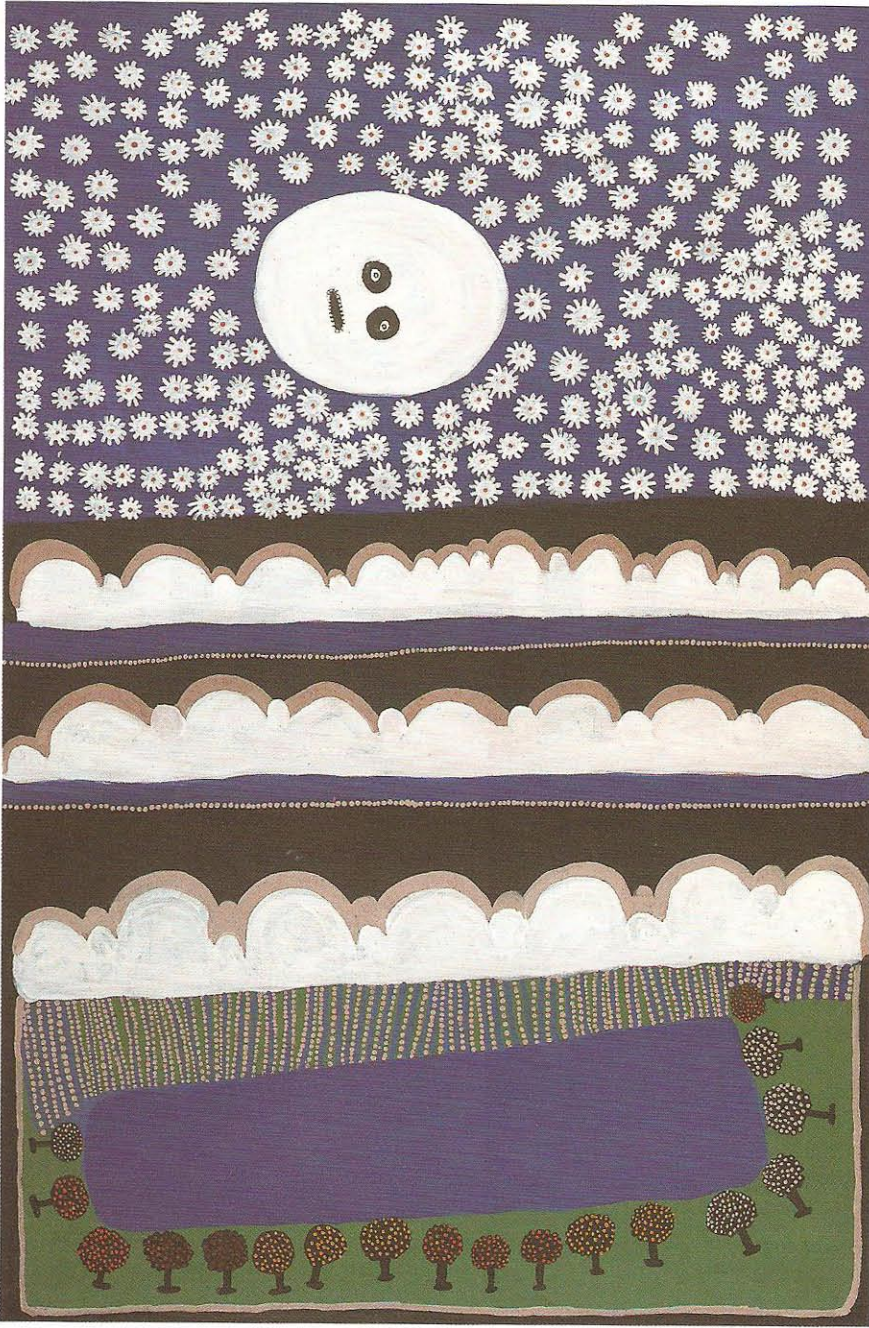


# Holy Holy Holy

at the Flinders University City Gallery in Adelaide

NICK WATERLOW



Jarinyanu David Downs (Wangkajunga/Walmajarri), *Genesis – God, star, rain and heaven*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint and earth pigments on Belgium linen. Collection of Duncan Kentish. Photo Clayton Glen. © artist's estate.

The last three Adelaide Festivals have witnessed stimulating exhibitions at the Flinders University City Gallery. In 2000 *From appreciation to appropriation: Indigenous influences and images in Australian art* posed a number of important questions in

relation to authorship and authenticity; in 2002 *River, land and memory: The work of Ian Abdulla* fully revealed one of this country's most magical artists. And now in 2004, *Holy Holy Holy* examines relationships between Christian teaching, its translation and

Aboriginal culture, through the work of contemporary artists and a number of precursors, with additional material objects such as photographs, books and documents that shed historical light on the subject.

