradition of religious imagery that was used to refer to New Testament

¹³ John Mack, (1995:53) in his essay “Fetish? Magic Figures in Central Africa” explains that the term fetish is vague and nebulous, is incorrectly applied to these figures, and has negative connotations. I have used the term here merely because of its common usage and generally understood associations as these could be relevant to the image in Victor’s drawing. Also, not everyone looking at the drawing has studied African art and therefore would not necessarily have any scholarly understanding of *nkisi*, or *nkondi* (the correct terms for nail-studded figures).

events and substantiate the purpose of Christ.¹⁴ John Mack (1995:59-62) explains that *minkondi*¹⁵ are often associated with royal power, witchcraft, clairvoyance, and supernatural power. These complex figures can commune with spirits and ancestors, they can bind oaths and deliver retribution and they are both earthly and spiritual in their effect.

The conflation of such a pagan symbol with royalty and similar supernatural qualities of the son of God is ironic, in that the church outlawed any vehicles of social control that were not Christian by suggesting that their power was rooted in evil/voodoo or devil worship. Presenting an *nkondi* within the context of Christian iconography could therefore be understood as almost blasphemous. It identifies Mary's womanhood with the darker aspects of witchcraft and overturns the mechanisms of ecclesiastical power structures by conferring power on the controller of the *nkondi*. Also, whatever else it may signify, the *nkondi/ere ibeji* figure clearly associates this Mary with Africa. This, in fact, appears to be one of the most enigmatic and undefined of the Mary personae, and possibly the opposite of the didactic images of Madonna and child that are familiar through typical religious iconography.

The Pietà image in panel five also defies expectations. It no longer presents a serene and perfectly beautiful Virgin (as in Michelangelo's sculpture) but a blowsy grinning matron in her underwear. The rather anti-classical 'Christ' figure on her lap is neither limp nor dead, but merely displays a minor injury that has been 'kissed better' with crossed plasters as one might comfort a small child with a scratch. Details of the original by Michelangelo have been inverted, with the limp hand of the dead Christ now displayed by Mary and the upturned supplicatory hand of the bereft Virgin translated as the displayed 'injured' palm of the 'Christ' figure. His childish hand gesture displaying his 'wound' could also be said to parody the saccharine image of *Christ in the Carpenter's shop* (1849-1850), by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais (Fig.4.10), where the young Christ holds up His hand to His mother in a similar manner, while Mary kneels and

¹⁴ An example of similar prefigurative symbols can be found in Hieronymus Bosch's *Adoration of the Magi*. The gift given by the first king to the Christ child is a sculptured image of the sacrifice of Isaac and prefigures Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

¹⁵ *Minkondi* is the plural for *nkondi*.

attempts to comfort Him. In relation to such representations of Mary, Simone de Beauvoir (1997:160) has written:

For the first time in history the mother kneels before her son; she freely accepts her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin – it is the rehabilitation of woman through the accomplishment of her defeat.

Victor, however, has taken this defeat of woman and, through her parody of both the Virgin's humble perfection and Christ's sacrifice; she subverts church dogma and the resulting mechanisms of ecclesiastical control over society.

Other tensions relating to Christian religion are evident, as some of the figures also appear to conflate the Virgin Mary with Mary Magdalene, who was thought to be a prostitute and therefore the antithesis or alter ego of the Virgin Mary. The masturbating figure in panel four, for example, would fit into the Magdalene category. She has also been quite literally turned upside down as if the bodily pose reflects the overturning of everything held dear in traditionally male representations of women, where aesthetic controls of the body, sexuality, taste and value were considered male prerogatives. This is made clear if one understands that the figure in panel four refers, in pose and gaze, to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c.1538: Fig.4.11). Titian's painting also echoes in her pose both Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (c.1509: Fig.4.12) and the ancient classical sculpture of the *Venus Pudica* or modest Venus (Fig.4.13), thus indicating the long tradition of female nudes in art. The sexuality of Titian's figure is overt, however, not only in the soft glowing skin and alluringly displayed body but in her inviting gaze and the position of her left hand drawing attention to, rather than concealing her pubic area. Both Titian's and Giorgione's Venus, may invoke reference to masturbation through this gesture but, as Daniel Arasse (1997:102) explains, the hand, which on the *Venus Pudica* is a protective gesture and in the *Sleeping Venus* is merely relaxed, takes on an active aspect in a figure, which is awake and seemingly aware of the beholder. She also does not attempt to conceal her breasts as the *Venus Pudica* does but appears to be, if not deliberately displaying herself, at least relaxed and confident in her nudity.

It has been suggested by Rona Goffen (1997), David Rosand (1997) and Arasse (1997)¹⁶ that the *Venus of Urbino* was a marriage painting and, as such, would fulfil two purposes. Firstly its sensual or sexual aspect should evoke and encourage sexuality sanctioned by marriage. Secondly, Paola Tingali (1997:131) explains that it was thought that to conceive a child beneath the gaze of a beautiful Venus would assure the birth of a beautiful, healthy and gifted child. Thus both the sexuality and the beauty of the painting were important for its purpose. Arasse (1997: 92) points out that this is the only reclining nude painted by Titian without any narrative context, and the only one who engages directly with the viewer through her glance. By placing her in a domestic setting and removing any references to a mythological status, she is presented as a living, available, responsive human being, and in this way she could be seen as a direct precursor to Victor's Mary. Mary, however, is neither ideally beautiful nor necessarily related to the sexuality of marriage, in fact her sexuality appears to be activated purely for her own enjoyment and her gaze seems to challenge rather than invite the viewer.

It would seem that Titian deliberately connected his Venus visually with predecessors famous for their beauty, sexuality and divinity, and in so doing he ensured that not only was his Venus understood in context, but that she could enhance his status as an artist through favourable comparison with the earlier masters. This indicates a trend in western art where the beauty and perfection of the female nude - regulated and aestheticised by the artist - became, in Nead's (1997:1) words, "an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment" implying, of course, the accomplishment of the male artist. Victor's Mary, however, evokes these comparisons only to overturn the traditional responses. She literally and metaphorically inverts expectations of representations of the female nude. No longer do we see a female body 'caressed' by the paintbrush, presented as a metaphor of male sexual creative energy, displayed invitingly and passively awaiting male activation. With her auto-eroticism and bold stare (turning the gaze back onto the gazer) she has broken the boundaries of taste relating to representations of the female nude generally, but also particularly with reference to representations of the Virgin. Perhaps she has even slipped over that ill-defined border into

¹⁶ Rosand and Goffen have explained that the painting's general context, both iconographic and formal, relates it to the genre of a marriage picture and Arasse has made a case for the painting to be viewed as if it is a typical nude found on the inside of a marriage cassone lid. For more information see the essays by Arasse, Goffen and Rosand in a collection of essays entitled *The Venus of Urbino* (Goffen 1997).

pornography? This would accord with the identification of a Mary Magdalene persona as the ‘other side of the coin’ of womanhood and therefore an integral part of a woman’s existence.

By conflating the saint and the sinner these Marys vacillate between signs, and undermine the Christian need to venerate and worship an idealised virgin mother by presenting, instead, a naked and dissolute body. In her essay on “The Virgin’s one Bare Breast”, Miles (1992:27-37) has discussed the problems of a conflict between erotic attraction and religious meaning when nudity is used in religious painting. The need for religious content to dominate was paramount in Renaissance paintings of the Virgin and was partly maintained by a lack of disarray in her clothing deliberately undermining the “provocative disarrangement of an erotic exposure of the breast” (Miles 1992:34).¹⁷ Victor’s Mary on the other hand provokes the opposite interpretation, and these images thus make a point about the fetishization of religious iconography. Victor’s figures are in various stages of *déshabillé* with skirts pulled up provocatively (panels one and two) or sitting in their underwear (panel five) or entirely naked (panels four and eight). Images of women occur very rarely in the church, but when they do they are predominantly there for didactic purposes. Even sexualized images of the penitent Mary Magdalene, clad in nothing but her long hair, are supposedly indicative of a ‘righteous’ contrition. The sexuality of Victor’s Marys, however, is an integral part of their humanity and their femininity – they revel in it, they are in control and they subvert the traditionally passive and obedient role of Mary in the church as well as the traditionally accepted mode of representing women in art, either in the church or in galleries, who ‘should’ be aestheticised to conform to some arbitrarily acceptable standard of beauty.

Victor also refers to the rebellion of women, for example the figure in panel six appears to be uncomfortably constrained by her narrow format and is pushing against the edges, as if she wishes to burst out of the constraints enforced upon her by the stone frame. The rigidity and formal considerations of Gothic as a style is particularly relevant to the constraints of patriarchy and is given visual form in the Gothic framework of the images. With her raised fist about to

¹⁷ Miles (1992:34) notes that not only was the Virgin’s breast presented as an instrument of nurture rather than sexual gratification, but the other side of her chest (the covered side) was completely flat – also denying its presence for any other purpose.

beat on the confines of her 'prison' she is showing anger and dissatisfaction with her lot instead of acceptance and humility. Less overt rebellion can be found in panel seven, which presents a veiled figure kneeling in a parody of the submissive Virgin, but her facial expression denies this submission. Her traditionally composed and gracious demeanour is rendered banal as she brandishes a whisk and iron, kneels on a polishing cushion, and her opened robe reveals skin painfully pinched by clothes pegs. She appears to be suffering a form of martyrdom as she could refer to many Renaissance images of the pierced St. Sebastian,¹⁸ and Victor (2006b) explains that the circular arrangement of pegs on her chest is also a reference to numerous existing images of the 'suffering' or 'sacrificial' Mary who is depicted with a circle of swords piercing her heart. The pegs denote domesticity so she has now become the exploited housewife who sacrifices her time and youth for the drudgery of domestic chores, she is the disgruntled domestic goddess rather than the 'Queen of Heaven'; identified by mundane kitchen implements instead of the customary symbols of sacrificial hearts, or lilies denoting purity, or the crown of stars (which is ironically represented on the pocket of her housecoat).

The final panel presents a shrunken, deformed, aged figure, sitting naked and defiant in her wheelchair. Her body breaks social and aesthetic taboos by displaying a sagging breast and stomach, wrinkled knees, and arthritically deformed hands. Her nakedness is made more explicit, and almost more pitiful, by the contrast of fur lined slippers on her feet. Her association with Mary is reinforced by a flower that resembles the form of a flaming heart, held in the position on her chest where Mary would normally display this evidence of her divinity. The irony of this lies in the *lack* of divinity manifest in this figure, as she has clearly not ascended into heaven but is physically decaying and heading towards the grave. Her humanity is thus underlined by this evidence of identification with Mary, virgin and mother of God.

Through sexuality and the visually insistent theme of ageing, earthly matter appears to transcend culture and overwhelms the spiritual aspects of art. The disintegrating/leaking or ageing body is antithetical to the wholeness advocated by patriarchal art discourse regarding the female nude, as discussed by Nead (1997) who emphasizes the importance of boundaries, framing, definiteness

¹⁸ Representations of the Martyred St. Sebastian were painted by Andrea Mantegna in 1459, Botticelli in 1474, Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo in 1475 and Antonello da Messina in 1477, for example.

and surface integrity for patriarchal aesthetic approval.¹⁹ She also cites these as areas of the greatest anxiety if they are transgressed in any way:

If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears (Nead 1997:7).

It is clear that this description of pollution from faltering outlines could appropriately be applied to Victor's images of Mary, and that in this instance art has not attempted to seal and contain the female body but has colluded in its disintegration. The mutability of Mary in each subsequent image also belies the notion of one perfect view frozen in time as, unlike the male figures in the reredos, they are not 'carved in stone' but can be endlessly re-invented.

Art historians such as Kenneth Clark have reinforced the notion of a coherent and rational whole as something beautiful. He evaluates the female nude, in *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956), in terms of her containment and regulation through the controlling hand of the (usually male) artist.²⁰ Nead offers a critique of Clark's analysis of the naked female body as unformed matter in opposition to the nude, which is formed, regulated and contained by culture. Clark's discussion seems to reflect an uncritical acceptance of Plato's and Aristotle's premise of woman as nature or matter needing to be defined by the male attribute of reason. Aristotle (1964:96) said that "the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness" and the influence of this notion on western aesthetics cannot be underestimated. Statements such as these show how the notion of wholeness, unity and containment have come to be held synonymous with the western ideal of beauty and aesthetics, particularly when related to the representation of the female body, hence the idealised perfection of the Virgin Mary in religious iconography, even when her breast is revealed to feed the Christ child. When boundaries and surface integrity are transgressed in any way, as they are in the leaking, ageing bodies of Victor's Marys, they cause anxiety in male viewers. Nead (1997:6) also explains that "one of the principal goals of the

¹⁹ Nead, in her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, 1997, deals with this issue in depth in her first chapter: Framing the Female Body (pp. 5-12).

²⁰ It is interesting to note that when discussing the male nude Clark does not concentrate on issues of containment but refers to "harmony, clarity and tranquil authority...calm, pitiless and supremely confident" (Clark 1956:34,37).

female nude [in art] has been the containment and regulation of the female *sexual* body” (my emphasis). When the depicted woman is the Virgin Mary then representations of uncontained nudity, abjection and overt sexuality become not just subversive but iconoclastic. Victor’s Marys are thus seen to engage with both artistic and ecclesiastical taboos.

The abject nature of these images has been an ongoing strategy in Victor’s work. In *Reconstruction Site*²¹ (1992: Fig.4.14), for example, the Mary persona probes an open chest wound with her fingers and has a caesarean scar and surgical drain on her stomach. Despite the reference to Catholic iconography seen in her gesture of pointing to a bleeding/flaming heart, the wounded, seeping flesh attests to the fact that, like *The Eight Marys*, this Mary is neither virgin nor divine. The dead Christ-like figure below her has been emasculated, perhaps inferring the impotence of religion in the modern world – a theme that has been commented upon by Victor on several occasions. The work also refers to earlier religious paintings such as Holbein’s *Christ in the Tomb* (the wounded/dead figure in the lower register), Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity* (in terms of compositional divisions), and Leonardo da Vinci’s preparatory cartoon for *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the infant St. John* (in the grouping of figures).²² Parodic re-use of well-known Renaissance paintings evokes religious dogma underpinning the original works and enhances the level of subversion employed by Victor.

One could explain the origins of the Virgin Mary myth by looking at her as a figure who conflates the matriarchal notion of a Great Goddess or ‘earth mother’ and subsequent Christian dogma. In the conflation, however, the Goddess is divested of her original power, strength and free will and turned into the humble and obedient pawn of patriarchy, thus disempowering women in the process. Victor’s representations of Mary have reinvested her with some of that

²¹ Made for the Cape Town Triennale and now in the Gertrude Posel Collection.

²² Incongruously this work also references *Gabrielle d’Estreés and her Sister* from the School of Fontainebleau (seen in the nipple pinching). It also refers to earlier works by Victor – Mary’s heart removal was seen in *He Will Steal More than Your Heart*, 1989. The plasters and no entry sign on the back of the kneeling man’s trousers refer to homosexuality and sodomy, also seen in Victor’s *An Ultimate Adoration*, 1989, (see the discussion of these works in Chapter Two). These and other sources are listed and discussed in detail in an unpublished History of Art Honours dissertation by Carine Michelle Tayler (1993).

power and self-determinism. Another artist who engages directly with the Great Goddess/Mary inversion is Majak Bredell.

Majak Bredell's Black Madonnas

Bredell (2008) firmly believes that the origins of Marian worship lie in worship of the ancient earth mother or archetypal 'Great Goddess'. Images of the Goddess are historically associated with the first wave of feminism²³ and post-modern feminists have tended to dismiss the Goddess as a symbol of essentialism who is not relevant in today's complex post-modern world. Majak Bredell, however, attempts to reinvent this imagery, to make it appropriate for post-modern sensibilities and reclaim it from long years of appropriation and dilution by the church, through her images of black Madonnas. These alternative deities with complex presences evoke both destruction and regeneration and re-interpret age old myths in order to re-evaluate preconceptions of patriarchy, power structures, belief systems and history; to uncover another aspect of our connection with the world and with each other. As a singular and unified 'God' has been the dominant supreme symbol for millennia it is perhaps unsurprising that a re-interpretation of core beliefs should start with the diverse, multiple manifestations of the Goddess, often identified by Bredell as a Mary reinvested with strength and sexuality.

Historically the amalgamation of Goddess worship into Christian dogma is largely due to religious expediency as the modification of existing customs ensures that a sense of loss or alienation will be minimised for new converts. A sense of familiarity at the continuation of familiar and treasured practices could ensure that the new religion is enthusiastically embraced; so, for example, the celebration of Christmas in December was an adoption of the winter solstice festival, and an investigation of many revered and hallowed religious traditions (like Easter, as

²³ These were feminists who were active mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom sought to return to pre-patriarchal culture where the matriarchal Great Goddess was worshipped, and strove to find a positive universal feminine standpoint as an antidote to the prevailing patriarchal hegemony. Gloria Orenstien, in her essay "Recovering her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess" (Broude and Garrard 1994:174-189) explains that the first wave of feminists believed that archetypal imagery (in the Jungian sense) was available to everyone regardless of their cultural origin. The 'great goddess' imagery, therefore, could reconnect all women with an ancient primal force (or gynergy). "This gynergic force would then bring together in a new harmony women who had previously been separated from each other by patriarchally constructed divisions such as class and race" (Broude and Garrard 1994:177).

another example) will indicate a pagan precursor.²⁴ Schafer (2002:149) explains that the gradual integration of pagan Goddesses, such as Kybele in Syria, Isis in Egypt and Artemis in Asia Minor, into the worship of Mary, occurred mostly after the council of Ephesus and Chalcedon, which was held in 451 AD. Schafer (2002:150) notes: “It is her motherhood, her function as intercessor, and her praise as the Queen of Heaven that relate Mary to these Goddesses and that facilitate her ‘usurpation’ of their role as the mothers of Gods and of their functions.”

There are also examples of visual links that point to a continuity between the ancient Goddesses and early representations of the Virgin Mary. Goddesses such as Demeter, Persephone and Artemis in the Roman world, the Celtic Triple Mother (Deae Matres) and the Mare-Goddess, Epona, Isis, Cybele of the East and Diana of the Ephesians were, according to Ean Begg (1996:17), “all on occasion represented as black”. One of the clearest indications of continuity between the Virgin Mary and these representations of the ‘Great Goddess’, therefore, is the existence of ancient statues of black Madonnas that have been documented widely since the twelfth century AD (Begg 1996:3,4). There are other visual correspondences between Mary and the Goddesses of ancient history, to be discussed here, but the transposition of blackness to early statues of the Virgin is one of the most direct. Begg (1996:3), for example, says:

Some of the most famous statues of the Madonna in western Europe have faces and hands that are black, by intention, and are known to have been so for many centuries. There are also approximately 450 images of the Virgin throughout the world, not counting those in Africa south of the Mediterranean littoral, which have been called black, dark, brown or grey.

Examples of these would include the *Madonna Enthroned with Child*, from Rocamadour, which is one of the earliest sculptures of Mary dating from the twelfth century (Fig.4.15), or a fifteenth century Gothic example, *Notre Dame du Pilier*, in Chartres Cathedral (Fig.4.16). There are also some painted examples such as the *Black Madonna of Breznichar*, in Bohemia (Fig.4.17) which was commissioned by King Wenceslas in 1396, and the *Black Madonna of Częstochowa* (Fig.4.18) who is supposed to work miracles and is the patroness of Poland (Ebertshauser et.al. 1998: 205).

²⁴ Benson (1976:23) even notes that the Christian cross has a precedent in ancient Druidic traditions: “The ancient Druids, who worshipped the sun, took as the symbol of their god a living tree, a stately oak, cutting off all its branches except two on opposite sides, forming thereby a giant cross.”

Bredell's many examples of black Madonnas draw on this language of manipulated images in the service of tradition. There is also a personal element for Bredell, in their association with her return from America to Africa, where she was born. They evoke the dark-skinned people of Africa and her longing for the dark and fertile soil of her motherland, darkness being a visual connection with the womb, the centre of the earth, and the chthonic matrix from which life emerged. So darkness is seen as a positive attribute, particularly in the light of Bredell's personal history. As a white woman who grew up in South Africa during the apartheid years, her promotion of a black Madonna/Goddess on her return could be seen as a significant symbol of the reversal of the social and political status quo in South Africa.²⁵

Visually these images conflate the Virgin Mary and the ancient pagan Goddesses who "symbolised power and majesty and feminine wisdom" (Begg 1996:1-28). In the *Black Madonna - Goddess of Beginnings* (2008: Fig.4.19) Bredell reunites the first woman, Eve, giver of life and earth mother (also an alter ego of the Great Goddess), with the Madonna and her child. They are set in a firmament of what could be the starry universe of Mary's ascended glory, or the primeval slime from which the first life (Eve) emerged, so Mary's link to the ancient earth and fertility Goddesses is clarified in this image. *Black Madonna I, II, and III*, (2009: Fig.4.20) presents the conventional Christian iconography of a haloed Madonna but her motherhood is emphasised both by the voluptuous earth-mother proportions of her body and the child between her legs which, in this instance, is female rather than the expected Christ child. In the etched *Virgin-Black* (2009: Fig.4.21), the typical virgin's robe is fashioned like a vulva revealing the naked body of the woman beneath, and her arms are raised in the traditional stance of an ancient Goddess statue. She is placed within a mandorla or *vesica piscis*, the stylised sign for the vulva, which is ironically also used in Christian iconography as a device to frame the Virgin (see Figs.3.7 and

²⁵ Bredell's decision to promote a powerful black goddess and to tap into old traditional forms of spirituality in the aftermath of the apartheid era could be seen as a similar parallel to the images of black goddesses and spiritual altars made by Betye Saar in the aftermath of the Civil Rights struggle in the late 1960s in America. Lopez and Roth (1994:142, 146) imply that political protest and the need to acknowledge and redress past injustices informs such works. Saar presented both the social liberation of black women (in her Aunt Jemima series) and psychic or spiritual liberation from western prototypes in examples such as *Black Girl's Window* (1969), *Nine Mojo Secrets* (1971) or *Guardian of Desires* (1988); all of which display non-western inspiration which Saar abstracted from a collection of African spiritual traditions and other indigenous belief systems (Le Falle-Collins 1994:10-13). This imbues Saar's works with a similar all encompassing spirituality as that pertaining to the 'great goddess', as James Steward (2006:17) explains: "Uniquely individual confluences become shared; the particular becomes the universal."

3.8).²⁶ The expression of sexuality in these images is unmistakable and the clearest indication that we are not dealing with contemporary Christianity where ascetic restraint and the virginity of women is emphasised.

A brief explanation of the origins of the black Madonna will highlight the way Christianity has divested women of power through its endorsement of a holy, modest and submissive Virgin Mary as a role model. Ancient Goddesses, from the Venus of Willendorf onwards, imbued fertility and sexuality. Begg (1996:41) speaks of the Sumerian Goddess Inanna, found in writings of the third millennium BC, who was “universal Goddess of the heavens, fertility, war, justice, sexual love and healing”. She is also known as the precursor to Ishtar, Aphrodite, Astarte and Venus (Begg 1996:42) and had a handmaiden named Lilith.²⁷ All these women were strong, independent and sexually liberated with the result that Lilith, in more recent times, has become a figurehead for female emancipation and women’s rights (Begg 1996:35).

As seen in the example of Inanna and Lilith these ancient Goddesses were powerful, majestic beings, displaying “extraverted, uninhibited sexuality” (Begg 1996:127). The New Testament has managed to assimilate, de-sex, disempower and subjugate the Goddess by turning her into a meek, submissive Virgin who is, at the same time, the ultimate role model for women in the Christian church advocating modesty, restraint and asexuality (purity). It is important, therefore in an alternative view of spirituality, to re-affirm the life giving qualities of sexuality and fecundity seen in many of Bredell’s images, where the protagonists glory in their bodies whether praying, giving birth or just being.

²⁶ J.C. Cooper (1978:103-104) describes this form as: “the ‘mystical almond’ which depicts divinity; holiness; the sacred; virginity; the vulva. It also denotes an opening or gateway and the two sides represent the opposite poles and all duality.”

²⁷ In Hebrew legend Lilith is the being who was created with Adam, from the same handful of dust, and was therefore created equal. She refused to be subordinate to Adam and left him to consort with demon lovers (Gadon 1989:123-4). She was also supposed to prey on newborn babies (Baring and Cashford 1993: 510-513). It is believed that this manifestation from Hebrew mythology is a distorted image of the Lilith connected with the Sumero-Akkadian goddess Inanna (Baring and Cashford 1993:217). With the rise of the women’s suffrage movement in the nineteenth century Lilith was promoted as the first strong-minded woman and a figurehead for women’s rights, but her killing of newborn babies was equated (by detractors) with birth control or abortion. The fact that some women in the nineteenth century wished to maintain control over their own bodies and limit their childbearing was seen as moral degeneration and Tolstoy, in *What Then Must We Do?* (1969:357), pronounced: “Every woman, however she may call herself and however refined she may be, who refrains from childbirth without refraining from sexual relations is a whore.”

Through the sin of Eve, as noted in Chapter Three, the ‘sin’ of sexuality was also largely considered a function of womanly nature and an emphasis on purity, sexual abstinence and preferably virginity was promoted in church doctrine, via the Virgin Mary, to counter this. Even the results of sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, were presented negatively by the early church. Both menstruation and the abject aspects of parturition, which Augustine referred to as “the faeces and urine of childbirth”, were considered evidence of woman’s closeness to “all that is vile, lowly corruptible and material” (Warner 1983:58). Bredell counters Augustine’s ‘proof’ of the defilement of women by glorifying all aspects of procreation and parturition, evidenced in her series of eight *Black Madonna* etchings celebrating fecundity, and in several versions of ancient Goddesses who bleed or give birth.

Even when entirely clothed, as in the *Annunciation-Virgin* painting (2009: Fig.4.22), Bredell’s women express sexual energy. The garment covering the Virgin’s body from neck to floor clings suggestively to her projecting breasts and parts over her belly to reveal a mandorla shaped opening that exposes an intense red, implying heat and life, which seems to pulsate and glow through the cloth. Her fingers are stained with the red, suggesting that she has ripped apart her ‘wound’ to actively receive the blessing that is inscribed on her face and around her head in the words of the annunciation angel. Her willing collusion in this overtly sexual experience negates timid passivity and reluctance displayed by traditional Virgin Marys depicted in so many church altarpieces and annunciation scenes.

In Bredell’s interpretation of the Madonna we find a figure that, in all her manifestations, is presented as equal to the powerful and sexually potent ancient Gods and Goddesses. She is also multi-dimensional, including all aspects of existence, thus reflecting the more complex nature of these ancient deities. The panels depicting *Eve* and *Magdalen*, (2008: Fig.4.23), with *Chthonic Eve* and *Chthonic Mary* (2009: Fig.4.24) encapsulate both good and so called sinful manifestations of these icons, extracting from church dogma and ancient Goddess beliefs to evoke diverse aspects of an ancient and glorious whole that has been suppressed for centuries. One could interpret Marian dogma as a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy to which this feminist Goddess iconography is a form of restoration. This is made clear in the altarpiece *Black Madonna and Sisters* (2009: Fig.4.25) which approximates Byzantine and early Renaissance

altarpieces of the Madonna and Child, such as the *Rucellai Madonna* by Duccio (1285: Fig.4.26) or Cimabue's large altarpiece, *Madonna Enthroned with Angels and Prophets* (1280-1290). Like these prototypes it is a large shaped format with the Madonna and child in the centre, and the rich golden colouring associated with Byzantine or Early Renaissance inspired imagery around the sides. Bredell (2010) pointed out to me that the colouring and side divisions were particularly influenced by a *Madonna and Child* painted by the Master of San Martino (1270-90: Fig.4.27), however the Madonna is no longer surrounded by angels, or scenes from her life, but by images of all the ancient Goddesses and powerful deities, both good and evil, from diverse religious traditions that she was designed to supplant.