*Holy Holy Holy* is accompanied by an excellent catalogue, with particularly enlightening essays by Marcia Langton and Varga Hosseini, and a deeply researched and clearly articulated rationale by the curator Vivonne Thwaites. What this exhibition does prove is how effectively Aboriginal culture, in particular through art, has been able, despite appalling obstacles and a continually stalled reconciliation process, to assert not its supremacy for that, unlike the Christian missionaries, was never its premise, but its primal position for Aboriginal people, and its importance for the rest of the world.

The earliest missions were established in the first half of the nineteenth century, with little success, hardly surprising when accompanied by 'the current theories of race which placed Australian Aborigines at the lowest end of the scale of human development. It was widely assumed that they would soon leave the stage of world history as a vestige of an earlier stage of development'.<sup>1</sup> Marcia Langton explained how European expansion included bringing the 'word of God' to the pagans and heathens, with attitude: 'The loathing for Aboriginal cultural practices followed this fundamental Christian stance towards the first peoples of the continent'.<sup>2</sup> Varga Hosseini took the point further, emphasising how Christianity 'is distinguished by its effortless ability to enter living cultures and – through translation – *render itself compatible with 'all cultures'*'; unlike Islam, for example, that demands a following of the non-translatable Koran.

But the missionaries of successive generations had not bargained on the survival, let alone the quotidian resilience of the Aboriginal spiritual world. A useful explanation is given by Professor Stanner whom I paraphrase: 'only a blindness of the mind's eye prevented Europeans in the past from understanding that Aboriginal ritual in all its creative forms had a sacramental quality, providing most vivid realisations of a belief in spiritual power laying hold of material things and ennobling them under a timeless purpose in which men feel they have a place'.<sup>4</sup> When Christian push came to shove, and one belief system confronted another, it gradually became quite clear how Aboriginal culture and art represented an understanding

right of anyone to assert the supremacy of belief only in their own God. Judith Ryan wrote of *Blind faith* 1992: 'The right side of the painting shows the boldness exhorting the tribesmen as they were chained up like dogs away from their homes to be locked up in prison and some of them died in these ratholes. The middle of the painting shows men, women and children being killed because they placed their trust in the strangers but the strangers like a snake blinded them with false promises and false hopes. The demonic snake, like barbed wire threaded through the eyes of Indigenous Australians, forces the viewer to ponder this 'image of modern evil' laid bare in a vision of Blakean power'.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Riley lived on Tabragar mission, and his photographs from the *Flyblown* and *Cloud* series (1998 and 2000 respectively) are no less resistant in their depiction of the tools of religion, Angel, Cross and Bible. Darren Siwes brings into question seats of power through the photographic superimposition of his own shadow image in front of, for example, an illuminated Lutheran Church in *Church I* 2000. Nici Cumpston's hand-coloured silver gelatin prints, in particular *Abandoned* 2003, of a derelict church in a field surmounted by its tilting cross, symbolises the inability of religion to bring meaning to her life. Trevor Nickolls' *Postcard from the Devil* 2000 grew out of the things that frightened him as a child made to go to Sunday school, like Harry Wedge, and here he transforms those nightmares into monstrous yet non-threatening fetishes.

Julie Dowling's *Minority Rites* 2003 series depicts her great-great grandmother with her daughter Mary, Mary Latham pregnant with her daughter May, and great aunt May in her best dress, with the Aboriginal flag as a celebratory backdrop. This combined work, about stolen generations and the way in which religion was used in the process of colonisation, was encapsulated by the artist. 'My great grandmother, Mary Latham was taken from her mother Melbin who was 'saved' from the bush and was baptised in the Church of England. Melbin's daughter, Mary Oliver was taken from her and baptised Anglican. Mary Oliver's daughter, Lay Latham was also taken from her mother and she was subsequently baptised Catholic. This took less than forty years to achieve'.<sup>6</sup>

The three non-Indigenous artists included in *Holy Holy Holy*, James Cochran, Christine McCormack and Alan Tucker, each bring a critical pertinence to this exhibition through



Harry J Wedge (Wiradjuri), *Blind faith*, 1992, synthetic polymer on composition board. National Gallery of Victoria. © Harry J Wedge of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-op.