Clockwise from the lower left one can identify Gaia, Goddess of Earth, or the first Mother, who is appropriately giving birth; the powerful and mystical Inanna with her control over life, sex and death (Baring and Cashford 1993:216-222); and Hekate, a Goddess of the underworld or nocturnal Goddess, who symbolises both life and death as her attributes include protection of newly born creatures, guardian of households, magic, witchcraft, the moon, ghosts and necromancy - she can protect and punish at will (Theoi Greek Mythology 2007). Above Hekate is the Egyptian Goddess Isis, mother of all things, mistress of the elements, queen of heaven and hell and mistress of divine powers (Gimbutas 2001:318,319). Then there is the Buddhist Goddess Tara, like the Virgin Mary she is both virgin, in her green form, and "mother of all the Buddhas" in her white form (Exotic India 2000). She also takes on the Christ-like active role of saviour in Buddhist beliefs, hence one leg is in the lotus position but the other is extended ready for action (Exotic India 2000). To the right one finds the many-breasted nurturing Cybele; Demeter, another nurturing Goddess associated with agriculture, grain and bread (Theoi Greek Mythology 2007); and the terrifying Hindu Goddess Kali, who simultaneously evokes creation, life, transformation, terror and death (McDermott and Kripal 2003:5).²⁸ Below her is the Greek snake-haired Gorgon, Medusa, whose emasculating gaze could turn men to stone; and lastly, on the bottom right, Eurynome, bride of Zeus and mother of the graces (Theoi Greek Mythology 2007). This image includes a comprehensive range of women's attributes, past and present

²⁸ Kali is often depicted dancing on the body of her dead spouse Shiva adorned with a necklace of fifty skulls. Her dress and demeanour indicate both destruction and creation as the heads represent the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and the manifest state of sound from which creation proceeded (Swami Harshananda [Sa]: 119-120).

beliefs, and clarifies the shared attributes of these icons through the title, which evokes a sisterhood of female experience.

The overriding quality of the archetypes displayed here is a duality of existence that extends beyond simplistic notions of right and wrong, good and evil.²⁹ They are more multilayered in essence and do not belong in a fixed, linear, morally prescribed world as structured by patriarchy and Christian religion. In his discussion of archetypes Erich Neumann (1963:9) explains that “their diversity is so great, the contradictory elements united in them so multifarious, that in addition to speaking of ‘the eternal presence’ of the archetype, we must also speak of its polyvalence”. This nuanced view of the Great Goddess tradition is perhaps more in tune with our post-modern world, where identities can be assumed and discarded at will and there are no longer absolutes and certainties. As Bogaard (2005:108) has explained: “Both Goddess and archetypes are intrinsically diverse...there cannot simply be one Goddess for all, nor one form of feminism.” Post-modern thought has thus dismissed the early feminist essentialist notion of the ‘Great Goddess’ as a universal female deity. Such an icon presupposed a ‘universal feminine’ standpoint and shared experience of all women, without acknowledging the variables in women’s experience, such as race, religion or social standing. In post-modern feminism an increasingly complex and constructed notion of identity, allowing for diversity of race, culture and gender, is considered more relevant.

Bredell’s Goddesses and Madonnas display multifarious characteristics and contradictory natures. They require the viewer to negotiate often diametrically opposing attributes in an effort to understand their metaphorical resonance in a contemporary context. Despite this (post-modern) complexity they still encompass the essentialist feminist notion of a universal sisterhood and thus may be interpreted, by some, as anachronistic. This approach could be understood, however, as a call to regain a unified strength of purpose that may have been dissipated in the celebration of difference, particularly in the light of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s description of South Africa as a ‘Rainbow Nation’. This term could imply a post-modern celebration of

²⁹ Marija Gimbutas (2001:316) explains that the opposing attributes found in goddess imagery arise from the fact that their symbolism is both “lunar and chthonic” and is built upon an understanding that life on earth is inextricably intertwined with “a constant and rhythmic change between creation and destruction, birth and death...Life givers are also death wielders”.

diversity and individuality but is not necessarily a useful approach to the difficulties experienced in South Africa's post-apartheid society. Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn (2004:1) point out that it "raises at least as many problems as it attempts to solve". Pumla Dineo Gqola (2001:98-9) similarly explains that this "discourse of rainbowism" essentialises difference, ignores both gender and class, and actually effaces the "power differentials" that result. These, as noted by Wilkinson (2002) in Chapter Three of this document, include the scourge of violence towards women and children and the subtle threat of traditionalism which promotes submissive behaviour in women and which has been promulgated by the continued hegemony of patriarchal political leaders. I would argue, therefore, that Bredell's overtly feminist agenda could be understood as a timely response to the continued social divisions and injustices that persist in South Africa despite the demise of apartheid.

Bredell's essentialist feminist stance may be considered surprising because the South African art arena has traditionally been less than wholehearted in its response to feminist art practice and theory partly because it is identified with western ideals. Feminist body politics in particular appear to have been marginalized as, for so many years, socio-political commentary in art was considered *de rigueur* in South Africa, and feminist art making was only acknowledged if it contained some racial or political content. The demise of apartheid coincided with the introduction of a so-called 'post-feminist' era so feminist ideology has remained peripheral and problematic to many artists and art critics. The historic reasons for race rather than gender, as the identity determinant of primary importance, are clarified by Arnold (2005:4):

...race determined experiences of privilege or oppression, opportunity or deprivation, wealth or poverty, freedom of movement or restriction. It promoted or impeded access to education and health facilities, and defined opportunities for personal growth and economic empowerment.

Arnold's explanations are related to the inequalities of the apartheid era in South Africa yet, as noted, continued inequalities of social, economic and personal power are experienced in post-apartheid South Africa. Wilkinson's call to form a unified feminist approach to counteract the continued patriarchally inspired inequalities in South Africa could be seen as a strategy to address this problem, as the unity of women could, ironically, provide the strength to ensure their

continued individuality. Perhaps, given South Africa's political history and present social climate, artists like Bredell can justly revisit the main concerns of feminism, which is to raise awareness of inequalities and oppression based on gendered power structures. As Janet Radcliffe Richards (1980:5) argues "Feminism is not concerned with a *group of people it wants to benefit* but with a *type of injustice it wants to eliminate*". To address this concern Bredell has promoted the unity of women by presenting the 'Great Goddess'/Madonna figure as a universal symbol of women's strength. Tracey Rose, on the other hand, delves into the post-modern complexities of this icon and presents a more diverse approach to a figurehead for the post-modern, post-feminist, post-apartheid generation.

Tracy Rose and *la Messie*

Tracey Rose's *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 – la Messie* (2003: Fig.4.28), is a 148 x 102cm photograph that forms part of a project made up of video artworks and photographs that re-invent and subvert the myths of Christian dogma and the origins of humankind.³⁰ The figure of *la Messie* could be said to relate, visually and thematically, to a reinvention of the Christian Madonna as a post-modern version of the 'Great Goddess' who embodies the diverse and multivalent aspects that construct a post-modern identity in women today. Linda Nochlin (2003:141) states that current feminist identity politics are "multivalent and self-aware" and include "ambiguity, androgyny, and self-consciousness, both formal and psychic". This complexity is readily identified in Tracey Rose's *la Messie*.

The image presents a contradictory persona, who embraces polarities by conflating aspects of good and evil including the Virgin Mary, a messiah figure, a devil, and a fertility Goddess. The words *la Messie* in the title might indicate a *meisie* (or girl), which suggests that we are looking at a young and naïve Virgin Mary identified by her halo. *La Messie* could also refer to a Messiah, and her slim almost androgynous body and short cropped hair are indicative of such an interpretation. There are connotations of Christian religious kitsch in the pastel rainbow-coloured clouds forming a 'heavenly' backdrop, with a fuzzy not quite gold halo around her head to

³⁰ An interview between Rose and Tracy Murinik that discusses the entire work *Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1* can be found in *Art South Africa* Vol.2, Issue 4 Winter 2004.

reinforce these readings of the image. However an alternative interpretation would take the indefinite halo as indicative of less than spotless purity, a reading that is reinforced by her flirtatious smile and the hand raising her vest (not to mention the inappropriate clothing for a saint or God/dess). Her ambiguity is further reinforced by a reference in the title to Lucifer (*Lucie's Fur*) with the tarnished halo of a fallen angel (Lucifer was traditionally supposed to have been thrown out of heaven) and the flames of hell on her chest. As mentioned in Chapter Three, *Lucie's Fur* is a metaphor for pubic hair and is thus also connected with sexuality and fecundity thereby evoking the fertility Goddess of ancient beliefs.

La Messie's leopard skin printed underwear is significant as leopard skin was traditionally only worn by kings in Africa, so this could confer royal status to a post-modern Goddess who is ready to challenge male kingly authority. Leopard skin is also a visual reference to the wildness of Africa and is linked thematically with the lions on the grassy green mat. It could suggest wild animalistic nature and rampant sexuality which, with the dark skin of her bare legs revealed, ironically evokes the Victorian colonial myth of a primitive atavism and untamed sexual appetite that was thought to exist in the body of African women (McClintock 1995:42). The sexual inference refers again to the notion of a fertility Goddess and this is further reinforced by a group of intensely coloured, lush looking snakelike plants at the Goddess' feet. The snake is a symbol of temptation and is often depicted trampled under the feet of the Virgin Mary. These plants, however, are not trampled but twine collusively around her feet as if she is the tempted, fallen Eve, rather than the virtuously victorious Mary.

One can see these 'flowers' in detail, in an enlarged separate image from the *Lucie's Fur* series which Rose entitles *Fucking Flowers* (for obvious reasons) (2003: Fig.4.29). Instead of stamens in each flower there are penises stretching and straining out of the folding vulva-like 'petals' of the flowers, and leaning together as if blindly seeking the object of their desire. They ooze and drip (presumably semen) and their bases are nestled in what could pass for birthday party packaging and strips of gaudy ribbons as if these phalluses are a prize presented to the Goddess, or laid at her feet as a votive offering.

In opposition to this fecundity, the flame printed on the Goddess' shirt might signify death and destruction (as in 'hellfire') on one hand, or the purity of a flaming 'sacred' heart depicted in Catholic representations of either Christ or the Virgin Mary (discussed above), or perhaps even a cleansing regenerative flame from which, phoenix like, a new being will arise. The flame is also a symbol of the Hindu Goddess Kali who epitomizes ambivalence as she combines nurture and destruction, anger and upliftment, life and death (McDermott & Kripal 2003:5). She is the ideal metaphor for a post-modern Goddess who embodies and embraces opposing dualities. Kali's association with *La Messie* is therefore appropriate if one identifies the hybridities, pluralism and overlaid identities that coexist in her like a palimpsest. This one figure, for example, not only cross references major religious personae (both good and bad, both Christian and pagan) but appears to conflate all the separate personae that appear in Rose's earlier video work, *Ciao Bella* (2001) which investigated the various identities and roles played by contemporary women (or by Rose herself).³¹

In the still photographs that accompany the video work one can identify *la Messie's* childlike body coupled with the seductive qualities of the knowing *Lolita* (2001: Fig.4.30), who elides into the more blatantly sexualised *Cicciolina* (2001: Fig.4.31), promising a parody of carnal knowledge. *Cicciolina* is followed by *Venus Baartman* (2001: Fig.4.32) exploited possessor of untamed African sexuality, an enigma to the Europeans yet referring, through her title, to European expectations of sexualized imagery in western images of African women.³² The white-faced masochistic pugilist, seen in *Lovemefuckme* (2001: Fig.4.33), represents an aspect of *la Messie* by evoking the dualities of Kali who is punisher and lover at the same time.³³ *Bunny* (2002: Fig.4.34), the destroyer and inflictor of violence (carrying her automatic machine gun), or *Mami* (2001: Fig.4.35), the restrained and controlled alter ego, are also two sides of a Kali identity. The Christian reference of saint/virgin in *la Messie* could be embodied by *Regina Coeli*

³¹ *Ciao Bella* was exhibited in 2001 at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, The Project in New York and at the Venice Biennale.

³² The title, *Venus Baartman*, refers to the infamous example of racial and gender related exploitation in the person of Sarah Baartman, known at the time as the Hottentot Venus. She was a Khoikhoi woman with the national characteristic steatopygia or distended buttocks. European explorers took her to England in 1810, and then to France, and displayed her in fairs and freak shows as a curiosity, until she died in Paris in 1815.

³³ This particular image also speaks of the societal pressure to be perfect and to blame oneself for imperfections, as well as touching on domestic violence.

(2001: Fig.4.36) in her nun's habit and gesture of supplication, and finally *MAQEII* (2002: Fig.4.37) with her queenly demeanour, her masks and painted face, who implies that each example of layered identity can be put on or taken off at will.

By originally performing many of these *Ciao Bella* characters in whiteface, Rose also appears to refute the rigid systems of racial classification employed by the apartheid regime. She engages with the feminist notion of a hybrid or constructed identity - an identity that is fluid and changeable, and through this is addressing what Firstenberg denotes as 'the psychocultural politics of postcolonial representation' (quoted by Jones, 2003:23). These negotiable personae embodied concurrently in *la Messie*, present us with 'a woman for all seasons' or the 'Goddess Lucie'. In this complex image Rose ironically appropriates multicultural references, colonial stereotyping, religion and cultural expectations to present a new feminist African Goddess with an unfixed, multi-politicized identity for the post-modern generation.

In another image from the *Lucie's Fur* series Adam and Yves³⁴ appear peeping through a niche in an annunciation scene entitled *L'Annunciazione (After Fra Angelico) c1434-2003* (2004: Fig.4.38). Their inclusion in this scene is linked to the notion that sex and sin are equated; and as Eve brought both into the world it requires a pure and holy virgin to give birth to a redeemer - a second Eve to undo the evil wrought by the first one. Mary, therefore, is the new Eve, looked upon impotently by Adam and Yves who cannot physically fulfil her role as an instrument of atonement. The multi-coloured angel and classical architectural arcade refer to Fra Angelico's painting (1451-1452: Fig.4.39). Fra Angelico's Virgin, however, is traditionally rendered as a modest self-contained young woman who passively accepts her duty, while Rose's Virgin (whom Rose [2009] has termed 'Madame Oeuf'), with her exclamatory hand gestures and sense of shock, appears to be protesting her intended role as a holy incubator.

Mary's destiny is defined by Edwin Mullins (1985:158) who explains that by divine appointment she exists for her son alone and "[her] sole duty...is to nourish Him until He is old enough to be delivered up into a man's world". The golden egg replacing her head indicates that her

³⁴ Adam and Yves, the alternative Adam and Eve also appear in a separate image which is discussed in Chapter Three.

personality as a woman has been completely subsumed by this religious purpose. The egg is a symbol of birth and regeneration and the golden colour represents glory and kingship. Its function in this reworking of biblical mythology is clearly stated in an image of the egg alone entitled *The Messiah* (2003: Fig.4.40). By using such a symbol in place of the Virgin's head, Rose could be raising awareness of Mary's, and indeed all women's, peripheral or subsidiary role in church politics, where the only acceptable expressions of human sexuality in women are maternity or abstinence.

Rose has given this annunciation event a banal contemporary setting, with Madame Oeuf, in a separate image, placed in the rocky space between the super-slides at the Durban beach-front amusement area and surrounded by hand drawn sperm jumping up and trying to fertilise her egg. To clarify this Rose has included an image entitled *Lucy's Fur Version 1:1:1 – Annunciation Context* (2003: Fig.4.41), which is an intensely coloured aerial shot of the Durban beachfront area. It looks almost as unreal as a Disney World image, with its saturated colours, palm trees and pristine blue sea. It evokes the hyperreality of myth, an intensity that belies the fact that this is a photograph of an actual place. Rose (2009) explains that Natal was so named because it was supposedly discovered on Christmas day by Vasco de Gama and his Portuguese explorers, so her recreation of the Christmas story could not have had a more appropriate setting³⁵. She is reinserting the African (Zulu) culture into a western history of Christianity by indicating that the Madonna in this case is Zulu and the Messiah for the new South Africa will therefore also be Zulu. In her own words (2009) "This story is a recreation of the genesis of a people, the birth of mankind, and that was one of the reasons for choosing Natal". So Tracey Rose's Madonna (Madame Oeuf) ironically takes on the role of Mary identified by Guerric the Abbot of Igny in the twelfth century as "Mother of Life" (Schafer 2002:161) but in this case she becomes the mother of an indigenous nation and producer of a secular saviour; we see here the creation of a new myth for a 'new South Africa'.

³⁵ Rose (2009) also notes that she was born in Addington hospital, near the Durban beachfront, so she considers this place to relate to birth for various reasons as well as considering herself to be technically a Zulu because she was born in Zululand.

Christine Dixie's evocations of motherhood

Christine Dixie approaches her interpretation of the Madonna from a very personal point of view as the works to be discussed here, all from a project entitled *Parturient Prospects*, 2006, were made in response to her experiences of pregnancy and the birth of her second child in 2005. Dixie, in an interview with me (2008), explained that she wanted to “create an uncomfortable tension” between the violence of medical imagery relating to childbirth and the imagery found in religious iconography, which tends to idealise the mother’s experience and construct the event as a natural outcome of a woman’s inherent ‘otherness’. This work interrogates the patriarchal constructions and resulting imagery that devalue women and their role in society through the discourses of medicine, religion and geography (mapping). Brenda Schmahmann (2007a:25), in her article on this work, notes:

While the gendered underpinnings of these discourses are not always immediately transparent when they are kept discrete from one another, they become evident when they are evoked simultaneously, and Dixie’s works reveal that they are in fact mutually reinforcing agents and indeed often use related tropes.

The largest work in the project, *Parturient Prospects – The Interior* (2006: Fig.4.42), takes its inspiration from an early colonial map of Africa by G. Blaeu originally published in the *Grooten Atlas* (1648-65: Fig.4.43). Dixie has replaced the continent of Africa with a large central image of a woman’s body that has been sliced open and spread out to reveal her interior organs, particularly those relating to reproduction. Early colonial discourses on exploration into Africa likened the continent to the unknown internal workings of the human body - a female body in particular. The new frontier, Africa, was represented in texts in biological terms as a dark, moist, fecund, inner world awaiting the illumination of Europe’s scientific gaze. It was terrifying in its power to engulf the male explorer but exciting in its possibility of conquest. The European explorer’s vision of Africa was thus feminised and polarised, as McClintock (1995:27) puts it, “between rape and emasculation”. As the world was explored and colonised the boundaries of knowledge gradually moved from geography to biology, so that by the late eighteenth century knowledge of the inner body was the new frontier to be explored. This particularly applied to the female body whose inner workings constituted a dark and mysterious place that needed to be opened and laid bare, like the African continent, to the light of the scientific gaze.

The use of female imagery for Africa was important in determining its status as inferior. In Europe women were conceptualised as other and inferior to men through an established division of labour and through biology, particularly the biological fact of childbearing. Africa was therefore constructed in terms of opposition to Europe, particularly the European male who was superior, reasoning, self-contained and above all civilised (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:106-107). In the eighteenth century, women, merely because of their biology, were condemned to a lower social status than men by the medium of scientific discourse. It was thought that the uterus was directly connected to the central nervous system, and that the physical development of childbearing facilities in the female body precluded any mental development (Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973:335). Woman's intelligence and rationality was therefore inferior to man's as the female body needed to channel all its resources towards the womb or, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:106) explain: "by implication, women's reproductive physiology rerouted their neurological pathways, diffusing the compact density of the rational male self". Added to this perceived lack of rational intelligence in women was the belief that emotional instability and moral weakness were unavoidable side effects.

The idea of a biological source for inferiority and the science/nature dichotomy was thus institutionalised in western thought through 'rational' scientific discourse. Dixie ironically promotes this 'female irrationality' by printing her images onto rice paper and then covering them with latex so the entire work looks and feels like soft skin rather than evoking the clinical precision of sharp edged lines on paper normally associated with map making. She furthermore sews the lines of latitude and longitude into the skin but inverts them so they are convex instead of concave, simulating the rounded shape of a pregnant stomach.³⁶ The scientific map of Africa

³⁶ The use of sewing on an artwork relates to the devaluation of anything resembling 'women's work' or craft such as sewing, ceramics or weaving for example. According to Roszika Parker (1996:5), the division between 'art' and 'craft' arose during the Renaissance when women were increasingly sewing or embroidering at home without pay, rather than professionally in workshops. Parker (1996:5) also notes: "The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft." Femininity is thus closely bound up with the notion of amateur work, in specific (non 'art') media, carried out in the domestic sphere and, accordingly, 'craft' has been relegated to a lower status than 'art' in the patriarchally instituted hierarchy of art making. As Parker points out the art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them (Parker 1996:5).

thus becomes a feminised medical diagram that interrogates her experience of the one area denied to men, conception and birth.

The central image is flanked by small rectangular blocks, which are reworked fragments taken from Annunciation prototypes of Madonna and Child paintings. The effect is similar to the divisions seen on either side of altarpieces such as the Master of San Martino's *Madonna and Child* (1270-90) and Bredell's *Black Madonna and Sisters* (2009) discussed above. However in this instance the inspiration was taken from Blaeu's pictorial embellishments, showing examples of the various 'exotic' inhabitants of Africa on either side of his map. The marginal position of these people on the edges of Blaeu's map indicate their 'otherness' and function in a very similar way to the liminal positioning of monsters in ancient *mappae mundi*. Monsters were placed on the outer edges of the known world to minimise the risk of their strangeness contaminating that which was known, ordered, regulated and 'normal' in the centre. Similarly, feminism has identified the patriarchal bias in medical discourse that identifies a woman's body in particular as a pathology to be 'normalized' or 'cured', the male body being 'the norm' or the positive aspect in terms of Aristotle's and Plato's theories of biological polarisation. Thus Schmahmann (2007a) refers to Mary Anne Doane (1985:152) who states that both women and disease are "socially devalued or undesirable, marginalised elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity".

Dixie has replaced the top three images on either side of Blaeu's map with details taken from Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation showing Angel Gabriel's hands on the left hand side, and the Madonna's hands and stomach on the right. Below these are details of the child on the left and the Madonna's breast on the right completing each aspect of a woman's 'otherness' through their link with conception, maternity and nurture. The Annunciation images in their original manifestation refer to Christ's sinless/sexless conception and therefore emphasise purity, chastity and restraint but their fragmentation in these small panels and the surgical implements held by Gabriel instead of his floral tributes evoke a more sinister interpretation.³⁷ The

³⁷ These fragments were taken from: Simone Martini's *Annunciation*, 1333, (Gabriel's hands, top left panel – originally holding an olive branch), Fra Filippo Lippi's Barberini *Annunciation*, c.1440 (Gabriel's hands second left panel and Virgin's stomach, second right panel), Fra Fillipo Lippi's San Lorenzo *Annunciation with two donors*, 1440(Gabriel's and the Virgin's hands, originally holding a lily stem, in third panel on the left, and the Virgin's arm

implements could imply painful medical procedures during childbirth although they look suspiciously like crochet hooks or something that may be used to perform abortions or even, as Schmahmann (2007a:30) suggests, “violation and a brutal deflowering”. The medical instruments were taken from illustrations of implements used for eye surgery, and Schmahmann (2007a:30) explains that Dixie chose them specifically to refer to gazing as sexual possession. Sexuality, as an inherent part of conception, is also indicated by the disembodied hands and fragments of the Madonna’s body that infer a process of seduction through touch and caress.

The lower three panels on either side are also fragments taken from Renaissance prototypes but in this case the left three panels, originally showing the Christ child supported by his mother’s hands, now proudly display a female child.³⁸ The gender shift is significant in terms of the history of religious imagery. Numerous Renaissance images of the Madonna and Christ child show Him naked more often than clothed and Steinberg (1996:27) notes “the conspicuous display of the privates, instead of resulting incidentally from the Child’s total nudity, is more likely the motive that promoted his nudity”. Steinberg (1996:24) further explains that the display of the Christ child’s genitals is important because it demonstrates that He is fully human in every way, fully male, but because He is simultaneously God He is “shame-less” in His nakedness (as in pre-lapsarian or not tainted with the shame that was introduced by original sin resulting in the fig-leaf clothing of Adam and Eve).

This effort to foreground a fully male saviour who is both God and man is questioned by Dixie who wonders how our history might be different if the saviour had been female (Dixie 2008). The power inherent in the gaze is also referred to here, as the bodies of naked women have traditionally been the passive subjects of a male appropriating gaze, whereas the naked Christ child displays the promise of His ability to actively fulfill God’s plan of redemption. Dixie

and stomach in top right hand panel). Fra Filippo Lippi’s Munich *Annunciation*, 1443 (the Virgin’s hand and stomach in the third panel on the right). Dixie has placed the title of the original work underneath each fragment.

³⁸ The fourth panel on the right is taken from van Eyck’s *Suckling Madonna Enthroned*, 1436, (breast and hand with baby removed), the fifth is from Van Cleve’s *Nursing Virgin*, c.1528, (breast, baby removed) and the last panel on the right is Masolino’s *Maria Lactans*, c.1420, (breast, baby’s hands removed). The fourth panel on the left is from Bellini’s *Madonna and Child with St. Peter and St. Sebastian*, 1487 (baby and hands), followed by Mantegna’s *Holy Family with Saint Elizabeth and St. John the Baptist as a Child*, 1495-1500, (baby and hands), and bottom left, Bellini’s *Madonna and Child with Saints Paul and George* c.1487, (baby and hands).

questions the legitimacy of this power by removing the purpose of the gaze, so it can neither witness proof of a deity nor function as a precursor to appropriation.

Opposite these three panels Dixie has placed three images of the Madonna's breast, also taken from Renaissance originals but with the child and the larger context removed so the breasts become sexually charged instead of merely nurturing. Miles (1992:32-34) contends that there is a fundamental tension between erotic attraction and religious meaning in images of the nursing Madonna, thus requiring a careful arrangement of her clothes and decorum in her deportment to offset any sense of sexual titillation. Megan Holmes (2001:173) also notes the importance of the formalization of stable iconographic conventions in images of the nursing Madonna (or Madonna Lactans) that would "discourage illicit looking". This became increasingly important with the evolution of Renaissance naturalism which, according to Holmes (2001:178), had the power to "undermine the Christian symbolic order...subvert the established links of concordance between sign and referent, encouraging a reading of Christian sacred signs and symbols in terms of their mundane counterpart". To avoid this and promote the Madonna's breast only in terms of its ability to nurture the Christ child and, through him, to nurture all Christians, images of the Madonna Lactans required conventions such as the inclusion of a Christ child, preferably suckling, a suitably modest and adoring mother, a level of idealization to elevate the Madonna above common humanity and a stately or serenely ordered setting.

In Dixie's fragments none of this is present; the emphasis is on the exposed breast alone – and in two of the images a hand either cupping the breast or pressing on the nipple continues the theme of sexual touching and desire that was introduced with the hands of Gabriel in the first three panels. The reciprocal gazes of Madonna and child are removed allowing for an unimpeded sexual gaze making the images overtly sensual, but with the emphasis here on active auto eroticism,³⁹ rather than portraying a Virgin/Madonna who passively awaits activation by a male principle.

³⁹ Dixie (2008) states that she modelled the hands on her own hands.

The nine oval roundels across the top of Dixie's work are also inspired by Blaeu's map but now contain historic representations of famous births. In Blaeu's image we see illustrations of ships coming into harbour, which Dixie (2008) notes is a "liminal moment of discovery" the precursor to 'taking possession' or penetration into the interior, in masculine terms. Dixie replaced these with examples of a woman and child's "liminal moment" showing experiences of the discovery and newness of birth, prior to the experiential continuum of a life together. Some of the source references for these roundels are from religious prototypes showing the birth of the Virgin, most, however, refer to caesarean births and are sourced from representations of the birth of Julius Caesar.⁴⁰

Dixie developed specific themes and content from *The Interior* in two series of works, the *Parturition* series and the *Birthing Tray* series (both 2006).⁴¹ The *Parturition* series is examined here as it refers more consistently to religious prototypes and the meanings they convey. Each of the five items in this series is made of wood and resembles a reliquary box and each contains certain 'relics' of Dixie's experience when her daughter Rosalie was born. (See Figs 4.44; 4.46; 4.47 and 4.48 for four of the five components.) The top receptacle contains real objects associated with birth such as medical hardware or object fragments from mother and child. The central compartment contains woodcuts printed on silicone, which was used for its medical references⁴² and because it hangs softly like skin.

The imagery is reworked from the panels flanking the central image in *The Interior*, fragments taken from Renaissance religious paintings with medical implements or diagrams and other details added. Electric lights are placed behind these images to create a mysterious glow from within the reliquary that emphasizes the notion of them being both precious and otherworldly. Dixie has carved onto the lower part of the reliquary words written in Latin, the language

⁴⁰ Dixie's daughter was born by caesarean section so the reference is motivated by personal experience.

⁴¹ The *Birthing Tray* series (2006) was developed from eight of the woodcut roundels at the top of *The Interior*, which were inserted into trays and digitally photographed with a vessel containing food or liquid on them relating to the birth process. Several of these have been discussed in detail by Schmahmann in "Figuring Maternity: Christine Dixie's *Parturient Prospects*" (Schmahmann 2007a) and "A Breach in Representation: Caesarean Section and Christine Dixie's 'Birthing Tray – Honey'" (Schmahmann 2007b).

⁴² Dixie (2008) notes that this material is used for breast prostheses in medicine.

associated with categorization, science and reason. The writing combines the angel's annunciation speech with medical jargon and numbers taken from scans of Rosalie during Dixie's pregnancy, thus conflating the discourses of medicine and religion and highlighting their debt to patriarchal systems of knowledge.

The combination of religion and medicine in these images clarifies the overlapping of patriarchal discourses in the areas where woman is identified as 'other'. The objects housed in the top section are not religious in any way yet through careful placement and display they appear sanctified. There are forceps in one, a breast pump in another, and medical items that look like pliers in a third. In another there are remnants of the physical birth process such as Dixie's pubic hairs shaved before the caesarean, Rosalie's umbilical cord and nail clippings, as well as the medical bracelets worn by both in hospital. The abject nature of these remnants alludes to the patriarchal disgust enunciated by St. Augustine in his comments about childbirth, and to societal taboos related to anything that disturbs the integrity of the body.⁴³ Ironically these evidences of corporeal debasement are presented in the same way as the revered physical relics of spiritually elevated saints, thus raising questions about 'double standards' and what constitutes acceptability and whose rules apply.

In *Parturition – Mucosa* (2006: Fig.4.44) the central image shows the Virgin's arm holding clothing away from her belly as if removing the skin to reveal a glowing red foetus floating in her uterus, alluding, as Schmahmann (2007a:36) notes, to a contemporary medical scan. The act of 'unveiling' follows an accepted practice of medical imagery as illustrated in a late nineteenth century statue from the Paris medical faculty entitled *Nature Unveiling Herself to Science* (1899: Fig.4.45). Nature is here personified as female in relation to the inferred male gaze of science. She is unveiling herself to reveal her naked body, which in this instance, as Ludmilla Jordanova (1989:89) points out, is given the positive connotation of both Nature and Truth. That this figure is both 'decently' covered and aesthetically perfect in the classical Greek mode, and is passively unveiling at the instigation of the active male, situates her firmly within accepted patriarchal

⁴³ As noted previously in this study, Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (2007) has identified substances that have become detached from the body (blood, urine, faeces, tears, milk, hair etc.) as marginal or transitional. They transgress the boundaries of the body and are therefore dangerous because they threaten physical and social structures that aim to control and complete both the body and the society in which that body operates.

discourses on the representation of women. She fulfils male fantasies on both the sexual and the scientific fronts, seen in men's desires for both women and knowledge, whereas Dixie's Virgin is neither whole nor visually available but is merely displaying her site of difference, her womb.

The unveiling of cloth can also be likened to autopsy imagery where the skin is removed as if it was clothing, to reveal the inner recesses of the body in an almost sexualized way. As Jordanova (1989:98) notes: "In the case of dissection, an actual female body could be possessed, made to yield up secrets, generate knowledge." Dixie further reveals how the female body is employed in medical imagery for the purposes of disseminating knowledge by including a small diagram of a caesarean section⁴⁴ showing the uterus held open by clamps, in the lower left register. Schmahmann (2007a:36) discusses how the folds of skin in the diagram resemble the folds of the Virgin's gown, and it has been sewn into the silicone with stitches that resemble sutures. The female body as both a subject of medical enquiry and religious approbation is presented as a passive recipient of the male gaze, raising issues of gendered binary oppositions such as nature vs. culture, or intuition vs. science and reason, and clarifying woman's status as 'other'. This is further reinforced by the soft darkness and textured finish of the main image, which contrasts sharply with the clinical 'Holy Trinity' of medical implements placed in the receptacle above.

In *Parturition – Umbilicus* (2006: Fig.4.46) and *Parturition – Vestibule* (2006: Fig.4.47) the hands of Gabriel hold the same medical implements as those shown in *The Interior*. Gabriel's hands, in *Parturition – Umbilicus*, are without the woodcut texture of other hands in this series as if the surgeon has already donned his surgical gloves. The hands are also lit from behind, and glow with a life force of their own indicating the 'God given' right of the surgeon to wield invasive instruments. Their display within a reliquary box also ironically refers to the way medical practitioners are often elevated to the status of 'Gods' due to their apparent control over life and death. Gabriel is holding a medical implement for eye surgery (discussed above in the panels of *The Interior*) but as Schmahmann notes (2007a:38) unlike the sexual inferences of the larger work this refers to the scientific gaze of the medical practitioner and his team during Dixie's surgery. The link is made clear by the physical remnants of her experience displayed in the receptacle above.

⁴⁴ Schmahmann (2007a:36) explains that this was taken from a medical textbook published in 1939.

In *Parturition – Vestibule* the emphasis in the main panel has moved from surgeon's hands to the instrument itself (also used for eye surgery), which glows disturbingly with a red light. The invasive nature of this instrument is clarified by real forceps that have been placed in the upper register of the reliquary. There are specific ramifications that arise from the use of medical implements relating to women's biology as this reiterates the notion of difference and 'otherness' raising the spectre of female imperfection or abnormality in opposition to the male 'norm'. Their clinical stainless steel contrasts sharply with the textured hands and glowing red implement in the aperture below. Interestingly, this implement with its hook-like end is reminiscent of the crochet hook in *The Interior*, with a reference to blood and pain reinforced by the red colouring. The juxtaposition of these examples of medical hardware thus introduces an element of revulsion, or even merely distaste on the part of the viewer that initiates a breakdown of viewer complacency. Reception of the work is disrupted and by this method the viewer is forced to re-evaluate the images and their implications.

The final example of this series to be discussed is *Parturition – Lacteal* (2006: Fig.4.48), which is a reworking of the lower right hand panel from *The Interior* with a suckling child reinserted as a negative image. In the receptacle above, a breast pump containing milk is displayed as a holy relic. The holy nature of breast milk has a long history from the earliest images of nursing deities. Warner (1983:193), in fact, ascribes the origins of the Madonna Lactans theme to portrayals of the Goddess Isis, crowned with the sun disc and regally suckling the infant Horus in Egypt, over a thousand years before the birth of Christ. Milk, especially the milk provided by a Goddess, is an ancient metaphor for the gift of life and this notion translated into Christian dogma pertains to the gift of eternal life. Thus, as Warner (1983:194) notes, a mystic meditating on the incarnation would see beyond the historical event of a nursing mother to "an eternal mystery whereby the Christian soul is perpetually nourished and sustained by grace, of which Mary's milk is a sublime epiphany." The spiritual importance of Mary's milk is developed in Christian writings and sermons over the centuries and it even becomes the vehicle for miraculous healings in compilations of stories written down during the Middle Ages by the Cistercians and

Dominicans.⁴⁵ The result of this was that phials purporting to contain Mary's milk were preserved in reliquaries and shrines that pilgrims would visit all over Christendom.⁴⁶

Dixie's reliquary ironically refers to this tradition but in a way that emphasises the earthly physicality of milk production. The breast with its insistently rosy nipple is the focal point while the suckling baby is only present through his/her absence thus the breast pump becomes a surrogate for the child. The milk in it can therefore be identified as an abject substance, instead of a heavenly elixir, because it has not been directly transmitted from mother to child, so her nurturing and sustaining role is delayed or even cancelled. By foregrounding the mechanics of physically pumping milk using an external device, a sense of sentimental mystery revolving around the 'natural' aspects of motherly nurture are rendered banal and mundane. Mary's engagement with humanity, as a nursing mother, is problematised in Madonna Lactans images, which functioned historically to balance both the humanity and godliness of Mary and Jesus within a set of stable pictorial conventions.⁴⁷ In this image only the earthly reality remains. The child is not physically there as a saviour, neither is the Madonna who only exists as a lactating breast. Schmahmann (2007a:39) furthermore notes that the breast is so stylised that it looks like a prosthesis attached to the body, far removed from the life giving spiritual possibilities evoked by the real breast of a concerned, intercessory Madonna.

Dixie's interest in fragmentation as a strategy for deconstructing the power of the gaze is further interrogated in the series of six woodcuts entitled *Blocking*, made in 2008 (Figs.4.49 to 4.54), which are a development of the six lower images on either side of the format in *The Interior*. The title refers to the physical process of working with a woodcut block, which Dixie indicates by creating the smaller blocks with an edge suggesting three-dimensionality, and by creating a thin

⁴⁵ For examples of these miraculous stories see Warner (1983:197-200).

⁴⁶ Warner (1983:200) notes that from the thirteenth century onwards there were so many phials of 'Mary's milk' in shrines all over Europe that Calvin was prompted to comment "if the holy Virgin had been a cow, or a wet nurse all her life she would have been hard put to it to yield such a great quantity" (quoted by Warner from J.A.S. Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire Critique des Reliques et Images Miraculeuses*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1821-2), 2:160-1).

⁴⁷ These conventions shifted during different centuries depending on the level of naturalism employed, the cultural practices of the day and changing religious viewpoints regarding the humanity or sanctity of Mary herself. For a discussion of these fluctuations see "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art" by Megan Holmes (2001:167-195) and "The Milk of Paradise" by Marina Warner (1983:192-205) and "The Virgin's One Bare Breast" by Margaret Miles (1992:26-37).

white line where the block has been abstracted from the larger image. In this way the works are self-reflexive, but they also engage conceptually with the notion of ‘blocking’ the gaze by manipulating the images as fragments and interrogating the notion of who ‘owns’ the look. There are three sets of images, therefore, that have the Virgin looking at the child’s genitals as their theme, and three that focus on the baby looking at the Virgin’s breast.

Blocking Bellini’s Madonna and Child (2008: Fig.4.49) for example shows the same child’s body that is used on the left hand side of *The Interior*, complete with female genitals, but on the right hand side of this image Dixie has now placed a detail of the original male genitals in the small extracted ‘block’. Corresponding to this fragment is a section of the Madonna’s face on the left side showing her modestly downcast eye indicating that this image is clearly about the legitimacy of the gaze. Questions are raised in these works regarding the acceptable public display of the Christ child’s genitals to prove his humanity, or the display of ‘lack’ in the female child through Dixie’s juxtaposition of male and female genitals, or the display of female nudity for male perusal in the art historical tradition, and finally questions of who may look at who. The Madonna, for example, is not looking at the viewer but has a veiled eye, as if she is glancing surreptitiously at the child’s genitals. In art historical traditions the downcast gaze is a suitable feminine attribute because not only does it denote modesty, but it allows for unimpeded viewing of the female subject, yet the viewer may not gaze at this Madonna because she is merely a tiny fragment, so visual gratification is ‘blocked’.

Dixie (2008) states that these works are inspired by a series of eroticized anatomical images found in the Renaissance medical diagrams of Charles Estienne, a doctor who published a manual of anatomy in 1545 entitled *De dissectione partium corporis humani* (Fig.4.55).⁴⁸ Estienne’s images, like Dixie’s, are woodcuts and they also function by removing a ‘block’ from the body of the subject. The remaining opening is then filled with medical details of the underlying internal anatomy. Estienne’s diagrams fulfill patriarchal expectations because they

⁴⁸ The notion of the ‘gaze’ pertaining to erotic looking at female nudes in art is raised here because the subjects in these ‘medical’ images are reworked, as Bette Talvacchia (1999:161) points out, from a series of erotic engravings, entitled *Loves of the Gods*, by Caraglio. The figures by Estienne are not displayed as dissected cadavers but stand, or recline in “sensuous abandon” (Talvacchia 1999:167) because he has directly appropriated pose, setting and gesture, creating “a conjunction between the erotic and the scientific” (Schmahmann 2007:28).

display the female body in various sensual poses while also revealing the body's internal workings to the scientific gaze. Dixie's examples both draw attention to the politics of the gaze by subverting those expectations, and display an alternative form of looking that questions the norms entrenched by patriarchy. Dixie (2008) states that she was trying to approximate Estienne's effect of removing and replacing clearly delineated sections without falling into the modes of exploitative display found in Estienne's examples. The marked blocked section in each woodcut indicates the changes she has made to the original image. Dixie then places the original detail in the small block on one side (the male genitals in this case, or a suckling baby in *Blocking Van Eyck's Paele Virgin* (2008: Fig.4.54), for example). She then also includes a fragment of the subject's gaze (baby or Virgin) on the other side of the central image to draw attention to the ownership of the gaze and its gendered implications.⁴⁹

By returning to imagery used in *The Interior* and the *Parturition* series, Dixie ensures that her content can be understood as a development of themes explored in the earlier works. The fragmentary nature of her images precludes the notion of a whole and perfect female body, shored up and idealised through the aesthetic intervention of the artmaking process, and presented for appropriation by the male gaze. Dixie's interventions expose the culpability of visual history and religious doctrine as agents in the social construction of gender and in the creation of what Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), has termed the "docile body", meaning a body that is subject to institutional regulation and control.

Like the other female artists discussed thus far, Dixie is employing feminist theoretical discourses to unpack images of the Madonna/Virgin and the role prescribed for her by a patriarchal hegemony. The women artists discussed above re-present this religious icon in a subversive way to deconstruct religious 'truths' about Mary and to question the construction of a certain prescribed expectation of womanhood that she supposedly represents. Feminist strategies allow them to critique gendered myths inspired to control women and suppress sexuality, and they raise awareness of the continued need for women to embrace self-determination and personal freedom. The last two artists in this chapter, however, are men and therefore approach

⁴⁹ When these are exhibited, wherever possible, Dixie prefers that the three mother figures are hung on one wall and the three suckling babies opposite, so they set up a dialogue with each other (Dixie 2008).

Marian imagery with a different agenda, although when dealing with a female icon it is impossible to completely ignore feminist implications.

The Madonna according to Wim Botha and Conrad Botes

Botha is not aiming to re-engage with an alternative spirituality in his images of Madonnas, as Majak Bredell is, nor is he aiming to actively undermine or reinvent religious myths like Tracey Rose. In fact Botha (2008) stated to me that he is ambivalent about religion other than its usefulness as a communicative device so he considers the main commentary in his works to revolve around art and art historical issues. The history of western art is deeply influenced by the church and ecclesiastical commissions, as the church in Europe for many years had the greatest power and control over cultural production, so for Botha, religious imagery and art history are inextricably linked. The fact remains, however, that in using religious icons such as a Madonna or crucified Christ, it is very difficult to avoid the connotations of faith and religion, which are inevitably segued into Botha's art historical concerns, revealing in the process the normal uncritical acceptance of their implications. Botha (2008) has said that he chooses these figures because they are firmly established 'types' to which people already have an inbuilt, or learned response. That response can be accessed and manipulated by the artist through his choice of image and his choice of alteration through which he can "play with an entire history of art indirectly instead of just focussing on the one work" (Botha 2008).

Carbon Copy (Madonna del parto col bambino) (2001: Fig.4.56) at first glance looks like an apparently generic Madonna and child, but the Madonna is pregnant (indicated also in the title) and she is constructed unexpectedly from anthracite. As a pregnant mother she adopts a secularised persona therefore perhaps warranting a less exalted material, but over her head one finds the sublimation of anthracite's dirty physicality in the gas flames of her halo (which ironically also evokes a gas cooker ring). It is interesting to note how the mere alteration of raw material or a slight shifting of focus or combination of features can apparently reveal subversive meanings in what was historically a revered image. Although there is an obvious spiritual implication in the tongues of fire above her, she does not fulfil those expectations engendered by the 'high art' Madonnas in traditional materials. Michelangelo's *Bruges Madonna* (1501-1504:

Fig.4.57), for example, conveys an air of reverence and spirituality evoked by the luminosity of marble, akin to the “visual piety” spoken of by Morgan (1999:1) as an inherent part of “the visual formation and practice of religious belief”. Botha’s Madonna, however, despite her close ties to religious visual tradition, loses her iconic Christian status and becomes human, sexualised, secular, dirty, practical – yet ‘other’ as the flaming halo indicates. In so doing, she relates very closely to the origin of the ‘black Madonna’, discussed above in relation to Bredell’s work, and to the history of Christian art in the West.

The blackness of anthracite, in part, refers to the assimilation of past traditions through this Madonna’s link with the medieval black Madonna statues, and their link with the ancient black goddesses discussed earlier in this chapter. *Carbon Copy*, therefore, interrogates the manipulative nature of religious visual culture and makes one aware of the distance between traditional beliefs and their origins. Botha’s secular Madonna is not necessarily a Christian religious work at all, but a social comment on the exigencies of daily life and the current status of women. Like the submissive Virgin Mary she evokes the self-sacrifice of a mother figure referring to drudgeries of household necessities like cooking for the family, heating the home and raising children. The anthracite could also be seen as a sacrificial material suggesting that she will be consumed in the process. On the other hand she simultaneously undermines the meek purity of the Virgin Mary by referring to notions of strength and sexuality in women. She is a black Madonna, a great Goddess and a carnal matriarch all rolled into one. Scratch off one persona and another emerges like a palimpsest.

This rich amalgamation of associations is a by-product of Botha’s choice of religious iconography. It can also be found in what, at first glance, appears to be a less contentious appropriation of an icon of both religion and art history – Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (1498-1500 Fig.5.5), reworked by Botha in a life size mirror image as *Mieliepap Pietà* (2004: Fig.4.58). Like anthracite, mieliepap has cultural connotations. It is a staple food, a basic physical sustenance that is valued by both black and Afrikaans cultures, yet simultaneously it could be understood as a physical manifestation of religion, which is supposed to ‘feed the soul’. Quite apart from the metaphorical associations, Botha (2008) has explained that he chose mieliepap because of its physical properties as an art material. Although it was pasted onto an armature and modelled in

the first stages of construction, it was carved in the last stages so the effect in both creative method and end result is very similar to the marble original. Marble is a permanent material that carries connotations of preciousness, elitism and 'high art'.⁵⁰ It is also often chosen for elevated subject matter, religious and mythical, so Botha has simulated a very expensive, valuable medium whose value lies in its ability to be decorative, with a cheap but culturally valuable foodstuff. The mieliepap, however, in the process of simulating marble, becomes devoid of the usefulness that gave it intrinsic value; yet paradoxically becomes infinitely more valuable as an artwork. There are several underlying commentaries here on the nature of art in relation to life, or art history and its application to modern culture, or spiritual versus practical needs. It speaks to the very core of what art is and why we make it.

Mieliepap Pietà was originally created as part of Botha's submission for the same *Personal Affects* exhibition in New York that Victor's *The Eight Marys* were made for. Like Victor's work, Botha's sculpture was thus ironically inspired by the fact that it would be exhibited in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and, like the original *Pietà* by Michelangelo, it was exhibited on the right hand side in an alcove off the nave. It is, however, a perfect mirror image and not an exact copy so these parallels set up infinite loops of ambiguity relating to the dialectics of high art and popular imagery, authenticity and reproduction. Enhancing this dialectic is the fact that, as Botha (2008) notes "the Cathedral itself is a fake – it looks hundreds of years old but is still being built". Like the *Mieliepap Pietà* there is a sense of aspiration, a striving for nobility arising from historic lineage but instead they become the metaphorical 'nouveau riche' of the art world.

Having established the pseudo status of this image the viewer is left free to re-evaluate the figures and consider what exactly is being presented. As with the *Carbon Copy* Madonna, material considerations secularise this image so the aura of reverence and contemplation gives way to a consideration of artistic and historical implications raised by the changes. In factual terms we have a young, voluptuous woman gazing down at the nearly naked body of a man in her arms (seemingly the same age). It appears more likely that this is a pair of lovers than a mother and child as there is a certain amount of sexual innuendo in her gaze, which is directed

⁵⁰ This is in opposition to the use of bronze, for example, which is more weatherproof and was therefore chosen more often for political sculptures that would be erected in public places. The connotations of bronze and marble thus differ remarkably.

towards his groin area; at the very least it is an erotically ambiguous image. These considerations would be unthinkable in a contemplation of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which is constrained by the original purpose - to produce an image of such beauty that it would enhance religious meditation and worship. The spiritual intent of the work, therefore, lies at the heart of its reception, so Botha's ability to shift a viewer's frame of reference from religious to art historical/secular through his manipulations of form and material has the most far-reaching consequences for our reading of his works. Through minimal mediation of a familiar image the artist is able to insert what Botha (2008) has termed a 'virus' into visual history, or at least into your memory of visual images, because it is never possible to look at the original again without some aspect of the mediated image affecting your response.

The last Madonna by Botha to be discussed is *Apocalumbilicus* (2006: Fig.4.59) depicting a haloed skeleton smiling down upon a skeleton baby cradled in her arms. The Madonna has lost her front teeth so her normal genteel demeanour is rendered bathetic, even humorous, despite the apocalyptically blasted landscape and what looks like a continuing force stripping the remaining flesh and sinews from her limbs. Apocalypse has usually been understood as some disaster or cataclysm that brings about the end of the world, as illustrated here, but Botha (Michael Stevenson 2007b) has explained that the literal definition is a revelation or unveiling of knowledge. By stripping away both flesh and beauty Botha reveals the base humanity and transience of this icon of everlasting salvation, so both definitions would appear to apply. Ironically 'art' in this instance literally exposes the fatal flaws of an irrational belief system that has been visually bolstered by art history.

This is one work on a solo exhibition by Botha entitled *Apocalagnosia*, a word that the Michael Stevenson (2007b) notes is a "neologism formed by combining 'apocalypse' and 'agnosia'".⁵¹ Agnosia means a loss of knowledge (a-gnosis) and the medical definition describes it as "the inability to recognise people or objects even when basic sensory modalities, such as vision, are intact" (PsychNet-UK 2003). It can also affect hearing and tactile sensations so the word, as used by Botha, implies the limitations of human understanding even when knowledge is being

⁵¹ The exhibition was held at the Michael Stevenson Gallery from 11 January to 10 February 2007.

revealed through art. It suggests a sense of futility in exposing ‘truths’ when people are unable to comprehend them and the effect of this conceptual underpinning in Botha’s work is visually and metaphorically akin to Joseph Beuys’ 1965 performance piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (Fig.4.60).⁵² During the performance Beuys covered his head with honey and gold leaf to evoke shamanistic power and intuition. The gold has alchemical importance, indicating purity in alchemical terms and represents the outcome of a successful transformation of base metals, but is also similar in effect to the shining halo placed over the heads of saints and deities in religious imagery.⁵³ Beuys certainly evokes something otherworldly (religious?) in this work and, as his motive was to indicate the futility of explaining intuitive and creative processes to people hampered by rationality, one could say that his audience was as limited by agnosia in this respect as are the viewers that Botha is addressing. There is also a certain amount of visual congruence between Beuys cradling the hare in his arms in the starkly limited setting of the gallery and the Madonna standing with her bony baby in an empty landscape.

Umbilicus in the title could refer to the link between mother and child but is also likely to raise consideration of the nature of the nurturing/controlling state and the dependent subject in social and political power relationships. The persistence of a visual identification that can equate two absurd skeletons with a Sainly Madonna cradling the ‘Son of God’ indicates the continuing strength of received information and historical ‘truths’ that were promoted to pursue both religious and state agendas. Unquestioning reception of such imagery results in religion functioning as the ‘opiate of the masses’ so Botha’s disclosure of the (skeletal) realities underpinning these (fleshly) constructs are an attempt to reveal, apocalyptically, prophetically, the limits of our understanding, and to reveal a point of disruption in the web of power relations.

Like Botha, Conrad Botes (2009) explains that he uses religious imagery because it is so easy to appropriate and manipulate. His interest is mostly in creating political allegories, and he notes that from his earliest memories politics and religion were intertwined due to his Calvinistic

⁵² Beuys’ performance took place in the Galerie Alfred Schmela in Dusseldorf on the 26 November 1965 (Stachelhaus 1987:135).

⁵³ The correlation of alchemical gold and the halo representing spiritual purity can also be found in the Hermetic, or esoteric side of alchemy which “saw the transmutation of metals as more or less unimportant in itself; the making of gold was rather the analog of physiological transformation – sickness to health or old age to youth, and of spiritual transformation, peccancy (sinfulness) to sinlessness” (Joiner 1982:25).

Afrikaans upbringing. This framework of patriarchal conservatism and religious morality gave him an appreciation for the ability of certain images to cause disruption and shock. As Botes (2009) says: “I definitely want to confront people, and combining certain things with religious imagery does that. That is why religious imagery is so powerful [although] I am not making a direct comment on religion.”

Botes also parodies Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, by replacing the Madonna with a Gorilla in his *Pietà* (2007: Fig.4.61). The *Pietà* group is centrally set against painted curved blue lines that create a framework for irregularly placed and sized painted glass roundels, like vignettes or stained glass windows, that can be related in some way to the sorrowing ‘mother’ and her son. The gorilla/Madonna is both humorous and darkly satirical as it could evoke the early colonial categorisation of the African as the missing link between primates and human beings,⁵⁴ or at the other extreme, merely someone dressed up in a gorilla suit for a party or to deliver a ‘gorillagram’. Links to the colonial past are, however, made implicit through reference to the images in the roundels. Each one, while innocuous in itself, can be read in conjunction with the others as a commentary on forced labour, oppression of the masses, exploitation, and poverty seen in the many images of people carrying heavy burdens or references to death (a coffin, in one, and a dead body being carried in another).

Colonial stereotyping is also demonstrated in two roundels showing a man carrying bundles tied to a stick. The huge arm and head that are being transported in two of the roundels possibly suggest pieces of Emperor Constantine’s enormous statue from the defunct Roman Empire, making the connection between the fall of Rome and the demise of apartheid.⁵⁵ There are also images of nurture (the man holding a dog) and sorrow (the man holding a dead body) that relate visually to the Madonna cradling the body of Christ. This *Pietà* parody thus functions as a political commentary on apartheid, which is why it was chosen to be part of an exhibition entitled *Apartheid: The South African Mirror* that was held in Barcelona from September 2007 to

⁵⁴ See Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:98-105) “The new biology and the great chain of being”, for a discussion of the origins of this so-called ‘scientific’ categorisation of non-caucasian people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁵⁵ The hand at the end of the arm is holding a pencil, perhaps referring humorously to Botes himself, or to other artists and their role in the political demise of the apartheid regime.

February 2008.⁵⁶

Conclusion

It is perhaps unsurprising that the re-interpretation of Mary by women artists tends to engage more directly with identity and personal issues than do the examples by both Botha and Botes, which have other kinds of social and political motivations. Nevertheless this one figure, an icon of womanhood from biblical imagery, is a remarkably rich receptacle for both social and religious meaning. The examples discussed have thus employed the Virgin Mary/Madonna to engage with such diverse issues as personal identity, sexuality, procreation, patriarchal idealism, mechanisms of cultural power over women, the creation of ‘docile bodies’, the questioning of ‘grand narratives’, the influence of an art historical continuum, political inequalities in a South African context, and debunking cultural myths, among others. This slight body has carried a heavy burden of symbolism over the centuries judging by the diversity of responses and issues that can be alluded to through her manipulation in a post-modern context.

In terms of Foucault’s (1990a:92-98) analysis of power, Mary, Virgin and Mother of God, exists as a flexible symbol of the intersection of various power relations. She encapsulates a matrix of social, religious, political and cultural forces, and as such she forms a point in the web of power that can be manipulated to interrogate and resist each of those controlling structures. Her historical continuum is important in this respect as a means to investigate past constructs and to uncover the ‘ontology of the present’ from which an alternative approach may manifest. Similarly, in the next chapter, the persona of Jesus Christ forms a historic fulcrum around which social and political constructs are built. In this case, however, the emphasis is on masculinity and patriarchal power structures.

⁵⁶ This exhibition is described on the CCCB website (2010) as: “a conceptual and visual approach to the old and new forms of prejudice and racial discrimination, based on a wide selection of original artworks and documentary material. The exhibition documents the main stages and characteristics of a tragically famous history and scenario which speak not only of the South African experience, but also of its European legacy, of racial ideologies and of the racist clichés and practices fed by western modernism, and how these prejudices constitute even today a powerful instrument for justifying and maintaining the most arbitrary injustices.” It was curated by Pep Subiros and exhibited under the auspices of the CCCB, a public consortium created by the Diputació de Barcelona (Provincial Council) and the Ajuntament de Barcelona (Barcelona City Council).

CHAPTER FIVE

Images of Jesus Christ, Son of God

Images of Christ evoke the very core of Christian belief and many Christians believe that ‘seeing’ Christ is equated with ‘seeing’ salvation manifest in physical form - a tangible proof of God’s plan of redemption. When the old priest Simeon took the Christ child into his arms, therefore, he was able to say “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30, New International Version). Similarly millions of paintings portraying Christ’s life and actions or carved crucifixes and other figurines have been meditated upon as an aid to spiritual contemplation of the role Christ has played on behalf of humanity, and as proof that such a person actually existed. From His birth to death and resurrection He is the lynch pin upon which the message of Christian salvation rests so the traditions and conventions surrounding His likeness probably carry greater significance, and excite greater controversy when disrupted, than any other religious icon. The public furore over Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, or Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (see Chapter One) are indications of the limitations of tolerance afforded to transgressions of the accepted parameters of Christology.

Transgressions informing the images of Christ discussed below include deviations from a restricted idealised norm in His appearance. This approach is favoured by Diane Victor, who depicts a banal and slightly ludicrous persona to raise questions about outdated expectations promoted by the church aimed at restricting male and female sexual behaviour. Masculine identity is the subject of works by the male artists in this chapter. Conrad Botes and Wim Botha engage with transgressive interpretations of the attributes of Christ to query a traditional masculine identity that displays aggression, machismo and control but is increasingly undermined by social constraints and changes in the political status quo in post-apartheid South Africa. Botes and Lawrence Lemaona also engage with masculinity that has been impacted by the legacy of apartheid violence, the history of Afrikaner nationalism and the permeation of racial politics in sport through the lens of Christian symbolism. In a post-colonial, post-apartheid framework where even the notion of masculinity is problematised the icon of an idealised Christ who upholds tradition and power dissolves under scrutiny.

Diane Victor's Christ - made man

Along with the notion of a perfect and unchanging saviour a certain ideal of His appearance has become the norm, or at least maintained a particular quality that makes Christ a recognisable image.¹ This is despite the fact that images of Christ have changed and developed over the centuries, dependent on particular expectations delineated by fashion and context, ethnic preferences, religious and social developments and stylistic considerations.² In recent times a plethora of popular images of Christ show a Eurocentric, patrician face with long wavy hair (often light brown or blonde) usually bearded and with a sorrowful or compassionate expression (Fig.5.1). Despite the many permutations of this ideal in artistic interpretations, there is enough of a similarity in renditions of Jesus to make him recognisable even without the identifying accoutrements of a crown of thorns, a bleeding heart or a cross. Ena Giurescu Heller (2002:13) thus notes that while all representations of Christ are not alike “[i]t seems that they all follow – with varying levels of detail and accuracy – a common prototype”.

Heller (2002:14) ascribes the enduring influence of this image to its origins as an *acheiropoieton* (an image that is ‘not made by hands’) in the mythical ‘supernatural’ transference of Christ’s features miraculously onto a cloth that was used to wipe his face, as found in the *Mandyllion of Edessa* (Fig.5.2) or the well known myth of the Veil of Veronica (Fig.5.3).³ The archetypal status of such imagery, free of human agency or artistic interpretation, ensured its veneration because

¹ Colleen Conway (2008:149) points out that although there are many mentions of “flesh” and “glory” with reference to Jesus the bible never actually describes his physical features at all.

² Byzantine representations of Christ, for example, are very different to those made during the Quattrocento in Italy, due to the levels of naturalism employed, the didactic and doctrinal requirements of such images and the expectations of the public. Similarly the idealism of sixteenth and seventeenth century Italian renditions of Christ, even when suffering on the cross, differ from the graphic depiction of suffering shown by Grunewald, or some of the seventeenth century Spanish crucifixes, which attempt to portray the extent of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity.

³ Belief in the story and image of the *Mandyllion of Edessa* (mandyllion is from the Greek word for cloth) dates from the late sixth to the early thirteenth century. The legend tells of King Abgar of Edessa who was afflicted by leprosy and sent an emissary to Jesus to ask for help. Jesus gave him the cloth, which he had used to dry his face and on which traces of his image miraculously remained. When the king saw the image on the cloth he was instantly cured. The second example, the *Veil of Veronica*, was a cloth offered to Christ by St Veronica to wipe his face while he was on the Via Dolorosa (road to Calvary) or in the Garden of Gethsemane (depending on the version). This cloth came to be known as the ‘Veronica’ or the *vernicle* or *sudarium*, which was a term for a cloth for wiping sweat. The cult of Veronica coincides with the disappearance of the *Mandyllion* from Constantinople, probably when this city was conquered by Crusaders in 1204 (Heller 2002: 16-18). It was subsequently “the most reproduced image in Christendom and perhaps the most famous relic in Rome” (Finaledi 2000:75).

such a portrait could “prove beyond any doubt the historical existence of Jesus” and “give the faithful an accurate image of what he really looked like” (Heller 2002:19). This allegedly authentic portrayal of Jesus resulted in subsequent images being closely copied and Heller (2002:21) further extrapolates from this to conclude that the remarkable similarity and various recurring features through which images of Christ become recognisable can be traced back to these prototypes.

Richard Viladesau (2008:57) explains that there was also a tradition of eyewitness reports, prevalent from the Middle Ages onwards, based on the Latin translation in the thirteenth or fourteenth century of an ancient Greek manuscript. This was purportedly a letter that was written by a (fictional) governor of Judea (called Publius Lentulus in later versions) just prior to the time of Pontius Pilate. It contained a detailed description of the physical appearance of Christ that accords closely with traditional representations. The importance of adhering to tradition in reproducing this image therefore is clear, if the image is to retain its accuracy; which accords with the view expressed by Ouspensky (1978:13) regarding the carefully delineated parameters for painting icons if they are to retain their efficacy in religious terms (see Chapter One).

The unchanging nature of Christ (and by inference of God) is therefore manifest in the considerable level of constancy through which He is portrayed, which extends to His attributes, both overt and spiritual, both physically manifest and implied. This means that any image closely resembling the expected visage and physical accoutrements of Christ may instantly be understood as a receptacle for all the historical, religious and art historical meanings ascribed to it throughout the ages. It is thus a rich vehicle for any artistic intervention in a post-modern sense. A disruption of these attributes, as displayed in many of the works to be discussed in this chapter, is therefore often understood by the religious community as a disruption of God’s plan, and a denial of the Christian faith in its most fundamental form.

The need for constancy may partly explain why the Christ in Diane Victor’s *Little Deposition Picture* (2002: Fig.5.4) (briefly discussed in the introduction) caused such consternation. These protagonists are only understood as representations of Christ and Mary because of the title and the physical arrangement of the figures that parody Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (1498-1500: Fig.5.5).

Victor's drawing, however, undermines every visual tradition and religious expectation that imbues the original. The face and physique of both Christ and Mary do not measure up to classical ideals and do not accord with art historical visual traditions which originated in Christian neo-Platonic thought from Renaissance humanists, who believed that the beauty of the human body reflects the beauty of the soul (Viladesau 2008:59). The ubiquitous headgear of many contemporary young men, a baseball cap, renders this Christ banal and contemporary, suggesting mundane mortality rather than spiritual purity. It also identifies him as youthful, perhaps adolescent, rather than the adult Christ. He is clearly not dead although a satirical reference to the stigmata can be seen in a very small wound prominently displayed on the lifted hand, as if he is trying to prove his identity in the face of possible scepticism.

Against all religious taboos regarding sexuality his penis is displayed, in fact is even revealed by the Madonna who appears to be pulling back the cloth over his lap. Victor may be ironically alluding to the many instances where the infant Jesus' genitals were deliberately displayed to prove that He was fully human as well as fully divine. As Steinberg (1996:15) explains, "the evidence of Christ's sexual member serves as the pledge of God's humanation".⁴ The common display of genitals in representations of the infant Jesus are in complete contrast to the adult Christ, however, and Victor is pushing the levels of acceptability by conflating child and adult in this image. Steinberg (1996:15) notes that even discussion of Christ's sexuality was suppressed "originally by the ethos of Christian asceticism, ultimately by decorum". In fact discussion of the adult Christ's genitalia was considered "unthinkable this side of blasphemy" (Steinberg 1996:233).

Whereas the Christ in Michelangelo's *Pietà* is modestly draped in a loincloth, a later sculpture, the *Risen Christ* (1514-20: Fig.5.6) also by Michelangelo, is one of the very few representations of a fully naked, adult, traditional Christ. Steinberg (1996:22) believes that Michelangelo is drawing on the belief that, while fully human, Christ was not subject to human sinfulness, which would include the sinful nature of lustful sexuality that was part of Adam's curse. A risen Christ could display His triumph over sin therefore His genitals would also be perfect, pristine,

⁴ See Leo Steinberg's 1996 expanded edition of *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* for a full discussion of this.

prelapsarian. Steinberg (1996:21) points out that Michelangelo would also have found his inspiration in the neo-Platonic ideal ascribed to ancient Classical sculpture of a pure soul expressed physically in “the pattern of naked perfection untouched by shame, nude bodies untroubled by modesty.” The relevance of this discussion for Victor’s work lies in the importance of emphasising Christ’s lack of sexual sinfulness, which includes a lack of lustful desire or concupiscence leading to shame. Victor’s Christ, on the other hand, has a piece of string tightly tied around his penis. Victor (2006b) explains that this pertains to an account that she read of a practice engaged in by certain monks. They believed that it would prevent nocturnal emissions, which they thought were the result of succubi who enticed them to sin in their dreams.

The equation of sin with a physical event that owes nothing to free will or mental control is a result of Augustine’s teachings about sexuality. Augustine believed that originally Adam’s penis was subject to his intellectual control so that he would have engaged in sexual congress only for the purpose of procreation and without lust in a manner that was “wholly volitional, rational, [and] resorted to only for progeny’s sake, no law of brute body disputing the law of the mind” (Steinberg 1996:232). Uncontrollable penile responses such as spontaneous erections or nocturnal emissions are therefore the result of the Fall, thus identifying mankind as a sinful being. An anti-classical Christ who not only displays his penis but who demonstrates his sinful sexual status so blatantly is clearly not a holy saviour. He looks instead like a gauche adolescent attempting, with his mother’s help, to deal with the inevitable effect of rampant hormones. It is perhaps understandable that a member of the viewing public found Victor’s interpretation blasphemous and offensive in the extreme as it cuts to the heart of the Christian message by rendering the life experience of a sinless saviour in terms of a sinful, ordinary mortal.⁵

A similar parodic rendition of Christ from the *Pietà* can be found in Panel 5 of Victor’s *Eight Marys* (Fig.4.8 [in situ] and Fig.5.7), discussed in relation to the parody of the Virgin in Chapter

⁵ The vandalism that resulted from the offended viewer’s response is discussed in the introduction to this document on page 3.

Four.⁶ This is a mirror image of the first drawing, minus the baseball cap and string around the penis. This Christ is wearing one shoe, which emphasises the incongruity of his nakedness. He looks less effete than the former example and more adult as his chest is hairy, his glance is more knowing and the hair on his head appears to be thinning. The adolescent's limp wristed gesture displaying stigmata has now become an outstretched palm adorned with crossed plasters in a gesture of supplication. Adult sexuality is inferred by the half-naked matron on whose lap he is sitting and who appears to be fondling his penis, perhaps a lover rather than a mother. Both protagonists appear to have aged and developed from youthful ineffectuality in the first drawing to debauched adults, particularly as the theme appears to concentrate on sexual development. The effect of both drawings is the same, in Victor's presentation of anti-classical, sinful human beings incapable of salvation, she restores her religious icons to humanity and questions the impossibility of historic role models who prescribe restrictive social behaviour and deny human sexuality. Victor's strategy thus simultaneously undermines a historic continuum of religious imagery, and the message of salvation through aspiration and conformity that has been conveyed and accepted for centuries.

Wim Botha, on the other hand, takes an intellectual approach to the person of Christ, by semiotically dismembering the very structure of religious discourse that underpins Christ's role as redeemer.

Wim Botha's deconstruction of doctrine

In his introduction to *The Sacred Gaze* David Morgan (2005:6-12) interrogates the notion of 'belief' as the foundation of faith and the way belief is mediated through words, actions, and images. Morgan states that belief cannot exist without a body to speak or act and without a means to share that belief. In other words, it is not something that happens in isolation but as part of culture: it must be communicated (Morgan 2005:9). The New Testament, the Gospel of John 1:1 (New International Version) states: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The importance of 'speaking' a truth into existence is emphasised

⁶ Victor was inspired to rework this image because she identified the vandalism to the *Little Deposition Picture* as proof of the power of this image to incite response, rather than viewer complacency.

by presenting the Word (or Logos) as an appropriate metaphor for the supreme creator God, as well as for His Son. The written word of the Bible, as the next step in such communication, is circumscribed and limited in its application, as explained by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1976:6-26) who argues that writing is understood to generate meaning when spoken language is absent. It replaces speech with a graphic substitute for a voice as if voice and writing were comparable and interchangeable. The reality is, however that the voice is alive and present whereas writing is the dead remnant capable of being misinterpreted or manipulated by the reader/receiver. Interestingly, he notes that in our society the primary bearer of meaning and knowledge is textual rather than phonic.

Written discourses (particularly academic discourses) operate as autonomous systems and refer intertextually to each other rather than to primary speech events. A generative and universal word thus becomes a hermeneutically interpreted text that functions semiotically within a set of predetermined (humanly determined and therefore limited) grammatical rules. It is this slippage between the conceptual and the concrete that is the inspiration for Wim Botha's *Commune: Suspension of disbelief* (2001: Figs.5.8 to 5.11), which consists of a suspended crucified Christ figure carved from Bibles and Bible text, surrounded by surveillance equipment in the form of CCTV cameras creating, as van der Watt (2005:6) remarks "a kind of art-historical tautology where form and content seemingly join".

Otten (2007:33) notes: "The fact that Christianity was about the Word, or Logos, makes it also understandable that in its next phase it is to be considered a religion of words, of books, or better still: a religion featuring a whole library." We can understand therefore, "how the Bible came to form the pinnacle of divine revelation" (Otten 2007:34), possibly diminishing the role of other media in the process, and termed 'bibliolatry' by Otten (2007:37).⁷ The creation story also indicates a material world that has been 'spoken' into existence both physically and conceptually, an example being found in Genesis 1:3 (New International Version): "And God said: 'Let there be light' and there was light." The statement "God said" is repeated for each day of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, and is followed by the manifestation of his spoken

⁷ Otten (2007:37) explains this as a function of Protestantism and explains that early Christian hermeneutic studies led to 'reining in' "the evocative potential of allegory, symbolism and metaphor." Morgan (2005:10) agrees with this and states: "The iconicity of printed texts is a category of experience that Protestants relish."

word. Otten (2007:35) observes that “the natural business of words is to generate meaning and signification”. This function is formalised firstly by the written Word (Bible) and is then concretised by the incarnation of Jesus Christ as explained in the Gospel of John 1:14 (New International Version) “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” So the visual, physical manifestation of the Word “opens up the interplay of the verbal and the material” (Otten 2007:36) and Christ becomes a physical icon of the anthropological link between the Word and the world.

Besançon who questions the devolution of power between the Logos, the man Christ, and His status as the incarnate ‘image of God’ raises the complexity of this link. Besançon (2000:119) notes that in early historical church discourse it was stated that “[t]he Logos did not inhabit a man, it became a man”. Through this incarnation the static, semiotically constrained written word could be visually demonstrated, perhaps become alive again and generate new meanings or clarify old interpretations in a new way and thus overcome the limitations of Derrida’s understanding of ‘dead’ text.⁸ While this is an anachronistic argument in terms of church history, it is relevant in the interpretation of Botha’s work as the motivation for this, like his other works (see Chapter Four), concerns historical systems of representation and visual communication with the intangibility of *religion as a concept* as his starting point. Botha is interested in both the past and the present understanding of a religious ‘truth’, albeit an intangible or irrational one, and the different modes (visual and verbal) of its continuing effect on society and the means to promote that effect.

A concept, such as religion, can only functionally impact on physical existence if it is given durable concrete form as language in order for it to be communicated. Language is capable of change with each retelling so to ensure the permanence and continuity of religious dictates they must be written down in an immutable form as text. Text in itself, as mentioned above, is merely abstract graphic symbols but through the agency of semiotic systems it becomes information and

⁸ Interestingly the writings of Calvin counteract the notion of scripture as ‘dead’ text because he believed and taught that in the scriptures both the Word and the Holy Spirit are inseparably bound together and corroborate each other. As Morgan (2005:12) explains: “Calvin’s hermeneutic conflates the Holy Spirit with the spirit or gist or divine intention of the biblical text. In this shift from speech to writing as the medium of revelation, breath becomes essence or meaning. Charisma is constrained by textuality, and text is animated by deeper meaning as discerned by the eyes of faith.” With today’s post-modern understanding of the authorial role, however, Calvin’s stance is untenable and indefensible.

instruction, which can ultimately be manipulated by the prevailing hegemony to result in intellectual, social and political control. The written text (Bible), formulating a belief system and its rules, is then carved by Botha into yet another mode of representation that serves to encapsulate the central message of the text in concrete or 'real' form which, in Hazel Friedman's (2005:47) words, "[is] imbued with simulated reality that often supersedes actual lived, breathed knowledge of the 'real'". Friedman could be referring to the fact that the image of Christ carved by Botha conforms to traditionally expected imagery ratified by centuries of art history, as explained in the introduction to this chapter, thus displaying a 'reality' that is based on myth and superstition but is nevertheless strong enough to have upheld entire societies and driven national courses of action over centuries.

Botha has also included several versions of the Bible, which have been translated into all eleven official languages of South Africa.⁹ Through the South African context this version of Christ closely pertains to the introduction of Christianity to the indigenous population, raising issues such as the imposition of a belief structure that serves the colonialist imperative (see Chapter Two) and embodies control over the local populace. Botha's Christ is therefore a figure whose physical 'reality' embodies more than one method of control.

CCTV cameras have been placed at different points surrounding the image (Fig.5.10) and function as a tool to deconstruct this 'reality'. Cameras create cultural spectacle, they refer to the predominance of photography, cinema and television, which can operate as mechanisms to disseminate cultural 'truths' in today's society. Simultaneously they automatically embody a sense of voyeurism and the control of state institutions. One thinks of George Orwell's statement "Big Brother is watching you" from his novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) which has had ever increasing validity in our era of cameras on highways, in shopping centres, in lifts, and even satellite cameras above the earth that can watch anyone, anywhere.

Botha's camera images, while alluding to both spectacle and control, are deliberately obfuscatory rather than informative, with black and white hazy images shown on the monitors that switch

⁹ Van der Watt (2005:6) explains that Botha used the Bibles that are usually found in hotel rooms, with red edges to the pages, which he positioned so that the red was visible in Christ's side and hands to approximate the wounds of his stigmata.

between an upright view and a sideways view. Three of the cameras zoom in on fragments of the Christ figure, which progressively become high contrast images and are eventually completely out of focus, showing just a fragment of a head and arms. When looking at the sculpture it is still possible to identify the section being depicted, but when looking only at the images they degenerate into abstraction. The work as a whole takes the viewer literally from an abstract imbued with religious meaning through various physical and visual manifestations to concrete form, and back to a black and white abstract with no meaning whatsoever. Could this be described as the deconstruction of religion through art?

One of the images recorded by the cameras is of people entering the space, standing at the foot of the crucifix and looking up like supplicants or mourners in countless crucifixion scenes encountered in art historical images (Fig.5.11). The supplicant requesting forgiveness also evokes notions of control, illustrated in the CCTV cameras as instruments of state regulation over the populace. As Foucault points out, regulation and control requires rules and their enforcement. Development from faith as an abstract spiritual notion to the formulation of rules and codes of conduct, as organised religion takes over from spirituality, is visually expressed in the raw materials of *Commune: Suspension of disbelief*. The physical manifestation of those rules is embodied literally in a 'figurehead' suspended above the heads of his 'supplicants' with CCTV cameras as his all-seeing eye, revealing an 'ontology of the present' that is underpinned by a conflation of state and religious control.

There is a possible allusion here to the appropriation and adaptation of specific religious precepts that underpinned an Afrikaner Nationalist regime in South Africa, as the Nationalist party used their interpretation of Christianity and the Bible to legitimise their discriminatory reign and their belief in apartheid. Bloomberg (1990:10,11) notes that from the first Calvinist settlers in 1652, Afrikaner nationalists fervently believed that their God-given duty as custodians of the new nation allowed them to enforce their views of biblical 'truth' on the social structure of South Africa, that is "its continued fidelity to Christian norms, the illumination of God's word over everything, and the Bible as the source of truth for all political life". The rigid certainty of these beliefs is no longer evident, however, in the fuzzy, increasingly abstracted images that appear to be in a state of disintegration and are now open to interpretation rather than immutably fixed.

Botha's installation has exposed an assurance built up over centuries that certain rules and actions are inherently right and therefore enforceable yet, simultaneously, he erodes the necessary confidence that should underpin their enforcement and replaces it with doubt and uncertainty. In all Botha's works notions of truth and certainty are questioned, as he explains (2008): "If anything I try to remove conclusiveness from the source material." Doubt is a necessary ingredient promoting the reflection and self-awareness required for creating a more tolerable future regime. Ironically, therefore, Botha's exposé of past dogmas instituted by the conflation of state and ecumenical regulations has an end result not too different from the initial motivation of religious faith - in its function as a catalyst for change and self-enlightenment.

Surprisingly, despite Botha's often reiterated lack of interest in religion and his diverse and contradictory motivations in appropriating these icons, the inherent strength of historical meaning imbued in such images still renders them able to function as devotional aids in support of religious faith for some people.¹⁰ This may result from his representation of Christ in a conventionally acceptable way, despite the unconventional material used. Conversely works such as *Premonition of War (Scapegoat)* (2005: Fig.5.12), which is a political work commenting on the age old principal of shifting blame to an innocent party, has caused controversy merely because it has been understood as a representation conflating Christ and the Devil.¹¹ Some people overlooked its primary preoccupation and concentrated only on what was perceived to be blasphemous because of the strength of the religious implications, so there was what Botha (2008) referred to, in an interview with me, as "a massive knee jerk reaction" based on the reverence with which Christians consider representations of their crucified saviour.

¹⁰ Botha (2008) explained that he often has young students or scholars who are very religious wanting to research his work: "I like it that despite my ambivalent or different intentions people can still find beautiful meaning in something so banal as carving Bibles – that it could actually support their faith. The most amazing thing about that work is how people found a way to make it not monstrous. It seems that the possibility of my intent being to destroy Bibles was just too horrible to comprehend so they really stretched their minds around this to find ways of making it OK."

¹¹ This work is part of Wim Botha's Standard Bank Young Artist 2005 exhibition, titled *A Premonition of War*. The exhibition opened at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown on 30 June 2005 and travelled to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum in Port Elizabeth (2 August - 18 September 2005); the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg (6 October - 6 November 2005); Durban Art Gallery (23 November 2005 - 22 January 2006); the Oliewenhuis Art Gallery, Bloemfontein (14 February - 19 March 2006); the South African National Gallery in Cape Town (8 April - 28 May 2006); and the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg (13 June - 15 July 2006).

Originally a crucifixion was a shameful death reserved, as Nigel Spivey (1999:19) explains, for only the most unworthy criminals: “it was death with grim humiliation, ignominy and abasement.” Moreover Colleen Conway (2008:67) explains that a crucified body was violated, penetrated and therefore emasculated, prompting Cicero, in his Verrine orations (*Verr.* 2.5.64), to describe crucifixion as “the most savage, most disgraceful punishment” (Quoted in Conway 2008:67). The cross was therefore seldom utilised in early Christian imagery because of the stigma attached to it. As Spivey (1999:19) so rightly asks: “who on earth would want its souvenir or remembrance?” MacGregor (2000:122) notes that on the very few occasions when the early church depicted Christ on the cross, the emphasis was on his victory over death rather than his suffering, and the motif was thus intended to reinforce the message that the end result outweighed the shame. When realism and graphic suffering was introduced later, as in Grunewald’s crucified Christ from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, for example, the intention in emphasising the suffering of Christ for mankind’s redemption was to induce feelings of love and gratitude that would evoke repentance in the viewer. The cross thus gradually became a symbol of sacrifice leading to redemption and, as such, a symbol of life rather than death. The wood of the cross was seen as a ‘tree of life’ in contrast to the ‘tree of death’ from the Garden of Eden, and Christ was the ‘second Adam’ who came to undo the deeds of the first Adam.

The cross in current religious understanding therefore has come to denote spiritual life and victory and is a succinct symbol of the core of Christian faith. As Benson (1976: 25) notes: “The Christian world today no longer thinks of the Cross as an instrument of execution, but always as a glorious symbol of Christ’s sacrifice for all mankind.” He furthermore states that: “The meaning of the Christian Cross is clear and significant. It is the symbol of life eternal, of redemption and resurrection through faith” (Benson 1976:23). The disruption of such a symbol by placing a ‘satanic’ image rather than a Christ on the cross led to approbation such as that found on the Moriel Ministries website (2008), for example, where their article on the exhibition including this work was entitled “Premonition of War – Blasphemy in Art” and the reviewer stated that he was “shocked and disgusted” by the works on view. He went on to identify Botha’s attitude to religion as the result of a weak personality. The Artthrob website (2006) also notes that this exhibition generated controversy in Bloemfontien, and Botha (2008) himself has stated that many gallery visitors expressed shock at the content of this and other works on the show.

Again the strength of reaction, to the degree that responses sometimes lack logic, could indicate the residue of a belief in the inherent sacredness of images of the crucified Christ.¹²

In a close analysis of *Premonition of War (Scapegoat)* Botha's reason for his choice of imagery becomes apparent and defuses the inference of blasphemy. It consists of a sculpture made of fragmented and burnt indigenous African hardwood,¹³ in the shape of a crucified satyr-like figure with horns and goat legs. The wood is carved in sections and appears unfinished at the back as if it has been pieced together like a puzzle, which creates a link between this central figure and the panels of six dramatic views of clouds and sky on either side which are actually framed jigsaw puzzles. The 'pieced together' nature of a puzzle that slowly accumulates into a coherent image, alludes to the construct that has been assembled over millenia of heaven as 'somewhere up there in the sky'. By association the fragmented figure in between is also revealed as a construct who floats ambiguously conflating the identity of a religious 'saviour' and a comic book saviour such as superman speeding through the sky to 'save' humanity.

Botha (2008) notes that he wanted to create an emotional impact so this figure is physically contorted with a broken demeanour, and is undeniably a victim rather than a strong and invincible superhero. The wood is burnt as if the figure has already been sacrificed by fire, perhaps burned at the stake before the crucifixion, in other words, doubly victimised. He looks helpless with a hanging head and large pieces missing from the middle, the antithesis of a satanic devil but also the antithesis of a hero or a saviour, he becomes a subversion of both symbols and the powers they represent.

A Scapegoat is inherently a victim; the term originated in the Old Testament ritual of Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:8-10) where a goat was symbolically burdened with the transgressions of the Jewish nation and then beaten and sent into exile in the desert, carrying away past iniquities

¹² Jeffrey Carter (2003:8) explains that many theorists believe sacrifice can be seen as both the "origin of religion" and the "essence of religion" and must be understood as something that is inherent to all religions. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is therefore not only at the core of Christian beliefs but is fundamental to an understanding of religious impact on society in general and therefore fundamental to the whole purpose of biblical teaching.

¹³ Botha (2008) notes that he chose specific African hardwoods to create a direct link with the African context of his work, using similar reasoning for his choice of mieliepap to create his *Pietà*.

to ensure a clean slate for the new year.¹⁴ The principal of shifting blame or sin onto a goat exists in many religions (hence the word scapegoat), and can be found in China, East Asia and Middle Eastern traditions.¹⁵ By extension, the word has come to mean any innocent group or individual that carries the blame of others or is the subject of irrational hostility (Merriam-Webster online. 2010). Perhaps it is this conflation of goat and sinfulness that resulted in the popular western image of the devil as a creature half goat, half man with cloven hooves, a tail and horns.

The roots of such an image lie in the Greek God Dionysus who, according to James Frazer (1959:464), sometimes appears in goat form, and in the God's followers, half men, half goats, called satyrs. Surprisingly the religious myth relating to the God Dionysus was associated with suffering, sacrifice, death and rebirth/resurrection and included the promise of life after death for devoted followers who displayed "clean hands and a pure heart" (Burn 1984:134). This does not sound too distant from Christian religious beliefs and perhaps points to the incorporation of suitable aspects of 'old' religions during the introduction of Christianity. On the other hand, however, Dionysus was also known as the God of wine and his worship included "wild dances, thrilling music and tipsy excess" (Frazer 1959:386) as well as frenzied rituals performed by his female followers known as Maenads.¹⁶ This lack of control is also found in the male followers of Dionysus. Because satyrs are half animal they are associated with untrammelled animal urges resulting in lechery, debauchery and immorality.¹⁷ There are, of course, far worse evils than these but such are the traits that the church wanted to subdue (see my discussion on the church's

¹⁴ The word comes from the Hebrew *Sa'ir La-'aza'zel* (goat for Azazel). Some scholars believe that the animal was chosen by lot to placate Azazel, a wilderness demon, then killed (sacrificed) by being thrown over a precipice outside Jerusalem, to ensure the sins of the past year were removed (Eb.com [Sa]). According to the *Lion Handbook to the Bible* Azazel is "a place in the wilderness to which the scapegoat was sent...The meaning is uncertain but it cannot refer to an offering to a demon, as some suggest, for this was strictly forbidden" (Alexander and Alexander 1973:177).

¹⁵ Even in Africa cows are sacrificed as a positive symbol for festivities whereas goats are sacrificed to appease the ancestors.

¹⁶ Burn (1984:135) explains that the Maenads were reputed to have gone into the mountains in their frenzy and torn animals (or people) to pieces. This myth is possibly part of the inspiration for another of Botha's works in this series, *Premonition of War (Bacchus and satyr)* 2005. The satyr, presumably infused with Maenadic frenzy, has ripped off Bacchus' arm and is beating him with it (Bacchus is the Roman name for the Greek god Dionysus).

¹⁷ The connection between excessive sexuality and satyrs is indicated in the use of the word satyriasis to denote a medical condition resulting in "excessive or abnormal sexual craving in a male" (Merriam-Webster online 2010).

regulation of sexuality in Chapter Three), that the goat-like satyr became the visual manifestation of ultimate evil – the devil.

Ironically the Christian crucifixion is also a pure example of the scapegoat principle. Christ is the carrier of sins, the innocent one that bears the blame and is unjustly punished for all. Botha's work is merely combining the two visual images that historically express the same principle. The fact that it looks like Christ and the devil is merely a result of the manipulation of religious imagery over centuries. As Botha says (2008) "It is not something I did – I just pointed it out". His stated intention was to combine recent popular myths with 'old' Gods and overlap them with religious imagery, as so much of the content and symbolism already overlaps. Botha maintains that most people merely assimilate the reinvention and re-use of mythical content without realising its origins or questioning the implications (Botha 2008). His disintegrating Scapegoat hanging in front of an expanse of sky as if in the midst of a heroic battle that he is not winning, taps into popular mythology like *The Matrix* or Japanese anime films, as much as it refers to ancient religious traditions.¹⁸ It demonstrates the continuing necessity for mythological constructs to be unravelled and reinvented in order to unpack them and interrogate their significance. This post-modern debunking of heroic narratives is inherent in Botha's conflation of both old and new heroes and villains and can be used as a means to investigate past beliefs and deconstruct their underpinnings to better understand the present.

Botha made a second version of the scapegoat carved out of anthracite, epoxy resin and eco-solvent, and entitled simply *Scapegoat* (2005: Fig.5.13). It is a sharper, more confrontationally menacing image than the wooden version. Like the former, it was originally hung with framed jigsaws which were, however, placed in a less structured more scattered composition, as part of

¹⁸ Botha (2008) mentioned the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix* in particular, which is riddled with Christian symbolism such as the use of Zion as the resistance headquarters and the last remaining human settlement, for example, or the sacrificial role of the main character Neo (whose name is an anagram of one as in 'The One'), or his girlfriend who is called Trinity (referring to the Holy Trinity). The Wachowski brothers, authors of the film script, stated in a web conversation that most of the religious symbolism is "intentional" (Armstrong 2000:22) and Ela Nutu, in an essay on *The Matrix* entitled "Red Herrings in Bullet Time: *The Matrix*, the Bible, and the Postcommunist I" (2006:69-85) analyses the points of similarity and concludes that Neo corresponds with Christ, Morpheus with God the Father, and Trinity with the Holy Spirit who unites the three (Nutu 2006:73). Nutu (2006:75-77) goes on to explain that the film is also riddled with an eclectic mix of mythological references (Morpheus and the Oracle for example). Such mythological intertextuality corresponds with the various classical characters of myth, such as satyrs and Bacchus or Dionysus, that appear alongside biblical 'heroes' in Botha's *Premonition of War* exhibition.

the Durban installation of *A Premonition of War*. Botha has also exhibited this version on its own and explains that although it is a variation on a similar theme the effect is more aggressive, with more presence, and is therefore capable of standing ‘alone’ (Botha 2008). This figure is whole and defined; the facial features are sharper and more precise in their naturalism. The hair is stylised and spiky as if it has a life of its own, and Botha (2008) explains that it was directly inspired by hair typically seen in Japanese anime films. This energising effect makes the figure look as if he could lift his head at any moment and he thus appears more vital and aggressive than the blurred fragmentation and victimisation of the first *Premonition of War (Scapegoat)*.

This figure also has a prominent phallus, which created another level of controversy when it was exhibited in Durban in 2005, as it was associated more directly with satyriasis and lewd behaviour than salvation. Through his inversion and conflation of religion and mythology Botha is displaying “hostility towards grand narratives”, as van der Watt (2005:5) explains, that questions the powers and rules which function through binaries such as “good/evil, friend/foe, sacred/profane, sanctioned/rejected, order/chaos, purity/taboo, canon/exclusion”. His works thus appear to be deliberately ambiguous, so the anthracite from which this *Scapegoat* is carved could indicate an all-consuming sacrifice, or evoke the material that fuels the fires of hell.

Botha’s ability to undermine the grand narrative of biblical salvation can also be seen in works from an exhibition called *Cold Fusion: Gods, heroes and martyrs* (2005).¹⁹ The exhibition title refers to an electro-chemical nuclear chain reaction for producing energy without heat, which has, thus far, never been successful but holds the tantalising promise of inexhaustible safe electrical power. In the exhibition, associations with nuclear force interface with the power of art, religion and myth to expose systems and structures that define us and “allude to the systematic decay inherent in symbolic representations related to power” (Michael Stevenson 2005). This is evident in what at first glance appears to be a less contentious image of Christ, titled *The Avenger* (Fig.5.14), which is a detail from the mixed media installation *Tremor* (2005).

¹⁹ This solo exhibition took place at Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town from 17 March to 30 April 2005.

Like the previously discussed works *The Avenger* takes its inspiration from Japanese anime and popular science fiction films. It is an oil painting of a fairly typical Christ with crown of thorns and loincloth, and with His arms outstretched as if on the cross. He is hovering in mid air, however, and his stance could easily be interpreted as the prelude to many of the fight scenes in *The Matrix*, where the protagonists are poised in mid air with one leg bent, arms raised and hands bent downwards, before engaging in their battle against the dark forces of cybernetic control. The title *Avenger* clarifies this link by turning Christ from a meek sacrificial saviour into an avenging superhero, so Christ is conflated with Neo (from *The Matrix*) for example, and this overlap identifies the origins of belief systems or sets of rules in society as the result of conflict with the status quo.²⁰ Botha's strategy illustrates Foucault's (1990a:92,93) explanation of dissidence as something that works within the culture it inhabits, that pushes against the web of power by exposing the weak places, but ultimately replaces one set of rules and expectations with another.

The tenuous instability of the web of power is illustrated in the entire eschatological installation of *Tremor*. It includes a divided and exploding pressed lead ceiling that ends in an 'altarpiece' arrangement of lead paned stained glass images entitled *Tree of Knowledge* (Fig.5.15) but ironically showing a stylised rendition of a mushroom cloud with shattered fragments in the frames on either side. Along one wall is *Blastwave* (Fig.5.16), consisting of a series of linoprints that appear to capture successive images of the destruction of this tree, caused by the nuclear explosion. This is very obviously an African tree rendered in a similar stylised manner to trees of the African landscape painted by Pierneef and therefore conflating the notion of a universal apocalypse and the localised politically initiated destruction of Afrikaner cultural heritage. The pressed lead ceiling (Fig.5.17) also identifies this destruction with the demise of a particular South African bourgeois sensibility that clung to the cultural expectations of a lost colonial past. *The Avenger* is placed on the opposite side to *Blastwave* alongside another oil painting called *Vanitas* (Fig.5.18), in the *memento mori* tradition, showing a pile of books and a skull. Paintings such as this are typical of the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition and are therefore also related

²⁰ Christianity, for example, was originally in conflict with the Roman Empire that ruled the western world at the time.

to the cultural heritage of the Afrikaner people, many of whom descended from Dutch settlers in South Africa.²¹

The forms of power and the means by which power is exercised, both socially and physically, scientifically and symbolically, interface with one another in this seemingly disparate series of images so that the combination, like nuclear fusion, results, as Michael Stevenson notes (2005) “in a chain reaction where the end is more than the sum of its parts”. Thus the tree of knowledge, the original disseminator of earthly power through intellectual learning, becomes a symbol of knowledge misused, and, appropriately in terms of biblical teaching, the symbol of death. The result is demonstrated in a martyr and saviour who now becomes the avenger of original sin/ political sin by creating an apocalypse. What Botha is doing by overlapping the cultural markers here is exposing the clues that identify the use and abuse of mechanisms of power, both old and new, religious and political, scientific and cultural and identifying their implications in an ‘ontology of the present’ lest we as viewers become complacent and fail to learn from our mistakes.

Conrad Botes and the search for Afrikaner identity

The particular South African context alluded to in Botha’s works becomes overt and central to an understanding of the work of Conrad Botes. Botes grew up in a traditional Afrikaans home and told me, during an interview, that Afrikaner politics and religion were inextricably intertwined and inherent in his upbringing (Botes 2009). He states categorically that he does not have a problem with religion and is not trying to comment specifically about religious beliefs. Rather, like Botha, he employs religious imagery as a vehicle for meaning because it resonates in so many ways with his context and the issues his work engages with (Botes 2009). As a comic book artist his work is satirical and deliberately provocative, so his images in both comics and artworks tend to be iconoclastic from both a religious and a social/political point of view. His work, and that of his partner in the Bitterkomix genre, Anton Kannemeyer, has been identified by Gregory Kerr (2006:135) as inherently a form of resistance to a very specific set of social and

²¹ Examples of Dutch *memento mori* paintings can be found in local art collections such as in the Johannesburg Art Gallery.

political circumstances in South Africa and is “contingent on the structures, assumptions, mechanisms and ideologies of the local context”.

The “local context” demonstrates a close link between the formation of an Afrikaner national identity and the religious imperative of the Dutch Reformed Church that underpinned it. Afrikaner politics are nationalist politics and their debt to Christian religion is explained by Adrian Hastings (1999:4) who states: “The Bible provided, for the Christian world at least, the original model of the nation. Without it and its Christian interpretation and implementation, it is arguable that nations and nationalism, as we know them, could never have existed.” The importance of this religious underpinning for Afrikaner identity is demonstrated in various statements that have been published over the years, such as “Our republic is the inevitable fulfillment of God’s plan for our people” (quoted in Bloomberg [1990:xxi] from an article in *The Transvaler* on the 31st May 1961, at the time of the inauguration of the Republic of South Africa). Similarly, Dr. J.P. Meyer, former chairman of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, identified Afrikaners as “an ‘army of God’ whose ancestors concluded a ‘Covenant with the Almighty’ and had a mission to ‘carry the light and spirit of Christianity into Africa from the South to the North’” (Bloomberg 1990:2).²² The Afrikaans nation is, in this way, likened to the nation of Israel, creating what Johannes Jacobus Degenaar (1982:23) identifies as an Afrikaner “myth of the chosen people” who had been “planted in this country by the Hand of God” (Degenaar 1982:49). This brought certain responsibilities for Afrikaner nationalists:

Just as Calvinists founded the Dutch nation, so they founded the Afrikaner nation in 1652. They are custodians of the nation as a Christian entity and must ensure its continued fidelity to Christian norms, the illumination of God’s word over everything, and the Bible as the source truth for all political life (Bloomberg 1990:10,11).

Interestingly this identity of a unified nation, bolstered by the hand of God, is also rooted in a fear of ‘the other’ and Hastings (1999:2,3) identifies struggle against an external foe as a significant factor in the development of nationhood. The Day of the Covenant, for example,

²² Meyer is referring here to the Covenant (or vow) that was taken prior to the Battle of Blood River, on 16 December 1838, where the Voortrekkers promised to keep the day holy and to build a church if God would grant them victory over the Zulus in the coming battle (see also the discussion in Chapter Two on page 39). Their decisive victory confirmed the notion that God was on the side of the Afrikaans nation.

resulted from winning a battle against the superior numbers of ‘the other’. The history of banding together in a laager to defend themselves against outside attack (as found in stories of the Great Trek), or banding together politically against the British, devolved into what Degenaar (1982:51) identifies as a “siege culture” in Afrikaner nationalism. Bloomberg (1990:13) explains that this resulted in a synthesis of the “chosen nation” with “the Right’s stress on authority, hierarchy, discipline, privilege and elitist leadership, as well as glorification of God, nation, family, blood and the cult of force.” Thus the ‘inherent’ cultural superiority of an Afrikaner nation that eschews the “carnal and the ugly” (Pelzer 1966:723) and its status as ‘chosen’ could only be kept intact if it was to reject any adulteration from other contenders, which led to separate development and eventually to apartheid as a national policy. As Bloomberg (1990:27) explains: “Self-preservation is a paramount duty and a sense of identity must be maintained in all aspects of Afrikaner life.”

Botes’ protagonist on the front cover of *The Best of Bitterkomix, Volume One* (1998: Fig.5.19) is a comment on the demise of the Afrikaner’s sense of purpose and their carefully guarded cultural integrity.²³ The use of comic book imagery is already a form of cultural resistance: as Rita Barnard (2006:148) explains, the Afrikaans community for many years considered any form of popular culture such as television and comic books to be “morally transgressive and even politically charged”. This was drawn a mere four years after the new South African regime was initiated and drew on Afrikaner fears of the loss of their heritage, loss of earnings due to affirmative action and the loss of political power. Such losses are illustrated in the patriotic and religious tattoos all over the body of the distraught Afrikaner.

He is the antithesis of white supremacy with his stained underpants, scrawny body and missing teeth while the tears of defeat pour out of hollow staring eyes. He stands in a graveyard of prominent Afrikaans political leaders with outstretched hands and a halo of cloud that mirrors the crucifixion scene on his stomach. The cross on his body is flanked by ox wagons and surmounted by the Voortrekker monument, making a mockery of the Day of the Covenant and God’s plan for the Afrikaner as ‘His chosen Nation’. To reinforce the martyrdom of the

²³ The themes mentioned in relation to this image are similar to those identified in the sculptural work by Botes, discussed in Chapter Three, *Tree of Knowledge*, (Fig.3.13).

Afrikaans national psyche the speech bubble issuing from this pitiful 'poor white' shows the words that Jesus spoke on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In this context the conflation of religion and politics reinforce each other to create a martyr for the Afrikaans nation and everything they held dear, that is not only satirical in nature but doubly ironic if one considers the way Christ was employed in the past to embody the martyrdom of the black nation under apartheid (see Chapter Two).

The use of religious imagery in Botes' work is closely allied to the Afrikaner social structures of his youth that are informed by a particular Calvinistic form of Christianity (as discussed above) and reinforced by the official educational policies of the Nationalist Party which pertained in South Africa until the mid 1990s. Kerr (2006:136,137) notes that the Nationalist educational policy of indoctrination "identified religion, obedience, conformity and chauvinism as vital areas for the formation of correct thinking". The policies were pursued through formal schooling and church teaching, and were reinforced by parental discipline and expectations. In fact Kerr (2006:136) identifies a direct link between the father's role in Afrikaner society and the patriarchal roles of church, army and state.

The weight of this repressive regime is incarnated in *Here Comes the Law* (2003: Fig.5.20) where a Christ-like figure, identified by his crown of thorns, is weighed down by an enormous tome. One presumes it is the Bible, but possibly an augmented and expanded version that includes the interpretations and additions that adapt Christian religious teachings to Afrikaner nationalism. Thus encumbered, Jesus strides across a bleak grey background of images alluding to gambling, alcoholism, exploitation, sex and death. It is an interesting inversion of many paintings of Christ carrying the cross on his way to Golgotha, surrounded by unruly crowds. The end result of that journey was martyrdom, resurrection and ultimately salvation from the bondage of sin. Botes' Christ however, appears to promise more bondage as this book of the law is a metaphor for the burden of religious nationalism, the burden of patriarchal repressive morals upheld through biblical teaching, and the burden of past injustice. It is contrasted by the words of Christ in the Bible (Matthew 11:28 and 30) "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (New International Version). There is nothing light, easy or uplifting in this image, even the expression on Christ's

face is grim and hopeless, denying the possibility of salvation and redemption by means of a now defunct set of rules.

Botes' engagement with Afrikaner nationalism includes the conservative, rigidly prescribed notion of chauvinistic masculinity promoted by this doctrine. It is a style of masculine identity that has been loosely termed 'hegemonic masculinity' and can be understood as existing in an arena of wealth and power, where men are able to "legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance." (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 2002:112). Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005:832) explain that although hegemony may be underpinned by force it is not necessarily violent but is demonstrated and perpetuated through institutions (like government and church), through cultural practices and persuasion. One of the areas of power that is exercised in this form of masculinity is the power of men over women so in certain environments hegemonic masculinity becomes synonymous with sexist, dominant 'macho' behaviour although, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:841) point out, the term hegemony implies certain complicity and acceptance from the subaltern group. The loss of masculine hegemony is therefore closely allied with the rise of women's rights movements in the 1960s and a general reinvention of gender-related behaviour²⁴ in what has recently been designated a 'post-feminist' context.²⁵

In South Africa an awareness and acceptance of gendered discourses in public arenas outside of academia coincided with the post-apartheid era and the demise of Afrikaner political hegemony. The loss of economic and political power in patriarchal Afrikanerdom impacted unavoidably on personal and family relationships and sometimes resulted in a diminished identification of male identity or loss of male stature in the community. Botes has chosen to explore this loss and find an opportunity to reinvent masculinity from his own perspective in a work called *Good Shepherd* (2003: Fig.5.21).

²⁴ Women's rights movements arose in conjunction with the gay liberation movement which also developed a discourse around men who were oppressed by conventional masculinity arising from the patriarchal promotion of gender stereotypes and from masculine homophobia (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:831-2).

²⁵ See my discussion of the problematic nature of using the term post-feminism in a South African context in Chapter Three on pages 73 and 74.

A traditional rendition of Christ as the Good Shepherd is painted in the centre of a glass roundel, but He is cradling a penis instead of a lamb. Around him are vignettes pertaining to male fantasies of sexuality and machismo, where naked and semi-naked women are interspersed with gun-toting soldiers, dice and death's heads. This is the work, mentioned in Chapter One, that instigated an outraged diatribe from one of the visitors when it was exhibited. The prototype of such an image can be found in countless saccharine renditions that have permeated popular Christian visual culture, showing the long-haired Jesus carrying a lamb, and epitomising the words of Charles Wesley's hymn "Gentle Jesus meek and mild" (Fig.5.22). This particular example illustrates the parable of the lost sheep and is designed to display the nurturing and loving aspects of Jesus' character.

The use of religious popular imagery in the form of what might be identified as 'kitsch' representations of Jesus or Mary have often been identified as a Catholic manifestation. They can be found as framed pictures on the walls of Catholic schools and homes, or as devotional images on small cards that can be carried in a pocket, bag or book. In his study of religious visual culture in America, entitled *Protestants and Pictures*, Morgan (1999:3-11), however, identifies a similar dispersal of religious imagery for didactic and devotional purposes among the American Calvinists and various protestant religions. Originally utilized as illustrations of biblical stories aimed at educating children, many of these images, of Christ in particular, were later identified as devotional with the particular purpose of forming a pious character in the devotee. The character traits, therefore, had to be readily discernable in the body language and expression of Jesus and the use of western paradigms identifying nobility and gentleness in His countenance allowed for such messages to be easily read by a mass audience. An image of an almost feminised saviour, originally produced to inspire childlike devotion and illustrate paternal love but now, in Botes' version, cradling a giant phallus, is guaranteed to disturb the sensibilities of Christian viewers, particularly after years of doctrinally inspired sexual suppression.

Botes is not commenting on the person of Christ, however, but is questioning the particular style of hegemonic masculinity and sexual conformity promoted by Afrikaner nationalism.²⁶ Kerr (2006:137) explains that in the Youth Preparedness programme at national schools the teachings on sexuality promoted marriage (to a suitable partner) and in contrast: “Sexual activity outside Christian marriage was punishable by hellfire and all forms of deviance were considered both a heinous sin and a criminal perversion. Afrikaner men were not homosexuals.” Botes’ gentle saviour cradling his ‘lost’ penis may be ironically bordering on ‘deviant homosexuality’ despite his acceptably caring and noble demeanor.

He could also be identified as a metaphorical saviour for a masculine identity that has been psychologically lost under the onslaught of rules, regulations, expectations, restrictions, threats and finally a change in the status quo with the demise of Christian nationalism as a dominant ideology and/or the demise of ‘macho’ chauvinism in a feminist and possibly ‘post-feminist’ society. Jesus has ‘found’ his masculinity, in whatever form it might take, and is therefore placed as a reigning saviour in the midst of male libidinous longings, and macho displays of power that expose what Michael Morris (2006:47) identifies as “the neuroses and hypocrisies of a patriarchal and conservative white - and particularly Afrikaner - society”.

Guns are a repeated motif in many of Botes’ images commenting on masculine identity, and they relate specifically to both the apartheid use of armed soldiers to maintain political supremacy pre-1994 and the subsequent regime of violence that has plagued South African society since then. In the introduction to her article on “Gun Violence and Masculinity in Contemporary South Africa” Jacklyn Cock (2001:43) states:

Every day 32 people are murdered with a firearm in South Africa (*Gun Free Newsletter* 1998)...The social legacy of armed conflicts in southern Africa includes antagonistic social identities and an ideology of militarism. Violence is regarded as a legitimate solution to conflict and a crucial means of both obtaining and defending power.

²⁶ Botes (2009) has stated that there is another version of Christ as the Good Shepherd where He is standing in the middle of a flock of sheep holding a lamb. Botes intends repainting this as Christ holding a penis with a sea of penises around him, as another way of commenting on male identity.

Furthermore she states that this has led to the identification of guns as a “key feature of hegemonic masculinity” (Cock 2001:43). Guns carried by soldiers in Botes’ images refer to their importance in defining the code of hegemonic masculinity that persists in South African society, and which is a legacy of the cadet programmes at schools that prepared young men for military service, and their subsequent experiences in the South African Defense Force. Cock (2001:43-44) notes that “a number of SADF conscripts have emphasized that the core of military training was to inculcate aggressiveness and equate it with masculinity”. Debbie Epstein (1998:49) points out that both black and white masculinities in South Africa were “forged in the heat of apartheid and the struggle against the apartheid state”. This can be largely ascribed to the institutionalisation of violence, which permeated society whether one was directly engaged in it or not, and which brutalised both the perpetrators and the victims. The legacy of this is still visible in the pattern of violence found in contemporary society and which is evident as an aggressive physical response to feelings of inadequacy, inequality or as a ‘legitimate’ way to express anger against anyone.²⁷

The norm of masculine aggression and the residue of apartheid resistance and violence constitute the topic for Botes’ painted silkscreen titled *Forensic Theatre: Empire of Error* (2004: Fig.5.23). Botes has divided the format into blocks with repeated images that include the devil/Christ carrying a cross, Jesus kneeling on the ground and holding an AK-47 machine gun, stone throwing ‘tsotsis’ and a weeping woman. These blocks are overlaid by a diagrammatic linear rendition of a one-eared rabbit and a three-fingered glove, drawn in a simple childlike manner as explanatory motifs for the errors that are inferred in the collection of images beneath.

The AK-47 machine gun held by Christ is invested with powerful contradictory symbolism including both criminal behaviour and revolutionary resistance. Cock (2001:44) states: “The AK-47 is not just a gun. It is a legend, a currency, a symbol of liberation and violence.” During the apartheid era it was used by the ANC and thus became a mythic icon of group identity for black South Africans while providing visual proof of the demonic nature of ANC activities to the

²⁷ Violence typical in South African society would include murder, rape, hijacking and other criminal violence but also is expressed in domestic violence against women and children and the group identification through violence that can be found in gangs. Connell (1995:83) identifies the latter as “the assertion of marginalised masculinities against other men [which is] continuous with the assertion of masculinity in sexual violence against women”.

Nationalist government. Cock (2001:46) further notes that for many of the young soldiers using this weapon it was also imbued with a strong phallic dimension and sexual potency became equated with violent action. Botes has blurred the lines of male identification by equating the icon of peaceful submission to God's will with a macho revolutionary and harbinger of death, interspersed with other examples of violent behaviour exhibited by the stone throwers. This rendition is ironic in the sense that Christ could be identified as a real revolutionary in his mission to free mankind from the 'bondage of sin'. His revolutionary message, however, taught submission (turn the other cheek) rather than aggression so the gun is incongruous in this context.

On the other half of the image Botes has inverted the role of Christ by showing Satan meekly carrying a cross of martyrdom interspersed by images of a mourning/weeping woman. Such contradictions are typical examples of Botes' method for questioning the teachings and experiences of his upbringing. In a similar inversion, Botes replaces Christ with Satan in the glass roundel entitled *Terrible Things are About to Happen* (2003: Fig.5.24). This revision of Michelangelo's *Pietà* places the *Pietà* image at the apex of a seemingly arbitrary collection of 'terrible things' including an SS officer (possibly Hitler), a dead Marilyn Monroe, yet more soldiers who appear to be shooting at the Madonna, the Little Mermaid weeping hopeless tears, and gambling dice - ubiquitous symbols of vice and greed. Botes raises the notion that what constitutes 'something terrible' is subjective, contingent upon an individual's context. Thus, depending on the viewer, some of these images can become funny or banal while others can provoke outrage.

Botes (2009) recounts that this work caused some controversy because it was included in the matric school syllabus in 2008 and a teacher in Natal registered a complaint about it with the education board. The complaint pertained only to the substitution of Christ's head with the head of Satan, and Botes was interested in what he called this "gut reaction" because it was an indication of how rigidly positioned people can be about such imagery, how possessive they can become about traditions and expectations. As he points out, the original sculpture by Michelangelo is "merely someone's interpretation of how Jesus and his mother might look, yet my interpretation of this artwork is considered 'satanic'" (Botes 2009). When asked to respond

to the criticism of this work Botes explains that he is merely taking something that people are familiar with and changing the context at the critical point.

In a positive acknowledgement of the strength of viewer response Botes repeated this theme in his *Pietà* (2006: Fig.5.25) where the 'Madonna' is a naked woman leaning forward and cradling a dead figure on her lap, again with the head of Satan. The image is appropriately rendered predominantly in red and has a painted background of sinuous red lines that support fifteen roundels.²⁸ Several roundels depict apparently arbitrary images of body parts, such as back, head, hands and feet, covered in similar graphic undulations (Fig.5.26) possibly pertaining to the tradition of body adornments in Africa such as the fine linear 'uli' body painting that is practiced by the Igbo people of Nigeria. It could also refer to tattooing the body (as in Maori traditions) or scarification; any form of bodily marking that sets the person apart in terms of their status or for a specific purpose or rite of passage.

Michael Stevenson's website commentary on this *Pietà* (2006) states: "The disparate iconography of the roundels disrupts and fragments the customary allegories associated with this religious imagery, and the artist leaves us to create our own narratives and associations between the elements." It appears, however, that the central *Pietà* group itself is so anti-classical and alternative in terms of religious prototypes that Botes has consciously maintained a religious link through his treatment of the roundels. Each roundel in its concentration on a fragment appears to simulate a religious relic, a small piece of the whole, carefully framed and captured behind glass in the medieval tradition and marked as extraordinary through the repetition of 'sacred' patterns. One image includes a scene of brutality, others have hooded figures who could be either perpetrators or victims, another shows a fragment of the cross. The 'virgin' and other mourners also appear, thus a coherent connection with the Christian tradition and the violence of the crucifixion is pieced together from these diverse units that individually would have no meaning in a religious sense. The religious implications are important for a disruptive effect to be felt when Christ's head is replaced by that of a devil and the Madonna is naked. Botes (2009) states that although he does not believe in the devil he has some sympathy for the fact that he is always being blamed for something. He wanted to suggest that perhaps he is not always guilty, thus this

²⁸ This is very similar in format and layout to the *Pietà* made by Botes in 2007 and discussed in Chapter Four.

devil is not only dead and being mourned by his naked lady, but is also surrounded by vignettes containing images that suggest martyrdom rather than sin, ironically resulting in an image that is more melancholic than shocking.

From Botes' engagement with white angst, the inversion of good and evil, Afrikaner nationalism, and macho masculinity all rendered in the graphic and uncompromising Bitterkomix style, we now move to 'something completely different' with the hallucinogenic floral fantasies of Lawrence Lemaona's religious parodies. Lemaona, as a young black protagonist, investigates his experience of masculinity and its intersection with racial power and politics in the 'new' South Africa, using humour to soften his critical commentary on the residue of sexual and racial stereotyping.

Lawrence Lemaona and black masculinity in the new South Africa

Lawrence Lemaona parodies Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495-98: Fig.5.27) in his delightfully humorous digital print, *The Discussion* (2005: Fig.5.28).²⁹ A long table is set with a pink floral cloth around which a group of thirteen men are seated in the poses and attitudes of da Vinci's prototype. Each man is dressed in pink robes and on closer inspection each is the same man playing a variety of roles, from redeemer to traitor and everything in between.³⁰ The replication of his protagonist perhaps refers to the way the racial 'other' has often been stereotypically homogenised in colonial discourse, but that stereotype is simultaneously problematised by the unexpected setting. The feminine theme is continued in a glorious fantasy of floral fields and misty skies but with an incongruous rugby goalpost instead of a window above the head of Christ.

²⁹ This work won the Absa L'Atelier's Gerard Sekoto Award in 2005.

³⁰ Lemaona used a friend and fellow student at the University of Johannesburg to model for these photographs. His name is Nkosinathi Quwe and he was chosen partly because he has the qualities of a Jesus figure with the gentle expression and long dreadlocks, and partly because he also looks similar to a Xhosa rugby player, Gqobani Bobo, who was one of the first 'players of colour' selected as part of the quota system for the national rugby team (Lemaona 2010).

This decidedly Rococo utopian scene, described by Shaun O'Toole (2007) as reminiscent of "Yinka Shonibare filtered through the lens of a Catholic Tretchikoff", belies a definition of stereotypical black masculinity presented by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic (1995: 211):

As everyone knows the social construction of masculinity is problematic. The stereotype of the ideal man is forceful, militaristic, hyper-competitive, risk-taking, not particularly interested in culture and the arts, protective of his woman, heedless of nature and so on...But the social construction of men of colour is even more troublesome and confining than that of men in general. Men of colour are constructed as criminal, violent, lascivious, irresponsible, and not particularly smart.

It is just such stereotypes that Lemaona is unpacking through mockery, with his camp rugby players in their hyperreal setting who question notions of religion, sexuality and culture. He interrogates ways that men position themselves through discursive practices to present a particular form of 'masculinity' to the world, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:836) note: "Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting."

Lemaona's photomontage takes issue with a particular type of macho masculinity that has permeated South African society, both black and white, which is epitomised by the rugby playing fraternity. By engaging with the homophobic attitude found in many cultural groups³¹ he also humorously tackles what has been called the "crisis in masculinity" (Ashe 2007:1) that arises from the erosion of traditional roles for men in the family and workplace, or the loss of 'manliness' through gay culture and feminism, and the rise of the 'metrosexual' man.³²

³¹ See my discussion on the problematic nature of responses to homosexuality in black cultures in Chapter Three (pages 78-80).

³² Metrosexual is a term that is derived from metropolitan and heterosexual and was originally coined by the British journalist Mark Simpson in an article published in *The Independent* in 1994. It is often applied to flamboyant, somewhat narcissistic young urban men, and the term became more familiar after Simpson described David Beckham as a metrosexual icon in an article published in *Salon.com* in 2002. As Simpson (2002) explains: "The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference."

Lemaoana uses religious imagery and rugby to address the intersection of masculinity and race because both Christianity and sport have autobiographical relevance. Lemaoana (2010), in e-mail correspondence with me, explains that his mother is a Catholic and while he was a teenager she insisted on the whole family following the Catholic faith. She bought a reproduction of da Vinci's *Last Supper* for their home which made him suddenly aware of how many times this particular image was seen in the homes he visited in Soweto. It was thus a familiar part of his childhood experience as was his rugby playing at school. Lemaoana attended Highlands North Boys High School, a typical 'model C' suburban school with a culture of sporting activity, and he soon became part of their provincial rugby team.³³ He was skilled enough to be selected to play for the Gauteng Lions under-18 team at Craven Week in 2000 so his interest in rugby and the macho culture it inspires arises from personal experience.

Theodore Cohen (2001:57) notes: "Participation in competitive sports is a large component of socialization into masculinity. In playing, one is exposed to the values and expectations that help make one appropriately masculine." For Lemaoana, therefore, his experience in developing the particular traits that identify a good rugby player (such as strength, speed, competitiveness and aggressiveness) also informed his understanding of adult masculine identity. Lemaoana's rugby experience also alerted him to the politics of sport in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly as rugby was described in 1994 by Naas Botha, the former Northern Transvaal and Springbok fly half, as to a great extent "the Afrikaners' game" (Grundlingh, Odendaal and Spies 1995:64). This was an attitude that Lemaoana was aware of at school where many of the black players were new to the game (soccer being the preferred form of sport in the townships). Lemaoana notes that the black rugby players often felt insecure when playing against Afrikaans schools and he furthermore states that "we felt we were generally playing 'their' sport" (Lemaoana 2010). His contrived interventions aimed at deconstructing such a notion therefore trespass on the cherished cultural domain of another population group.

³³ Lemaoana (2010) notes that, as is typical for a boy's school, there was an emphasis on sports of all kinds but rugby was considered the most important. He goes on to explain: "As most of the young black students had never played rugby before and opted to play soccer instead, we were told that if we were going to play soccer, we should do a season of rugby first. This pre-season rugby training is what got me hooked."

The political implications of a nation ‘owning’ a game became apparent to Lemaona in a letter he received, containing the names of players selected for the Lions. Some of the names were marked with an asterisk, which later turned out to identify all the black players in the team. Lemaona, talking to O’Toole (2007), continues:

At the bottom, the letter explained the quota of black players required.³⁴ It made me question myself. If we are the players of colour what are the other guys? What are they called? What category do they fall into? At the time it wasn't a sensitive issue, I just wanted to play, but when I started doing my art I questioned these issues.

His approach to art is described as an “attempt to amend a very passionate experience...a death of a dream” (Lemaona 2005). The dream in this case is the unfulfilled hope of becoming a “normal rugby player” who would be recognised for his abilities alone. Lemaona (2010) explains how his image of the sport was further marred by individual ambition:

As I played rugby beyond the schools, I played for Soweto Rugby Club and then the TWR rugby club, I was disappointed to find that the sport was ‘corrupted’ by elitism, nepotism and people’s egos, political agendas and individuals taking advantage of the ‘popular call’ for the sport to change for their own benefit.

The dreamlike setting for *The Discussion*, with interchangeable protagonists, is therefore an attempt to recreate the dream of a truly national sport that could uplift the lives of other potentially talented black players – a form of salvation for the disadvantaged majority. As such it falls into the status of myth, or wishful thinking, thus the fanciful setting and the equation with a religious message of salvation.

In her study of ethnic integration in high school rugby, Elmarie de Wet (2004:8) explains that sport is understood to be an intrinsic part of South African society to the extent that social identity and sporting activity become conflated. Furthermore, as Richard Holt (1990:3) explains, sport is not only a physical activity: “Sports have a heroic and mythical dimension, they are, in a sense, ‘a story we tell ourselves about ourselves.’” Thus elevated, sport becomes a metaphor for

³⁴ The quota system was introduced to rectify historical demographic imbalances in South African sports teams as part of the transformation process in post-apartheid sports. These imbalances resulted from the unequal opportunities of the apartheid regime. The aim of transformation is to ultimately have teams that match the population demographics with each player being chosen by merit (de Wet 2004:9).

national identity, and in South Africa we have seen that national identity has been historically intertwined with religious beliefs for the Afrikaner nation. It is a small step to see rugby as a national religion identified by brotherhood, exaggerated manliness, strength, and machismo. Such traits are among those commented upon by Botes in his response to historical Afrikaner patriarchy.

Alfredo Mirande (2001:46-49) explains that macho is usually identified in a negative way as “exaggerated masculinity”, that demonstrates authoritarian or aggressive behaviour, although positive connotations of courage, honour and integrity can be identified as the other side of the macho coin. Both the positive and negative definitions would be pertinent in categorising rugby players but Lemaona questions both ideals, so rugby in the new South Africa, once the domain of macho white players, is changed beyond recognition into an antithesis of masculinity that takes issue with both black and white stereotypes.

Lemaona takes the problematisation of colour one step further by creating an alter ego ‘pink’ rugby player who appears cloned in groups (rugby teams) or standing alone against floral backgrounds as seen in *Defenceless* (2008: Fig.5.29), or as haloed saints floating aimlessly against a black void in *Last Line of Defence* (2008: Fig.5.30). The pink stockinged figure is a comment on quotas and ‘players of colour’ but the feminised clothing refers to the erosion of masculine stereotypes in contemporary society and stands as an emblem for anyone who is socially “outside the periphery” (Lemaona 2010). In his discussion of the formation of male identity Cohen (2001:55) notes: “Broadly speaking, boys learn that being male means being strong, competitive, aggressive, inexpressive and courageous. They further learn that *masculinity* is tightly connected to their (hetero)-sexuality.” The effeminate homosexual is therefore anathema to the macho *masculine* rugby player who has been valorised by the hegemonic masculinity that has been traditionally promoted by the Afrikaner nation.

Lemaona’s pink-clad protagonists surrounded by flowers, or dressed in floral fabrics, exhibit a level of pinkness and femininity that become very amusing in their antithetic hyperbole while simultaneously commenting seriously on the social hierarchies that men contend with in South African society. The metrosexual image of modern masculinity espoused in Lemaona’s

fantasies is the image of the sporting hero who is simultaneously dandy, possibly bisexual, definitely in touch with his feminine side and fulfilling the criteria delineated by Mark Simpson (2002) in his description of the ultimate metrosexual narcissistic sportsman – David Beckham.³⁵

The use of pink camouflage also appears to address what Lemaona (2005) calls the “complexities of inferiority” that he struggled with as a black player in a white sport. He explains that on the rugby field name-calling is a typical strategy to achieve psychological superiority over the opposing team. On one occasion where Lemaona was playing against an Afrikaans school the opposing captain screamed out “we are playing against ‘moffies’ (gays or feminine men) and ‘lappies’ (dish cloths or cloths used to scrub floors)” (Lemaona 2010). Pink is the colour that “moffies” and “lappies” would wear, so Lemaona’s players are confronting the name callers with the ‘real thing’.

In *Last Line of Defence* several players foreground masculinity as an issue by clutching their groins as if to offset their clothing and the lack of purpose displayed by figures floating in limbo.³⁶ Despite undermining his hegemonic masculine identity, as a rugby player he is still sanctified by a halo provided by the carefully placed sun motif on a traditional Kanga cloth. Lemaona has chosen his cloth backgrounds for their layered associations as, in themselves, they represent the idiosyncracies of global trade. They are designed in Europe and manufactured in the East yet have been appropriated by the local people in South Africa and imbued with local meaning. As Lemaona (Brodie/Stevenson 2008) explains, “they are regarded as significant markers of spiritual healing, imbued with great religious and spiritual power, used by diviners and fortune-tellers”. The hagiographic depiction of pink ‘metrosexual’ rugby players in *Last Line of Defence* denotes the levels of idealism lavished on sporting heroes in South African society, yet they are each sanctified by a sun motif that reflects African religious beliefs rather than

³⁵ Simpson’s article *Meet the Metrosexual* (2002) comments on the remarkable *lack* of sensation that was noted in UK media following the ‘pin up’ photographs published in a glossy gay magazine, which were posed by David Beckham. He ascribes the non-reaction to the fact that “Becks’ is almost as famous for wearing sarongs and pink nail polish and panties belonging to his wife, Victoria (aka Posh from the Spice Girls), having a different, tricky haircut every week and posing naked and oiled up on the cover of *Esquire*, as he is for his impressive ball skills”. British (and international) glorification of such a high profile metrosexual man has, therefore, gone a long way to making metrosexuality understood as a descriptive term and acceptable as a lifestyle choice in global culture today.

³⁶ Lemaona often has his protagonists clutching their groins, particularly in group images (like entire rugby teams), to emphasise that masculine identity and sexuality is an issue in contemporary South African society.

western Christianity. These figures thus simultaneously combine and undermine the stereotypes, beliefs and ideals of both cultures.

Many of Lemaona's images are made of traditional fabrics which have been overprinted, manipulated or 'adorned' in various ways. Some, like *Defenceless* (2008) have been sewn with appliques and deliberately refer to the craft medium of 'women's work' rather than the more masculine aspects of art displayed by painting or sculpture. He also uses gaudy colours and includes imagery from the internet or botanical magazines (O'Toole 2007) which are layered and reduced to construct his pretty dreamlike spaces or decorative finishes. In this way he employs a 'kitsch' aesthetic that appears designed to engage with the modernist notion of patriarchally sanctioned aesthetically tasteful 'high art'.

See for example *The One*, (2006: Fig.5.31) where the image of a Christ-like figure dressed in the ubiquitous pink, (portrayed by the same model (Nkosinathi Quwe) who repeatedly appears around the Last Supper table in *The Discussion*) is pointing to his flaming heart in the shape of a rugby ball, set against a patterned fabric background in cheery yellow, pink and turquoise. The halo is constructed from manipulated sections of Shangaan fabric print, and the result is an amusing fantasy of traditionalism and kitsch presented in the guise of a 'Catholic prayer card'. Lemaona (2005) explains that he carefully selects the fabrics to subvert expectations and display irony through his combination of idealism and feminism in reference to a sport that valorizes masculinity. His pink clad religious protagonist is thus a quintessential South African 'metrosexual' man who displays the erosion of distinctions between masculine and feminine, black and white, or straight and gay in contemporary South African society.

These works by Lemaona have followed the trajectory of religious imagery, beginning with the grand gestures of the Renaissance and da Vinci's famous *Last Supper*. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this painting has embodied post-modern hyperreality through media repetition and many reinterpretations/borrowings or parodies by subsequent artists and in this tradition it now enters into the surreality of Lemaona's heavenly stage setting in *The Discussion*. His subsequent religious parodies then reduce Christian iconography to the bathos displayed in popular renditions of Jesus found in 'low art' religious visual culture and epitomised

by *The One*. The religion of rugby and the macho sporting hero/saviour are thus humorously exposed as constructs of visual culture and media hype. By promoting ‘moffies’, ‘lappies’ and metrosexuals Lemaona questions the unifying role ascribed to national sport and its heroes (or to religion and its icons for that matter) in a culturally and ideologically fragmented country.

Conclusion

Masculinity, then, is the ‘taking up’ of an enunciative position, the making up of a psychic complex, the assumption of a social gender, the supplementation of a historic sexuality, the apparatus of a cultural difference...My attempt to conceptualize its conditionality becomes the compulsion to question it; my analytic sense that masculinity normalizes and naturalizes difference turns into a kind of neurotic “acting out” of its power and its powerlessness. It is this oscillation that has enabled the feminist and gay revision of masculinity – the turning back, the re-turning, of the male gaze – to confront what historian Peter Middleton (1992:3) describes as the “blocked reflexivity” that marks masculine self identification, masked by an appeal to universalism and rationality (Bhabha 1995:58).

The quote above, by Homi Bhabha, encapsulates the complexities of masculine experience and masculine identity which, in this context, problematises the presentation of a narrow version of ideal manliness in the person of Jesus Christ. Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, in their introduction to *African Masculinities* (2005:4), point out that the study of masculinities is no longer a coherent discipline and discourse on masculine identity is anti-essentialist because the experience of men is diverse in the extreme. Such diversities are demonstrated in the vastly different approaches to masculine identity ironically embodied through the single persona of Jesus Christ in the work of Botha, Botes, Lemaona and Victor.

The irony lies in the fact that Christianity’s ideal of masculinity is rooted in perfection. Conway (2008:143) explains that the Gospel of John presents Jesus (in first century Greco-Roman terms) as a perfect model of the traits that define ideal masculinity and a man “who ranks above all others”. Such perfection is delineated by the limited parameters of who and what Christ is and how He may be portrayed, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Current masculine identity on the other hand, indicated in the artworks discussed here, is complex, diverse, mutable and imperfect. This raises questions about the continued relevance of such an icon and the

acceptability of the rules and regulations He is there to promote, whereas renderings of an uncertain, flawed Jesus in an imperfect and constantly changing world are arguably more reflective of post-colonial experiences in South Africa.

Diversity and complexity are identifying characteristics of the following chapter where the source is no longer limited to a single persona. Artists instead draw on a selection of biblical narratives and a cast of patriarchs, saints and sinners that manifest both good and evil, and present many facets from which to engage with the challenges of contemporary life.

CHAPTER SIX

Saints, Sinners, Patriarchs and Politicians

The Bible is a rich source of stories about fallible humans and their mixed interactions with the power of God and His minions, particularly in the Old Testament. Such narratives, repeated often and emphasised as ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’, are assumed by many to be historically accurate.¹ However, as Arnold Rothstein (1998:35) in his lecture on Cain and Abel indicates, the biblical narrative “is *not* an historical or collective account that focuses on events and their causes, nor on chronological sequence”. The biblical narrative, he suggests, should be regarded “as moral teaching, presented in the form of singular personalities”. The illogicalities of biblical narrative serve in fact to universalise the story and broaden its application rather than presenting singular and specific occurrences.

Rothstein (1998:5) notes that myth allows humankind to engage with the common mysteries of life through metaphor, and he illustrates this interaction using biblical examples. Thus “man’s soul takes flight at his demise, strength resides in one’s hair, leprosy is punishment for impiety; misconduct on the part of a king, such as David or Ahab, can produce a drought.” He concludes this explanation by stating that “myth [is] the natural language of religion” (Rothstein 1998:5). One might add that, associated as it is with metaphor, myth also lends itself to interpretation through art. It is not surprising, therefore, that biblical narratives have produced an abundant supply of myths which the artists discussed below employ as allegorical metaphors² in their

¹ The creation versus evolution argument is a good example of this point. Richard Dawkins, in his book on the case for evolution, *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009) cites the results of American Gallup polls taken over nine years between 1982 and 2008 indicating that between 40 and 47 percent of Americans believe that life was created by God in the last 10 000 years and that humans did not evolve from other animals (Dawkins 2009:430). The result is that many Americans actively campaign against the teaching of evolution in schools and there are literally thousands of websites dedicated to proving the truth of the biblical version of creation – John Ross Schroeder ([Sa]), for example, concludes his argument by saying “We cannot believe both the Bible and evolution. Both Old and New Testament consistently support the account of the divine creation of Adam and Eve.” In an even harsher response from: What does the Bible say about Creation vs. evolution? (GotQuestions.org [Sa]) the writer states “Evolution is an enabler for atheism.”

² I use the term allegory here in two ways, firstly, according to the dictionary definition, it is “a narrative picture intended to be understood symbolically” (Chambers Concise Dictionary). This definition would pertain to the image produced as symbolic of both the original biblical story (which in itself is, arguably, already symbolic rather than literal) and of alternative meanings raised by the parodic reworking of the story illustrated in the artwork. Mieke Bal (2010:246) explains allegory as “a discourse (*gorein*) on otherness (*allos*)” thus referring to the content of the artwork as a way of addressing ‘an-other’ interpretation which would differentiate it from the biblical original. The

response to the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The storyline in these examples is already deeply invested with meaning (or ‘universal truths’), so alternative views of protagonists or altered outcomes have the potential to evoke strong reaction when used to convey contemporary social and political messages.

The chapter begins with reinterpretations of Old Testament biblical patriarchs, starting with Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac which, even in its original form, is an emotive issue touching on child sacrifice, a demanding God and patriarchal rituals. An enquiry into motives for murder and social violence follow with a contemporary reworking of Cain and Abel. This discussion of social ills pertinent to contemporary South African life is developed further through a selection of biblical and secular authority figures ranging from the Holy Trinity to saints, church leaders, and politicians, whose shortcomings are revealed and sharply criticised by means of transgressive representations.

Interpretations of sacrifice in prefigurations of Christ

The story of Abraham and his sacrifice of Isaac is known as the *aqeda* or binding, in Jewish religious tradition, referring to the binding of an offering (human sacrifice) before it is placed on the altar. Wim Botha and Christine Dixie have approached this narrative with interpretations that differ markedly from each other in both connotation and in visual manifestation. Botha comments ironically on blind obedience to a traditional power and Dixie reflects on the rites of passage in patriarchal societies.

In a work that forms part of the *Premonition of War* exhibition, entitled *Premonition of War (Abraham and Isaac)* (2005: Fig.6.1), Wim Botha has symmetrically arranged nine framed jigsaw puzzles to create a large and dramatic sunset skyscape. In front of the middle panel, positioned as if falling through the air from the top left, is a small bronze sculpture of Isaac in the

difference between allegory and metaphor appears to reside, mostly, in the first relating to a discourse (or storyline) and the second relating to the embodiment of an idea. A metaphor already presupposes slippage between subjects and the symbols used to visually encode other meanings within those subjects. Metaphor is a way of moving from denotative meaning in an image to connotative meaning and requires some link with the original for the meanings to accrue rather than be replaced. By combining the two terms I am trying to indicate that the works discussed here engage with symbolic reinterpretations of didactic narratives so that the original narrative and its message is still discernable while the alterations address specific contemporary topics that have been identified as contentious.

process of sacrificing Abraham. Botha, who is known for his hostility to ‘grand narratives’ (van der Watt 2005:5), has created an ironic counter grand narrative by inverting the role of the protagonists and, like *Scapegoat* (discussed in Chapter Five), presenting the denouement in the form of an epic mythic superhero battle occurring in mid air. Unlike the apparently passive acceptance of Isaac to his fate in the biblical story, Botha’s protagonists are actively fighting (see detail in Fig.6.2). Abraham appears to be attempting to grasp Isaac’s arm and is overwhelmed by his young, active son who claws at his eyes while brandishing the knife. The old man is clearly at a disadvantage and Botha creates an air of bathos by turning a grave religious ceremony into an ignominious struggle for existence between age and youth. The dramatic backdrop merely trivialises the diminutive figures and their battle, as if the outcome is negligible in terms of the greater scheme of things, an ironic conclusion in terms of the importance of sacrifice in the development of biblical dogma.

In the Bible God’s instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his only son (Genesis 22:1-19) has traditionally been understood as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of God’s son on the cross. As such it often appears in images of the birth or childhood of Christ from the early Renaissance onwards, because it symbolises the whole cycle of the Fall and the promise of redemption ordained by God.³ An example can be found in van Eyck’s *The Virgin with the Canon van der Paele*, (1436: Fig.6.3) where the left arm of the Madonna’s throne has a carved figure of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac. It can also be seen in Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Adoration of the Kings*, which is the central panel of his *Epiphany* triptych from 1495 (Fig.6.4), the gift placed at the feet of Mary and Jesus is a small sculptured rendition of the sacrifice of Isaac (see detail Fig.6.5).

The sacrifice of Isaac is an expression of that same faith in the redemptive power of sacrifice and obedience that is found in the New Testament. Botha’s image of a son killing his father, however, raises questions about the legitimacy of God’s command for a father to sacrifice his son. The story of Isaac holds an uneasy place in Christian literature as it appears to refer to the practice of child sacrifice, considered emblematic of idolatry in biblical history (Levenson

³ This is more prevalent in Northern Europe where the Gothic tendency to include religious symbolism in art continued for much longer than it did in Italy, where the development of naturalism took precedence.

1993:4) despite the injunction by God in Exodus 22:28 to give Him the firstborn sons. Jon Levenson (1993:4) explains that in practical terms firstborn cattle and sons were to be redeemed by sacrificing a lesser animal in their place (a sheep for example). However the sacrifice of Isaac is an anomaly because it is a clear and direct injunction by God to sacrifice a child: “Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about’” (Gen 22:2). David Lee Miller (2003:15) clarifies this paradigm by explaining sacrifice in relation to both the existence and the fatherhood of God:

Whether practiced, commemorated, narrated, or otherwise depicted, sacrifice may be understood as a social technique for the manufacture of God. As gift giving, it substantiates Him through the symbolic economy of the gift. Specific types of gifts establish His character: if giving a child makes God a progenitor, then giving the firstborn son makes Him a patriarch.⁴

In the Bible Isaac is reprieved at the last minute when God provides His own alternative sacrifice of a ram. The reprieve is demonstrated visually in several examples of Renaissance art such as Ghiberti’s trial work on this topic for the bronze doors of the Baptistery in Florence (1401: Fig.6.6) where the angel is shown with his hand raised to stop Abraham from wielding the knife, simultaneously indicating with this gesture the ram caught in a bush.⁵ Donatello also created a marble statue on this theme in 1418 (Fig.6.7), for the Campanile of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. No angel is evident in this version but Abraham looks up with a furrowed brow, as if surprised or disturbed, while his hand holding the knife against Isaac’s neck slackens illustrating his loss of purpose for this action. In Botha’s inversion there is no reprieve therefore an accepted story becomes a heinous crime, the command to murder is stripped of its mythical and metaphorical mystique and is revealed as anathema. At the very least the morality of both act and command in the original story is problematised.

⁴ Miller (2003:15) explains that every gift given imposes an obligation for the recipient to reciprocate in some way and thus secures obligations and ties within the clan. Furthermore gifts given to an invisible God aid in substantiating His presence and raising the hope of His interventions.

⁵ Ghiberti created the bronze panel of Abraham sacrificing Isaac as his submission for a competition between seven Florentine artists. All were given the same theme to illustrate and the award was the commission of a set of bronze doors for the Florence Baptistery. Ghiberti notes in his *Commentarii* that he was awarded the commission unanimously on the strength of this panel (Baptistry Competition [Sa]).

It is interesting to compare Botha's work with two works on the same subject by the American artist, George Segal, both of which became the subject of controversy and protest in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁶ The first, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1973: Fig.6.8), was presented to the Tel Aviv Foundation for Literature and Art in 1973, as a requested donation to the state of Israel. The sculpture shows a heavy-set middle aged Abraham who clutches his knife while standing over his son Isaac, lying helplessly on rocky ground. A sense of menace is evoked due to the contrast between the huge, solid father who towers over his frail child. The work was met with a storm of protest and was never publicly displayed as, according to Segal (quoted in Tuchman 1983:91), "the Israelis were reading the piece as a criticism of Zionism, as saying that Israel was sending its sons out to war to die". Segal considered this interpretation simplistic in the extreme, in its failure to read the work as "a detached philosophical examination" (Tuchman 1983:91).⁷

A similar response met his later work commissioned for Kent State University by the Mildred Andrews Foundation, entitled *In Memory of May 4 1970, Kent State: Abraham and Isaac* (1978: Fig.6.9). This piece was to commemorate an event at the University in which students were protesting Nixon's decision to extend the war from Vietnam into Cambodia. The army, sent in to disperse the protesters, fired at them killing four and wounding nine (KSU kills sculptor's memorial to slain. 1978:18). Segal (quoted in Tuchman 1983:96) believed that the subject matter would resonate metaphorically with the Kent State issue on several levels:

The National Guard killing students during an antiwar protest was not Right Wing versus Left Wing polemics, but it was more analogous to the Abraham/Isaac terrible, eternal conflict between adherence to an abstract set of principles versus the love of your own child.

This sculpture differs slightly from the earlier one as it consists of a father in workman's clothes, standing over his kneeling son who is markedly older than in the earlier version and, with bound

⁶ There is an affinity between Botha and Segal in the reasons behind their choice of subject matter as they both question the morality of sacrifice and the adherence to "abstract principles" that would require such action (Try again in twenty years. 1978: [Sp]).

⁷ Segal (quoted in Tuchman 1983:91) noted that the sculpture was "put in a basement somewhere" and as far as he is aware the sculpture remains "hidden in the recesses of the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv rather than on view in a more public room there" (Tuchman 1983:91).

hands held in an almost supplicatory gesture, seems to be pleading for mercy. In Segal's work, as in Botha's, there is no reprieve, no ram provided by God for the sacrifice, and as Mark Stevens and Cathleen McGuigan (1978:99) so aptly remark: "How could there be? In the end the National Guardsmen fired their rifles." Ironically it was just this detail (or lack of it) that caused the Kent State University to reject the sculpture; they considered the subject too violent, as there was no indication that the son was spared.⁸ The work, however, refers to a particularly violent incident and to the specific dilemma raised by an older generation sending its youth to fight a war that they do not necessarily believe is morally correct. The generational gap is shown as a site of conflict and moral issues are raised about the sanctity of life and the notion of sacrifice (Try again in twenty years 1978:6).

As shown here nuances of the original narrative automatically affect the contemporary interpretation, sometimes beyond the artist's intention, yet Segal found the biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac so pertinent to current issues and events that he employed it twice for different purposes. Botha similarly comments on social conditions that uneasily vie with historical expectations, and his interpretation could be said to question both the motivation and the overall notion of sacrifice. *Premonition of War (Abraham and Isaac)* thus undermines the religious message more than replacing Christ with a Satyr on the cross (see Fig.5.12), because it questions the fundamental motivation for the redemptive act. By inverting the sacrifice Botha's image queries not only the legitimacy of the original story but the entire development of God's plan for humankind and, in terms of sacrifice as a means to manufacture and substantiate God, he appears to be raising the question of whether this is still necessary. Does humankind still need a God who requires bloodletting for His existence? And by inference – is there not already enough bloodshed in our society? Surprisingly, despite the level of doctrinal subversion employed, there was less adverse reaction to this graphic depiction of patricide than was recorded in relation to the *Scapegoat* crucifix which, as mentioned in Chapter Five, is actually not as revolutionary in its religious implications. Perhaps this is because any representation of the crucified saviour carries far more inherent symbolic power than images of Abraham and Isaac.

⁸ Kent University instead proposed a sculpture depicting an armed soldier with a nude (or semi nude) woman facing him "to suggest innocence or vulnerability" (Stevens and McGuigan 1978:99). Not surprisingly Segal rejected this proposal. The Mildred Andrews Foundation, who were paying for the commission and who had originally offered it to Kent State University, then offered it to Princeton University who gratefully accepted and arranged to have the plaster sculpture cast in bronze (Segal Sculpture 1979:4).

Christine Dixie's interpretation of the *aqeda* is approached from a more personal angle and is informed by the social expectations she has encountered while raising a male child. Her installation entitled *The Binding* (2010: Fig.6.10) consists of six large (197 x 125cm) etching and collagraph prints of her six year-old son, Daniel, lying on his bed.⁹ He is represented to scale and is partially or entirely covered by a white blanket, or other material created by blind embossing, in all but one of the images, so the overwhelming effect is of almost clinical whiteness. These images are placed in a row along one wall in a regimented manner that evokes, as Dixie (2010a) explains, a dormitory, hospital ward or army barracks. Below each print is a table, draped in a white cloth mirroring the largely white expanse of the prints on the wall. Dixie (2010a) describes the table as a bed, an operating table, or an altar, on which a 'shadow' image of the child in the print above is constructed from regimented rows of plastic toy soldiers (Fig.6.11). The white cloth is identified by Dixie (2010a) as an altar cloth, perhaps suggesting the sacrificial nature of the sleeping child in this context.

Sacrifice is the underlying theme throughout, inferred by the biblical reference in the title. Sacrifice is also alluded to in the soldiers making up the shadow images, not only because soldiers are expected to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of their country, but also because Dixie had to cut limbs off many of the figurines to enable them to fit into the required shadow shape (Dixie 2010a). Some shadow children on the beds below also have severed limbs (see Fig.6.12), approximating the severed limbs of the maimed toy soldiers from which they are made, and metaphorically suggesting the emotional fragility of the sleeping children in the images above. Dixie may also be responding to the circumstances of her own generation during her youth, as young white men, after completing school, were subject to compulsory conscription in the South African Defence Force,¹⁰ and were deployed to fight border wars or to participate in

⁹ This installation was first exhibited at the Art on Paper Gallery in Johannesburg from 8-29 May 2010 and subsequently at the History Museum's Alumni Gallery in Grahamstown, during the National Arts Festival from 20 June to 4 July in the same year. The work was bought by the Smithsonian Institute for African Art and was sent there in November 2010.

¹⁰ Compulsory conscription lasted until 1990 when it began to be phased out and was officially ended in 1993 due to the massive resistance of young people with the ECC (End Conscription Campaign) and their supporters, like the Black Sash, who objected to official government ideologies of apartheid and the suppression that underpinned Defence Force activities (South African History Online [Sa]).

the suppression of township resistance and often returned home dramatically changed by their experiences. Some were injured or killed (sacrificed) in battle so the maimed toy soldiers in this installation could refer directly to South African history.

Dixie is also approaching the nature of sacrifice as a necessary part of establishing patrilineal descent and the cultural reproduction of male identity, in particular identifying with the father. A mother's role in producing children is manifestly visible and uncontested but the father's role is less obvious. According to Nancy Jay (1992:98) ritual sacrifice, as found in the Abraham and Isaac story, is necessary to produce patriliney. She notes that semitic tradition maintains a lineal descent from fathers but also recognises the descent from the mother's line, which produces a conflict: "Whose is the son? – the mother's or the father's?" (Jay 1992:99-100). Jay (1992:102) notes that the *aqeda* is necessary to identify Isaac as part of patriliney because Isaac is born of his mother but ultimately owes his life to his father and to God, who both spared him at the point of his death. His symbolic rebirth into patriliney is witnessed by the father as visible evidence of his fatherhood. While blood sacrifice (where the son is 'redeemed' by sacrificing an animal) is thus socially necessary to reinforce patrilineal descent, the story of Abraham and Isaac differs in intent. Abraham was promised many descendents, but was then asked by God to kill the means for producing those descendents - creating a patrilineal paradox that is noted by Miller (2003:5):

How can fatherhood thrive on what appears to be self-destruction? I argue that the binding of Isaac, which sets forth this paradox so unforgettably, forces its contradiction to a crisis resolved by the deification of fatherhood in Yaweh. As a prototype of filial sacrifice, Isaac embodies in radical form both the structural dilemmas of the filial relation and their narrative resolution.

The narrative of the *aqeda* and the ultimate awakening, or rebirth, of her son as he enters his father's world can be identified in Dixie's images through her method of reproducing the sleeping boy. Dixie (2010a) notes that when she took the photographs to be used as reference for these works her son was the age at which young Spartan boys would leave their homes and enter the father's military camp for training. The transition from one state to the other in this instance would have been clear-cut and irreversible and such a transition is illustrated by the naturalistic rendition of the boy in his bed above contrasted with the regular lines of soldiers that form his

shadow self. Such a defined progression from child to man is not the norm, however, in contemporary child-raising practices.

The ambivalent nature of her son's transition is indicated by two images of the calmly sleeping child placed at either end of the installation. These 'framing' prints, *To Sleep* and *To Dream* (2009: Figs.6.13 and 6.14) show the child wrapped in a woven blanket, a metaphor for his mother's protection and comfort, with a toy gun (Fig.6.15) next to him indicating that he is still pretending to be a man. The toy gun is embossed, not etched, so it visually becomes part of the mother's realm of embossed, woven blanket,¹¹ rendering it innocuous and unable to inflict harm. In all the images there is a contrast between fine illusionistic etching and blind embossing that enhances the division between hard reality (or the father's realm) and a soft formless trace of the real associated with the mother, a contrast that produces, in Dixie's (2010a) words "a dreamlike illogicality". This work appears to display just such a dichotomy between the iconic and the indexical, as it evokes the disjunctive experience of childhood where many children are familiar with war and violence through games, toys and television but are unaware of the reality of loss and pain that they symbolise (Dixie 2010a).

The quietly dreaming boy at either end thus inhabits a liminal space between childhood and adulthood while the images in between display various stages of his transition from the mother's world to the father's. The second print, *Bind* (2009: Fig 6.16), shows him tightly wrapped in bandages as if tied up for the sacrifice. He is, however, unaware of his fate, displaying the oblivion of childhood in his trusting acceptance of the future, much as Isaac appears to have done in the original story. The third image, *Burning* (2009: Fig 6.17), is markedly different in both execution and effect. It is the only image where the boy is awake and gazing back at the viewer, thus foregrounding the importance of the father's gaze in his witness to the sacrifice as a necessary part of the social contract that ensures the patriarchal line. As Miller (2003:7) explains:

Patrilineal patriarchies recruit sacrificial victims as visible stand-ins for the fatherly body; post sacrificial cultures represent filial sacrifice and display the images of boys for much the same purpose. 'Witnessing' proves crucial to all

¹¹ Dixie (2010a) explains that the texture for the embossed blanket was created from an actual woven blanket, which made up the matrix for the collagraph. She also used actual materials to create textures in the other prints, such as sheepskin or bandages for example.

these transactions because although the spectacle can be observed, its connection to the patriline cannot.

The title, *Burning*, reminds the viewer that this boy's sacrifice is the means by which he may advance towards adulthood. The dazed intensity of his gaze raises a spectre of clarity and harshness emblematic of adult life. He appears to have been thrust suddenly into a state of being antithetical to the hallucinatory illogicality of dreams and childhood. His awkward nakedness reflects his discomfort at this sudden change and his awareness corresponds to Isaac's awareness and probable shock when he learned of the real reason for Abraham's journey to Moriah. The trauma involved in a transition from childhood to adulthood and the awakening from innocence to knowledge is represented in this image. Dixie (2011) also links the vulnerability of the child's body with the palms of his hands open and facing the viewer to images of the suffering Christ. There is a marked difference between this and the other panels, as Dixie indicates here the distressing nature of sacrifice for both victim and witnesses.

The two remaining panels, *Offering* (2009: Fig.6.18) and *Blind* (2009: Fig.6.19), return to the hyperreal world of dreams, indicating that the development from child to adult is not a steady linear progression nor a sudden irrevocable transition as it was with the Spartan young boys. The contemporary experience of growing up is more likely to be an accumulative trajectory of advancing and receding, of identifying with the father and running back to the mother for comfort and sustenance. In *Offering* the boy is covered with a sheepskin which Dixie (2010a) notes could anticipate his own 'skinning' or sacrifice, but which could also be a reference to the last minute reprieve for Isaac, when God provided a ram for the sacrifice on Mount Moriah. The sheepskin is thus a dual index, evoking both comfort/safety (mother) and sacrifice (father). The fifth print, *Blind*, is the exact opposite of *Burning*, as the boy has disappeared completely under the blanket and is curled up like a foetus in his mother's domain. Both the embossing and the child's configuration suggest a need for protection and reluctance to enter the adult male world. The shadow image of *Blind* is made up of fallen soldiers haphazardly piled within the boy's contours (2010: Fig.6.20) instead of the neatly regimented rows of fighters that form the other alter egos. These 'dead' soldiers embody the boy's fears of future expectations, and provide motivation for his withdrawal from adult responsibilities.

The images thus progress unevenly towards adulthood and express Dixie's own maternal ambivalence at the eventual need to relinquish her son to his father's influence. When discussing Dixie's earlier *Parturient Prospects* exhibition, Schmahmann (2007a:39) notes that Dixie's works "expose the points of resistance, fragility and uncertainty within discourses about maternity." Schmahmann is drawing on Foucault's (1990a:92,93) notion of power relationships as a fluid, ever-changing web of domination and resistance¹² and, like the earlier works the presentation of these images expresses the resistance and uncertainty of both mother and son in this process.¹³

Dixie's installation and interpretation of the *aqeda* is a personal evocation of her son's development and her response as a mother to her loss of control and her changing role in his life. This work would thus probably resonate with any mother of sons. However it also implies an awareness of South Africa's history of past military violence and perhaps even the ongoing scourge of violent crime in her use of toy guns and soldiers as emblematic of preparation for adult life in South Africa. The following discussion, however, is specific to a South African situation and is couched in the violent framework of the Old Testament brothers, Cain and Abel.

Murder and Mayhem

Conrad Botes (2009) has stated that during his schooldays, under the apartheid regime, certain stereotypes were presented as 'truths'. He was particularly fascinated by the repeated statement that "black people are violent by nature" (Botes 2009) and notes that he and his fellow pupils were never given any explanation or supporting argument but were expected to accept such indoctrination unquestioningly. His series of images seen in the 2009 exhibition entitled *Cain*

¹² See also my discussion of Foucault in the Introduction.

¹³ Dixie (2011) has also expressed the difficulties she experiences as a female artist and mother when grappling with the nuances of a male ritual. She feels that this is an area which needs more exploration and understanding so perhaps the notion of ambivalence could be ascribed, in some part, to her feeling that she has not fully grasped the complexities of this issue.

*and Abel*¹⁴ take this premise as the starting point for an investigation into the agents of violence in South Africa.

The story of Cain and Abel is the first murder recorded in history, according to the Bible. It follows directly after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 4:1-16) and Jan Bremmer (2003:91) suggests that it is an illustration of the dire consequences of Adam and Eve's sin now manifest in the world, and an indication of the fragility of fraternal relationships which are often subject to the sin of envy. If one takes the notion of the brotherhood of Cain and Abel as a metaphor for the 'brotherhood of man' in a broader sense, then the level of envy and consequent violence escalates exponentially, further exacerbated by elements of racial tension introduced by Botes. According to Pamela Barmash (2005:13) in her study of biblical homicide, the forcefulness of the original story lies in the fact that it is a complex unravelling of tension and violence "fraught with dramatic, psychological and social possibility." Cain is also not a one-dimensional cold-blooded killer but is "drawn in subtle emotional nuances" (Barmash 2005:13). Botes' work is similarly nuanced as befits an investigation of both violence and racial tension in South Africa, which has an extraordinarily complex history, although the layered complexities of this story ironically unfold in a deceptively simple and direct comic book style.

The origins of violence in South African society have been analysed in a study by the Johannesburg based Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) and their findings, according to Steven Hunt (2003), indicate that very little has changed since the end of apartheid.¹⁵ Hunt (2003) notes: "South Africa's high rate of violent crime is just as related to economic and social marginalisation as it was during the 1980s." During the apartheid era violent protests and criminal acts were understood by the black community to be a form of resistance that would render the townships ungovernable and thereby promote political change. The struggle for equality thus legitimised crime and violence as a liberation strategy, however there is still a struggle for equality identified in economic terms in the 'new' South Africa. Hunt

¹⁴ Botes' solo exhibition, *Cain and Abel*, was held at the Michael Stevenson Gallery from 15 January to 21 February 2009.

¹⁵ Hunt (2003) states that post-apartheid South Africa still has one of the highest murder rates in the world with over 22 000 people murdered in 2000.

(2003) points to the blatant displays of unequal distribution of wealth as a factor, illustrated in the minority who can enjoy the constantly upgraded shopping centres or live in leafy suburbs with good schools nearby for their children, while many stay in shanty towns without adequate sanitation or legal electricity and still have to travel long distances to work. This inequality leads to the marginalisation of the dispossessed, and Hunt (2003) notes that marginalisation is at the root of patterns of violence in South Africa. Botes' *Cain and Abel* appears to illustrate this point of view and this work is, in Botes' (2009) words, "a political allegory" told through a well-known and widely understood biblical/historical medium.

Botes' original interpretation of this story was published in *Bittercomix #15* in grainy black and white images that are re-presented for the exhibition as a full colour lithograph in *Cain and Abel* (2008: Fig.6.21) with selected panels from the story reproduced as reverse glass painted panels in *Cain Slays Abel* (2008: Fig.6.22). His interpretation differs markedly from the biblical version and takes on a particularly South African emphasis in the presentation of an Abel who is large, strong, white and apparently superior both physically and politically, the latter indicated in his direct communion with God. Cain, on the other hand, is poor, oppressed, dispossessed and black. Michael Stevenson (2009) refers to Botes' story as "a detailed allegory of rivalry, jealousy, corruption and lust" which forms a point of departure for further investigations of these themes in the accompanying works on the show. It is not, however, a simple tale of good and evil, as Abel is the first to introduce violence and death (albeit of his horse). He is also presented with a woman, by God, in an apparent reference to the Adam and Eve myth, but unlike Adam he attempts to control his woman by keeping her veiled and tethered to him by a rope around her neck. There is a reference here to original sin leading to lust, and the notion of woman as the instigator of that sin who now requires restraint, which could also imply the controlling patriarchal bias of the old Nationalist Party. When the hapless Cain has killed Abel and unveiled the woman, however, she becomes an avenging angel and flies away, perhaps as a metaphor for the freedom of women under the new constitution, while Cain is left with nothing but remorse.

In the Bible the origin of discord between the brothers can be identified when Cain's offering to God of the first fruits of his farming was unacceptable while Abel's offering of the best lambs was greeted with favour (Genesis 4:3-5). Rick Benjamins (2003:136) explains that in the

interpretation of the biblical story by Augustine, Cain's sin lay in regarding Abel as a rival instead of as an example. Such an interpretation would be ironic in the light of Botes' situation of the story within the context of violence in South Africa. Blatant social inequalities and the arrogance of Abel are presented, not as just cause, but as mitigating factors for Cain's actions, and we are left at the end feeling sorry for the wretched Cain weeping over his 'brother's' grave in a barren desert. Similarly, the catalogue essay for *Cain and Abel* by Stacey Hardy (2009) pursues an imaginary storyline referring to Cain's experience in jail for his brother's murder. In a harshly epigrammatic style that encapsulates in writing the idiosyncrasies of comic book illustration this story evokes a sense of the desperation and hopelessness that Botes depicts in his images. It also raises the side effect of a violent society that produces an insalubrious, overcrowded jail system where hardened criminals are able to influence and dominate the inmates. Echoing Botes' approach, sympathy for Cain is the overriding emotion in this essay.

Unlike the comic book images with a developmental narrative, the individual reverse glass paintings that form part of this exhibition are more open ended and the possibilities for interpretation within the thematic context are greater. In one of the accompanying images (*Cain and Abel* Fig.6.23) Abel inscribes the 'mark of Cain' as violent pictograms all over his brother's body to set him apart and identify him as 'other' in the same way as skin pigmentation and physiognomy has functioned in colonised lands. Ironically, 'the mark of Cain' was originally decreed by God as an emblem of protection (from murder) during his exile (Genesis 4:15), but here it appears as a painful punishment, possibly a form of scarification or many tattoos, in Botes' words, "like shrapnel under the skin" (Michael Stevenson 2009). Cain is marked and set apart as both dispossessed and violent but the culpability of the oppressor is also raised in these images where evil only begets more evil. This is clearly stated in another image (also entitled *Cain and Abel* (2008), Fig.6.24) where we see the brothers as equals, pounding each other with clubs in a large desolate wasteland. The gritty grey background becomes a metaphor for the results of a violent society in which no one prospers regardless of who wins the battle.¹⁶

¹⁶ In his comic strips Botes has further developed the biblical tales of sibling rivalry as allegories of post-apartheid society and the colonial aftermath in his reinterpretation of the story of Jacob and Esau, and the tale of a birthright that was stolen by deception, which appeared in *Bitterkomix* #12 (2002). In the Bible (Genesis 27:1-40) the second son, Jacob, impersonates Esau to receive his dying father's blessing and the inheritance reserved for the firstborn. Jacob and Esau are twins (Genesis 25: 23-25) but even before birth it is prophesied by God that the older will serve the younger. In Botes' story one twin is white but the other is black representing in a very direct way the conflict in

Botes renders these images in uncompromising flat colour, hard outlines and graphic simplification resulting in a style that promotes a message of desolation resulting from violence and its aftermath. His simplification of the story as a black/white issue arises from the fact that this state of affairs could be understood as a manifestation of the apartheid legacy as explained by R.W. Johnson in *South Africa's Brave New World: the Beloved Country since the end of Apartheid* (2009). Johnson (2009:590) points to crime and violence as an expression of the current mismanagement of government and states that parts of South Africa are now without the rule of law and in many squatter camps and townships the only form of justice is found in vigilante groups and lynch mobs. He differentiates the 'haves' from the 'have-nots' by economic advantage rather than skin colour and indicts the current ANC government for exacerbating the dichotomy between rich and poor in the country, thus leading to the escalation of violence and disorder for all citizens. He does suggest, however, that the lack of leadership capacity can be attributed to past Nationalist government policies which denied black people access to quality education in South Africa and sent many of these leaders into exile where they were exposed to outmoded forms of communist inspired training. They were also denied the opportunity to be nurtured slowly into positions of power where the skills of governance could be absorbed and understood, the baggage of a disadvantaged past, therefore, inevitably hampers their present endeavours. This depressing analysis of the current problems facing South Africa are metaphorically illustrated in Botes' bleak wasteland setting, which displays the results of an unfair advantage that was mishandled, to the ultimate detriment of all. Botha's works on this exhibition could thus be seen as a cautionary tale for the new South Africa.

To take the story of Cain and Abel to its ultimate conclusion Botes turns his attention to a Last Judgement image entitled *On Earth as it is in Heaven* (2009: Fig.6.25) with lead paned painted glass set inside a Gothic inspired wooden window frame. Botes (2009) explains that his

South Africa for land. The post-apartheid struggle for a country and its resources, and the culpability of the colonisers can also be found in *Rats and Dogs*, (published in French as *Rats et Chiens* by Cornelius in January 2009), which is also a political allegory told through the metaphor of fraternal rivalry between both Cain and Abel, and Esau and Jacob.

development from comic books to the reverse glass painting,¹⁷ seen in many of the images discussed here, was a result of his interest in alternative forms of graphic imagery. The specific style of outline and colour that is typical to comics also lends itself to glass painting and forms a progression in terms of scale and exhibition style. There is, furthermore, a conceptual link evoked in relation to his religious imagery through reference to stained glass church windows. *On Earth as it is in Heaven* is apparently inspired by art historical examples of a biblical judgement day such as Rubens' *Fall of the Damned* (1620: Fig.6.26) where unworthy mankind is damned by God and cast into hell. In the context of this exhibition it is the promise of judgement and damnation that will befall Cain and which causes his despair, although in a wider sense it refers to the devastating effects of greed and corruption that is rife in South African society and politics.

Like Rubens' example, Botes has depicted rays of light streaming from above creating a matrix for the tumbling sinners (appropriately black in this instance) and devils inflicting torture and death below. Here the similarity ends because Botes' graphic style allows for the insertion of clues to the sins these people have committed and creates an image that becomes almost humorous in its childlike overstatement. The snake of original sin curls around the tempting woman/Eve, metaphor for lust, who holds a skull instead of an apple to demonstrate the results of her role in history. Below her are diamonds on either side to represent greed and avarice (related to the mining wealth in South Africa that inspired rapid colonisation in the nineteenth century). Then there are two grinning devils, complete with red colouring, cloven hooves, and horns. One wielding an axe and the other a sword, they gleefully dismember the hapless sinners as they fall. Finally a collection of skulls, one decoratively adorned with writhing worms, complete the lower register lest the viewer miss the dire message of the 'wages of sin'.

The terror of art historical Last Judgement images was designed literally to frighten people into good behaviour. Such imagery was used on the tympanums of Romanesque churches, an example being the west tympanum of Saint-Lazare in Autun, France, (c.1130-1135: Fig.6.27). As people entered the churches they were graphically reminded to listen and obey, thus ensuring

¹⁷ Botes (2009) explains that he was encouraged to move in this direction by his lecturer, Nicolaas Maritz, who taught him the technique.

a receptive audience for the priest. Fred S. Kleiner (2009:440) explains that at Autun there were also written warnings inscribed in Latin on the stone for the literate viewers. The inscription beneath the weighing of souls reads: “May this terror terrify those whom earthly error binds, for the horror of these images here in this manner truly depicts what will be” (Kendall 1998:207). A similar effect can be found in Hieronymus Bosch’s or Pieter Breughel’s depictions of hell. They all display a sensibility that is echoed in the words of tenth century painter, Magius, who explained: “I have painted a series of pictures for the wonderful words of [the Apocalypse] stories, so that the wise may fear the coming of the future judgement of the world’s end” (Williams 1991:223). Botes has satirised this method of controlling the populace using fear, through the hyperbole of his imagery where, by extracting and simplifying the message, he renders the original meaning ridiculous. This strategy allows the viewer to question the content of the work, with its currently applicable serious implications for South Africa, without being beguiled by a visceral assault on the emotions.

Injustice and Infamy

Another allegory of political and social injustice is forcefully demonstrated in *Stained Gods* by Diane Victor (2004: Fig.6.28). This work was conceived of as a diptych to be exhibited with a series of smoke portraits of missing children (Fig.6.29).¹⁸ The portraits were taken from missing children websites where the quality of images is often very poor and hardly recognizable. Some of the children had been missing for several years and sometimes it was the only photograph a parent had. When printed out the result was a strange amorphous image, which was echoed in the quality of smoke drawings and created a room full of sad, half-forgotten little souls blurring into obscurity. The icons of Christianity - God the father, the Son and the Virgin - are positioned on an opposite wall to offset the missing children whom they were not there to help. They are identified with both religious and social infrastructures (which tend to use religion to legitimize their authority) as they are beautifully rendered line drawings conforming to traditional religious iconography; but they represent a support system that failed and are therefore stained and smudged with charcoal and water. This surface intervention not only suggests the besmirching of

¹⁸ This diptych was made originally for the Kebble competition but because of the death of Brett Kebble and the subsequent cancellation of the competition it was first exhibited at the Goodman Gallery in 2006.

something once pure and pristine, but also obsolescence as it creates an effect similar to ‘hazing’ from damp or mildew that affects old, unwanted books and pictures abandoned in attics and basements. Such a reference is particularly relevant to the obsolete nature of these ineffectual divinities.¹⁹

The smoke portraits accompanying these icons are a marked departure for Victor in terms of imagery, style and medium. They are made with smoke (carbon) from a burning candle held beneath the paper, a technique that is extremely difficult to control and produces a fragile end result. While on a teaching contract at Rhodes University, Victor was invited to take part in a German exchange show dealing with HIV/AIDS, which she was rather anxious about as she felt it presumptuous to ‘speak’ on a subject of which she, personally, had no knowledge (Victor 2006b). In an attempt to help a student with experimental drawing media, Victor suddenly realised the possibilities of drawing with candle smoke, and the transience and ethereal quality of the medium made it ideal for portraits of people infected with HIV. Working from photographs of infected people from a nearby HIV community centre,²⁰ she perfected the technique, and that was the starting point of a process that produced the portraits of lost children in *Stained Gods* and the portraits of individuals who had died from AIDS-related illnesses which she used for the Sasol Wax installation, *In Smoke and Stain - The Recent Dead* (2006: Fig.6.30).

The last mentioned installation consists of a completely enclosed white-screened area resembling a chapel or sacred space. The walls inside contain a disembodied gallery of lost and damaged people delicately drawn in smoke, ranged around three sides of the enclosure and placed in rows as if they were icons on church walls. The ghostly wisps of disembodied souls made a stark contrast to the all too solid images of depravity and moral turpitude embodied in *The Good*

¹⁹ Victor created the staining technique after a pregnant friend committed suicide. She was asked to make a commemorative drawing for an exhibition to celebrate the friend’s life but was so traumatized at the nature of her death that she needed to find a suitable medium to express this without being too bleak and graphic (Victor 2006a). The result was a stained pregnant Madonna entitled *Dead Nikki* (2004) where the stain allows the image to seep into the paper as if it is dissolving.

²⁰ Victor explained her project to the nuns who ran an HIV community centre near the University, and asked if she could photograph anyone who would be happy to have a portrait done. She offered to give the photographs in exchange and about thirty people agreed to participate.

Preacher, The Good Doctor and The Honest Politician (2006: Figs.6.31, 6.32, 6.33). Each figure has a phallic reference (see the Preacher's cross held in place of his penis, the Doctor's stethoscope with a penile end and of course the blatantly sexual Politician) so they embody both the perpetrators of sexual crimes and the lack of assistance given by the institutions they represent which, in South Africa with its prevalence of HIV and AIDS, has often meant a death sentence for victims of the disease.

The trio are placed appropriately where the altar should be and form a triptych of corruption on which the dead were sacrificed. These larger than life-size 'pillars of morality' are finely etched but defaced with charcoal and smoke stains and even slashed with a razor blade to more forcibly indicate that, like the *Stained Gods*, they are not only ineffectual as leaders but have themselves become the cause of many social problems. Victor (2006b) remarks that slashing, staining or destroying finely and intensively worked surfaces is cathartic, relieving the emotional tension derived from engaging with distressing subject matter. On entering the enclosure one is cut off from the gallery space and you encounter a world of spirits whose sad eyes stare collectively at the viewer as if asking why they had not been protected from the abuse and exploitation meted out by these morally corrupt 'upholders of society'.

This work, like many others in Victor's oeuvre, conveys her sense of the perversity of humankind and in this case Victor was responding, as she often does, to events and policies reported in South African media that angered or upset her (Victor 2006b). *The Good Doctor*, for example, could refer generally to the shortcomings of the health system in South Africa and, in particular, to the appalling policies of President Mbeki and his health minister Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang with regards to the AIDS pandemic.²¹ Their collective denialism effectively killed thousands of AIDS sufferers by restricting access to anti-retrovirals (because they were too expensive), and by promoting traditional healers, a 'healthy diet' and the advantages of garlic, beetroot and lemons as a viable alternative (Johnson 2009:186,187,213). This policy was continually ridiculed by the media and by the international community, to no

²¹ For a fuller discussion on the political and personal complexities behind this mistaken policy, see pages 182 to 195 in Johnson (2009). Also see chapter 12, "Dying of Politics" in Andrew Feinstein's *After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey Inside the ANC* (2007:123-153) for a detailed analysis of both the effects on the country and the motivations of the people involved.

avail, and Johnson (2009:215) states: “By 2008 2.5 million South Africans had already died of AIDS, often in misery and ostracism, many deliberately deprived of medicines which could have saved them.” In fact Johnson (2009:216) notes that AIDS was more effective in depleting the youngest and strongest of Africa’s population than the slave trade. It is no wonder that Victor responded with anger and disgust to the failure on such a grand scale of medical assistance and national policy.

Similarly *The Honest Politician*, with his expression of surprise and denial while his penis protrudes from his opened trousers, appears to portray the moral degeneration and lack of moral leadership that is reflected in South Africa’s appalling rape statistics. Johnson (2009:218) reports that “50 percent of all cases before South African courts are for rape”. Furthermore a survey of over 300 000 young South Africans was reported in the *Sunday Independent*, on 24 October 2004, in which “58 percent believed that forcing sex on ‘someone you know’ was not sexual violence and 71 percent of girls had been forced to have sex” (Johnson 2009:218). Rape is also a factor in the rapid spread of HIV and AIDS yet this was another area of denial by Mbeki (who also had a reputation as a womaniser) (Johnson 2009:219).

The most famous South African example of dubious leadership in this regard can be found in the transcripts of Jacob Zuma’s rape trial from 2006 and which is probably directly related to the image of *The Honest Politician*. Zuma was accused of rape in November 2005 and a report was leaked to the press in a thinly disguised attempt at political assassination, as Zuma was immediately barred from all ANC activities. The trial in 2006 acquitted Zuma of all charges but he was publicly indicted in the media for taking advantage of a young gullible woman who was an old family friend and having unprotected sex with someone he knew to be HIV positive. His excuse was that she had initiated the event and “in Zulu tradition nothing could be worse than refusing her gratification” (Johnson 2009:547). Johnson (2009:547) notes that the impression given was that “Zuma was a man of innumerable sexual liaisons who drew no fine distinction”. He may not have been technically guilty of rape but his attitude was an indictment on a narrow

(and expedient) interpretation of the so-called revival of ‘traditional values’ particularly in relation to the rights of women.²²

The Good Preacher could embody those members of the clergy who so often appear in reported cases of abuse and molestation. In this instance, however, with his judgemental expression and a cross held out as if it is a weapon, he is more likely to refer to the lack of sympathy and the hard line that some churches took against people suffering from AIDS. In March 2010, at a UNAIDS conference in the Netherlands, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa publicly admitted the church’s culpability in fuelling the stigmatisation of AIDS (Afrol News 2010). He was speaking about the disapproving attitude in his own as well other Christian churches, where both homosexuality and sex outside of marriage was considered a sin. He also noted that there was a vocal minority who believed that AIDS was a judgement from God (Afrol News 2010). This attitude is demonstrated in Victor’s fiery preacher who is literally ‘going up in smoke’ in his righteous indignation. Makgoba (Afrol News 2010) noted that church policies and attitudes had often been so negative that, unsurprisingly, many people have told him the last person they would turn to for help or to disclose their HIV status would be a church pastor.

Victor’s decision to represent these dark and disturbing themes within a church-like sanctuary thematically allies this work to the nineteenth-century ‘Gothic’ horror novels such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* or the stories of Edgar Allen Poe and subsequent ghost tales. In Gothic literature the protagonists are depicted struggling against the forces of evil embodied in ghosts, monsters or vampires. Victor’s work similarly encompasses ghosts and moral darkness, and refers to the violence, religion and depravity found in a Gothic novel. There is a wholly modern sensibility here, however, in the ironic inversion illustrated in earthly protagonists who appear

²² The roles and rights of women within marriage in traditional or rural societies is also implicated in the spread of AIDS amongst many married and monogamous women and is responsible for their specific vulnerability to the disease. Schmahmann (2010:39) explains that unequal power relations result in women being unable to refuse sex or enforce the use of condoms even if they suspect that their husbands may be HIV positive. The reasons for this are complex and include the problem of men who work in large cities and only come home erratically to their wives, often with the hope of fathering more children. Also, a husband may interpret the request of a condom by their wife as proof of her infidelity and possible HIV status. Wives are therefore afraid to make such a request because of the real threat of retribution. These and many other aspects of traditional life relating to gender inequalities that have impacted on this problem are discussed by Schmahmann (2010) in her article “A Framework for Recuperation: HIV/AIDS and the Keiskamma Altarpiece (see particularly pages 38-40).

monstrous and evoke a response of horror and fear, while the ethereal, ghostly presences of their victims are a poignant testimony to absence and loss.

Personal interpretations: Female gods, saints and martyrs

Having exposed both secular and religious figures of authority as ineffectual, if not downright culpable, Victor presents an alternative in *Minder, Mater, Martyr* (2004: Fig.6.34). The all-male trinity of depravity discussed above is replaced by three large etchings (200 x 100 cm) that parody the grand Christian narratives embodied in St. John the Baptist, St. Sebastian and Christ enthroned.²³ They also make reference to the Holy Trinity but the three male figures are transposed into female alter-egos, occupying a triptych format within embossed Gothic arches that together resemble a historic Christian altarpiece. The Gothic theme of *In Smoke and Stain – The Recent Dead* is physically manifest here in the vocabulary of architecture, and this framework ensures that a connection is made with the *Eight Marys* (Fig 4.8 and 4.9), which was part of the same exhibition but was displayed within a Gothic stone framework in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Ironically, as Rankin (2008:35) notes, the decorative embossing making up these arches is created from ephemeral kitsch and found items²⁴ that detract from the architectural gravitas of Gothic as a style that has close links to religious dogma.²⁵ They are also

²³ These etchings were exhibited at the Museum for African Art in Queens, New York in 2004 as part of the *Personal Affects* exhibition.

²⁴ Rankin (2008:35) explains that Marley tiles were cut to create the decorative edge to the arches on each panel, to give consistency throughout. For the decorative infill, however, Victor used lacy plastic tablemats found in a department store for *Minder* and *Martyr*, and for *Mater* she used “components of tazzo spinner novelties from Simba crisps packets”.

²⁵ Gothic architecture embodied an era when state and church worked together to employ “a consistent policy – architectural as well as political – through many generations” (Furneaux Jordan 1988:127). The style stretched higher than any previous building with ‘spiritual’ lightness and the beauty of stained glass to demonstrate the demise of paganism and a striving to link earth and the heavenly realm (both physically and metaphorically). Simultaneously these buildings showed impressive strength and a longevity that manifested the power of the state underpinned by the legitimacy of God. State funding and the social organisation (through the work of the guilds on the cathedrals) ensured that society was economically viable during the building process and the subsequent religious worship and diocesan control ensured a docile, well controlled populace that benefited both church and state. Gothic cathedrals are the manifestations, therefore, of spiritual power wielded by a male God as well as earthly patriarchal power wielded by kings and abbots, priests and bishops. This power basis underlying Gothic aesthetics is explained succinctly by Ralph Cram (1909:[Sp]): “Gothic architecture and Gothic art are the æsthetic expression of that epoch of European history when paganism had been extinguished, the traditions of classical civilization destroyed, the hordes of barbarian invaders beaten back, or Christianized and assimilated; and when the Catholic

visually ethereal and delicate due to the embossing technique and thus form a feminine counterfoil to the massive rigidity of the stone architecture to which they refer.

The central figure, *Mater* (Fig.6.35), is seated befitting the status of a queen or ruler. Her severely coiffed hair and pursed lips suggest both control and disapproval. There is an element of Disney hyperbole here evoking wicked queens and stepmothers in the fairy-tale tradition, pointed out by Rankin (2008:38), which subverts the notion of a majestic and all powerful deity. Like *Strip* (Chapter Three, Fig.3.5) *Mater* is revealing her internal organs, muscle and flesh by pulling back her skin to expose her heart, but the flames of Christ's heart in traditional Catholic imagery have now become tears in the skin of her upper chest.

Africa is referenced in the multiple rings around her neck and the garment that looks like an African Kente cloth where it is wrapped around her torso. The Kente pattern, however, devolves into heavy black material studded with fish hooks. This could refer to Christ's injunction to his followers to become "fishers of men" (John 21:17) but *Mater* is grasping a writhing, snarling shark in her right hand instead, as a parody of the traditional symbol of a fish that is associated with Christ. Sharks are a recurring motif in Victor's oeuvre as she finds the shape formally and aesthetically beautiful and wholly functional for the "ultimate predator" (see Fig 6.36 for example). It also represents a very personal aversion to the "hard core conversion attacks" that Victor has received from the more militantly Christian students she has taught (Victor 2006a).²⁶ The shark is thus a metaphor for the predatory nature of radical fundamentalist Christianity, clutched ironically in the controlling hands of a matriarchal alternative to God.

Victor has described this figure as invoking a "fish toting Mami-Wata figure from West Africa" (quoted in Rankin 2008:38) thus denoting a complex and powerful female African deity who was

Church had established itself not only as the sole spiritual power, supreme and almost unquestioned in authority, but also as the arbiter of the destinies of sovereigns and of peoples."

²⁶ Victor lectures part time at Pretoria University which has a majority of students who have been raised in Afrikaans homes with a strong Calvinist Christian tradition. She has stated that many of these students find her subversive approach to Christian iconography blasphemous. Works like these are made deliberately in the Pretoria University studio in an effort, on Victor's part, to raise dialogue between opposing viewpoints and to break down rigidly held doctrinal boundaries (Victor 2006a).

imported from European traders²⁷ and assimilated as “an exotic ‘other’” (Drewal 2002:193) into African religion and culture. In Mami Wata figures (Fig.6.37 for example) the deity is sometimes half fish and half human, or at least has an ambiguous and obscured lower half (hence the heavy black drapery on Victor’s *Mater*). Many images show her holding and controlling snakes which in African arts are associated with water spirits.²⁸ Her interventions described by Henry Drewal (2008:25) are myriad and complex ranging from good fortune in wealth, status, and procreation, to spiritual and social advantages such as the possibility for women to become powerful priestesses and healers and to “assert female agency in generally male-dominated societies”.

There is a dangerous side to Mami Wata, however, as she may demand a sacrifice in return for the advantages she bestows, such as the death of a loved one or the recipient may be asked to embrace personal lifelong celibacy (Drewal 2008:25). The complexities inherent in a Mami Wata figure include the conflation of religious and mythical personae from other cultures with all their associations. In Drewal’s (2008:25) words:

She is a complex multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings.

As a dynamic Pan-African female deity with multicultural associations Mami Wata’s resonance is clearly not out of place as an aspect of Victor’s post-modern African alternative to the enthroned Christ.

Placed to the left of *Mater* is *Minder*, a parody of St. John the Baptist with his rough camel skin cloak (Fig.6.38). Details that identify this connection include the neck brace referring to John’s decapitation, and the platter on which Salome presented his severed head to Herod, which serves

²⁷ Henry Drewal (2002:193) notes that Mami Wata figures were added to African pantheons of water spirits in the fifteenth century shortly after the first encounters with European visitors. Their complex iconography was developed over the years by “taking exotic (and indigenous) images and objects, interpreting them, investing them with new meanings, and then re-presenting them in inventive ways to serve their aesthetic, devotional and social needs”.

²⁸ Drewal (2002:199) explains that the snake represents both water and rainbow deities in many parts of Africa thus linking the waters of the sky with the waters of the earth. Mami Wata similarly links and dominates both the waters of the sea and all fresh water.

as the podium on which *Minder* stands. The Baptist's rough cloak now consists of hair growing from *Minder's* head that appears to take on a life of its own in the extended prehensile locks covering her lower limbs. The outer limit of her hair forms a mandorla shape, which, as previously mentioned, was used as a framing device for both Christ and Mary in religious iconography and is indicative of her elevated religious status in this instance, as part of an alternative Trinity. Sexual inferences can be found in the sheer lush extravagance of the hair with its embedded cowrie shells, the traditional commerce of Africa, with a shape that resembles small vaginas, thus evoking both early colonial trade and women as marketable commodities. Rankin (2008:38) points out that luxuriant locks cascading over a naked body are also typical in traditional renditions of the penitent Mary Magdalene, (Titian's *Penitent Magdalen* (c.1531-33: Fig.6.39) for example) as well as in the "pelts of pagan fawns in lewd bacchanalia".

In front of *Minder* is an African aloe plant that appears to grow out of the hair/cloak so that she is surrounded by pelt and foliage in a way that suggests she is emerging or growing from them – a product of nature and at one with nature. In fact she could be identified as a polarised version of woman who demonstrates the Platonic nature versus culture or emotion versus reason dichotomy, which in this case ironically also evokes the intuitive, emotional aspects associated with John the Baptist. The 'inherent' womanly nurturing nature, is represented by the lamb in her arms sucking her fingers, making *Minder* a parody of popular images of Christ cradling the lost lamb. There is a more sinister side to this, however, in the knife held in her right hand as if ready to slaughter the lamb. This, along with her stern expression, is an indication not to take this woman and her nurturing, 'natural' role at face value. If one takes the lamb as a metaphor for Christ the 'Lamb of God' then this *Minder* is also the instrument of death, 'killer of Christ' - a role that is also automatically implied by Victor's substitution of three women in place of the Christian Trinity.

In *Martyr* (Fig.6.40), the third panel of Victor's triptych, sexuality is foregrounded through *Martyr's* 'S&M' inspired un-dress, with tightly corseted waist, garters and uncomfortably bound arms. Sexuality is also inferred in the multiple penetrations by nails that crowd her body. Her lower legs are pierced by traditional arrows and with her stance and piercings she is clearly allied to homoerotic images of Saint Sebastian. Sebastian, however, is often represented (in the more

well-known Renaissance paintings) as a beautiful young man gazing up towards heaven, posing languidly with a mere handful of arrows representing his penetration, as seen in Perugino's *St. Sebastian* (c.1495: Fig.6.41), for example. This female inversion of Sebastian emphasises difference through the excessive abundance of her penetrations with the sexual innuendo clarified by swarms of embossed sperm surrounding her in the background. She is neither serene nor classically beautiful, with her angry expression and awkwardly twisted, restrained body. She appears to be protected from the background sperm by a shroud-like backdrop, which could refer to a condom or a crumpled bed sheet or to the shroud of Christ, thus tarnishing the reverence which is assigned to relics like the Turin shroud. According to Rankin (2008:35) this connection with relics "seems to connote illusions and simulacra, perhaps questioning the validity of relics, perhaps reminding us that *Martyr* is itself a representation". In foregrounding this image and her two companions, as part of a larger text of religious representations, Victor alerts us to the differences, raising questions about the validity of the originals and, by inference, the validity of the (patriarchal) dogma that such originals are there to promote.

Like *Mater*, *Martyr* also connotes the traditional belief systems of Africa as her nail-studded body clearly alludes to the nail-studded *nkisi/nkondi* figures found in the Congo (Fig.6.42). Yet another link is forged, therefore, between these iconic inversions and the *Eight Marys*, as the figure in panel three of the *Eight Marys* clutches an *nkondi* instead of a Christ child. The myriad sources on which Victor draws ranging from African and Christian beliefs to pagan rites and popular culture are overlaid and destabilised thus creating, in Rankin's words (2008:38): "open-ended iconographies that invite imaginative interpretations of these uneasy partnerships of spirituality and satire, lust and laughter."

Practising Poise (2004: Fig.6.43) is a figure that relates visually to *Martyr* and Saint Sebastian images in her nail-studded body and the theme of penetration. However in this instance the allusions to an African *nkisi* figure is more clearly developed. She appears to be in control of her fate, unlike *Martyr*, as her limbs are free and her body language and gaze are not tortured or twisted. Despite the overtones of martyrdom this *nkisi* wields the powers conferred by witchcraft and sorcery attested to by the amorphous black objects, like condensations of primeval forces, which have been bound and constrained in the upper register of the image. There is a conceptual

connection between these formless blobs and the unformed matter of woman, devoid of the reasoning male principle, in the Platonic dichotomy of the sexes. Through her apparent control of these enigmatic objects this 'saint' valorises the power of nature over reason, and personifies intuitive knowledge systems rather than western science. She thus undermines the very core of ecclesiastical and western structures of control. She is flaunting her sexuality through the metaphor of a vaginally shaped shell held before her and the added penetration of lamprey fish surrounding her which look rather like sperm. She manifests strength in her direct gaze and clenched fist which overturn the notions of powerlessness and exploitation normally associated with saints and martyrs. There is no vestige of spiritual purity in the Christian sense or submissiveness of any sort. She is the antithesis of pure, beautiful images of virginal saints favoured during the Renaissance, she is, in fact, a 'modern' African woman with all the complexities that this term might imply.

Conclusion

The examples in this chapter are, of necessity, selective and non-representative, both regarding the cast of biblical characters employed by South African artists, and the relevant topics to which they refer. It is clear, however, in the examples discussed here, that enthusiasm for the newly democratic South Africa is belied by continuing challenges in political and social arenas that are often overlooked or ignored, such as the corruption of politicians and role models, the failure of the state to redress past inequalities, and the widespread lack of questioning and accountability that is rife, but is merely pushed under the carpet or denied by current leaders. Such a 'head in the sand' mentality is challenged by the artists in this chapter who are able to parody familiar biblical stories and their protagonists in a way that reveals the fallibility of South Africa's current political leadership and social infrastructures. According to Foucault's (1990a:93-96) "irregular web of power relations" the weaknesses identified in South Africa's social and political systems should indicate points at which a new order or alternative strategy may be introduced. The subjects of these works have been measured against patriarchal role models, historical mores and church dignitaries, with the result that both past and present are revealed as flawed; yet, as playwright Sir Tom Stoppard (2011) notes, art itself is not able to change anything, the role of art

is rather to bring about public awareness through the issues expressed as “change must come from within, from the people themselves”.²⁹

²⁹ This was quoted from an interview between Sir Tom Stoppard and Riz Khan on *Al Jazeera*, 27 January 2011. They were discussing Stoppard’s ongoing collaboration with opposition activists in Belarus and the Belarus Free Theatre, which presents performances that challenge censorship and raise issues of human rights abuses in Belarus.

CONCLUSION

And the bishops shall carefully teach this, that, by means of the histories and mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people are instructed, and confirmed in (the habit of) remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety (Quoted in Hall 2011:271).

The excerpt above comes from the Decree of the Twenty-fifth Session of the Council of Trent “On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images” and emphasises the historical importance of visual imagery to supplement and reinforce religious doctrine. The sentence following the quote above reads: “But if any one shall teach, or entertain sentiments, contrary to these decrees; let him be anathema” (Hall 2011:271). Throughout this document the images discussed may well fall into this latter category in their ability to evoke criticism or engender outrage. The bishops are further warned to avoid lascivious images or representations of drunkenness and wanton behaviour, also there must be “nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous” (Hall 2011:272). Such warnings are clearly flouted in these contemporary transgressive examples and it appears that the extent of deviation from historical religious doctrine dictates the level of outrage in viewer response. The artists discussed in this document, however, are not necessarily aiming for outrage. In most examples they merely attempt to disrupt complacent viewing, using a Brechtian form of viewer distancing, to encourage alternative considerations on the relevant topic, or to expose past injustices that have been perpetuated by institutions of power and control and absorbed by many as the norm. As such they become a spokesperson for the populace, the downtrodden, the marginalised; like medieval *giullare* these artists “give satirical voice to resentments felt by ordinary people against authority” (Farrell 1991:6).

There is a weight of historical meaning contained within religious imagery that is essential for full cognisance of the transgressions applied in these examples. The Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, strongly advocates the benefits of historical knowledge for an understanding of current problems when he states:

If it is true that universal history is a chain of efforts which humanity has made to liberate itself from privileges and from prejudices and from idolatries, one cannot see why the proletariat, which wishes to add another link to that chain, should not know how and by whom it has been preceded and what benefit it can derive from that knowledge (Gramsci 1977:13).

Similarly Foucault's investigations into past modes of population control - explorations seen in his studies of the prison systems, the control of madness, societal structures imposed by the disciplines of medicine, science and language and the social regulation of sexual behaviour - underpin his assessment of current social regulations and indicate the importance of historical knowledge when analysing the present. Foucault, however, also insists on the need for a strategy of detachment and defamiliarisation, similar to the disjunctions provided by parody, in order to clearly assess contemporary strengths and weaknesses. In the artworks discussed in this study meaning accrues through dialogue between past and present incarnations, and the moral tenor implied by a biblical original automatically imbues the content of these transgressive parodies with an emotive ethical dimension that discourages uninterested or passive viewing.

Working from an emotionally charged framework (religion) and further amplifying that emotion through parody and satire, the artists in this study have engaged with critiques of almost every aspect of contemporary South African life with the hope of instigating change (at the very least a change in attitude) by exposing historical injustices. The discussion on Adam and Eve thus raises problematically narrow attitudes to both male and female sexuality, male Afrikaner identity and the results of colonialism on the construction of 'the other'. The Virgin Mary becomes a feminist icon countering almost every identifiable aspect of patriarchal repression imaginable. Transgressive images of Christ, understandably, question notions of masculinity and power; and the final chapter covers a selection of social and political challenges facing our country, from the prevalence of murder to continued economic, social and gender inequalities that belie the rights entrenched in our Constitution.

Given the nature of Christian iconography it is surprising that one topic not addressed by these artists is that of contemporary spirituality. This is an extremely complex area in South Africa where colonial imports such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism co-exist with traditional African belief systems and a collection of other imported religions, befitting a multicultural ‘rainbow nation’ that espouses inclusivity. An assessment of alternative religious iconographies is not within the rubric of this study, although a comparative analysis of imagery from a cross-section of South African religions would be a fascinating area for further investigation. I would like, however, to end with a recent artwork by Diane Victor that raises concerns about the difficulties of inclusivity¹ and the cost involved in change, both spiritual and social; and that raises questions about what could possibly replace these weakened nodes in the ‘web of power relations.’

In 2010 Victor created a large (105 x 199 cm) etching of a horse carrying a Madonna figurine strapped to its back. Entitled *4 Horses: Bearer* (Fig.7.1), this image was part of a series of four horses relating very loosely to the four horses of the Apocalypse, a connection which suggests the end of something. The imagery in *Bearer* corresponds closely with the themes of this study as it illustrates the intersection of African cultures and beliefs with Christianity, and the trauma of ideological change. The horse, for example, is covered with a strange hessian-like blanket suggesting an African version of chain-mail armour which functions as a protective covering. Victor (2010) explains that she studied the costumes of masquerade dancers in Burkina Fasso and tried to approximate the coarsely textured garments they wore during their performances. The accoutrements of shamanic dancers are also alluded to in cowrie shells adorning the horse’s back leg and tail. This figure is half horse, half human; it has human hands instead of front hooves, the head is actually a mask tied onto its body, and the eye is Victor’s own instead of the eye of a horse. In the tradition of shamanic dancers dating back to San² rituals the horse is actually a therianthrope, the result of a dancer’s conversion to the mythical realm of the spirits where he/she becomes one with the guiding animal spirit.

¹ Such difficulties can be identified, for example, in the many xenophobic attacks in South African townships since 2008 (Johnson 2009:630,631).

² San is the term most generally used to denote the original hunter-gatherer peoples of Southern Africa (or ‘First People’). It must be noted, however, that both San and the other popular term, Bushmen, are considered problematic as they were employed, often pejoratively, by colonial settlers.

In every way the horse is thus emblematic of African spiritual beliefs, but these beliefs are in a state of transitional distress which is visible in the horse's demeanour. The nearest hand is clutching a horseshoe with nails directed at the vulnerable inner palm, parodying the nails in Christ's hands on the cross and conveying a sense of pain and anguish. The mouth is open as if gasping for breath and the head is hanging downwards in despair. Victor (2010) describes the horse as engaging in a "leap of desperation" over the wasteland depicted in its shadow. The landscape is burned, crops and farmhouses in ruins, both the old colonial buildings and the African land are blighted and fallow befitting an apocalyptic event.

The horse's dark bestiality is contrasted with the helpless figure of a crowned Madonna Immaculata, who is strapped to its back while clutching her flaming heart. Her bare legs protruding below the shortened garments give her an air of incongruous vulnerability. Together they evoke the tradition of a scapegoat, burdened with the sins of the nation, being driven into the wilderness where they will both die, thus allowing the nation to begin a new year afresh, without being hampered by old traditions, old expectations or old mistakes. Perhaps this is Victor's way of indicating a possible future for South Africa. She is not ignoring the problems of the past but is choosing to discard the effect and influence of both colonialism and African traditionalism in the effort to build a new nation that is not divided by conflicts arising from different histories. The difficulties of transition, discussed in the introduction to this study, are manifest in the anguish depicted in both horse and Madonna, and the devastation of the wasteland below. Yet one could read this wasteland as an opportunity to rebuild without the looming shadow of the past threatening to tarnish efforts of renewal. This is, of course, a utopian dream which arises as an imaginative antithesis to the dystopian image presented by Victor, but, after all, it would be tantamount to giving up altogether if a nation did not dream and hope for a better future.

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