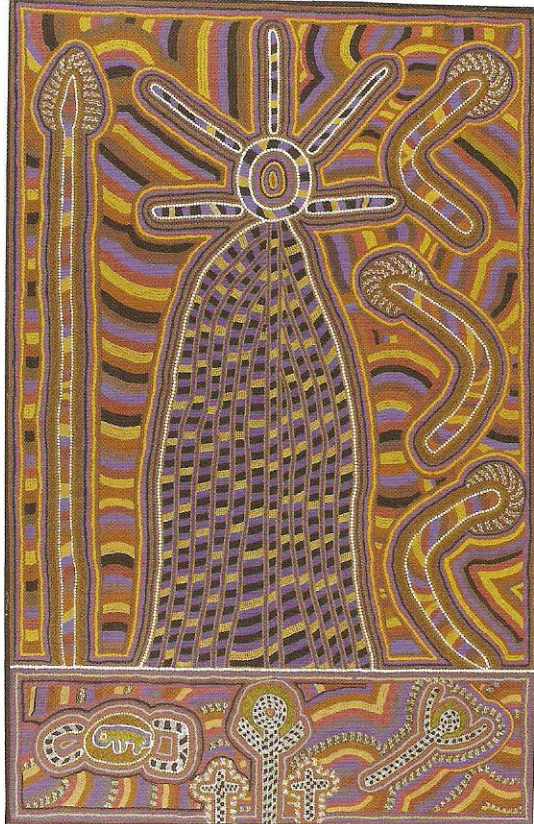
of their sacred, and it was thus possible for Aboriginal people to question the European equivalents, that were found to be wanting, and in many ways of less significance and relevance. And herein lies the crux of this fascinating exhibition.

The earliest works on display were three remarkable *Toas* made between 1895-1905 from the Lake Eyre region, impressive works by Albert Namatjira, who lived at the Hermannsburg mission, and others, including a magnificent *Water Dreaming* by Walter Tjampitjinpa, followed by the substantial presence of nineteen recent artists. It pro-

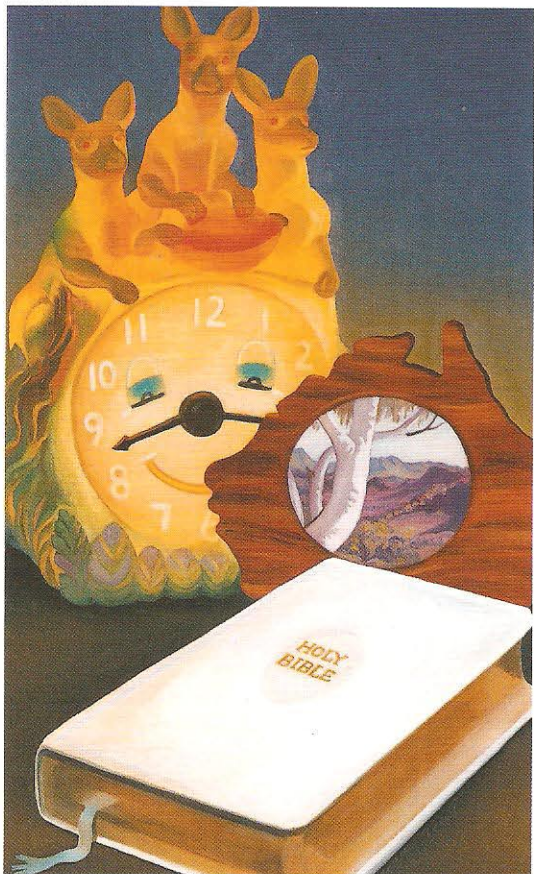
vides in total a timeless and heart-warming reminder of how to absorb the assault of an imposed belief system, and turn it to advantage, whilst retaining fully your own spiritual understanding and its representation. Had the word and iconography of Christianity ever fallen on such seemingly fertile ground, only to emerge with such a lack of substantial and lasting success? It did however, as *Holy Holy Holy* reveals, produce some memorable Aboriginal artistic responses, none of them passive and some far from peaceful.

Harry J Wedge was born on Erambie mission in Cowra and his work questions the

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Tjangika Wukula (Lynda Syddick) Napaltjarri (Pintupi/Pitjanjatjara), *The Messiah*, 1996, acrylic on linen. Courtesy Gallery Gondwana. © Lynda Napaltjarri Syddick 1996/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney, 2004. (top)



Christine McCormack, *Other refuge have I none*, 2003, oil on linen. Courtesy CUBE Contemporary Art, Adelaide. © Christine McCormack 2003/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney, 2004.

their paintings. McCormack's *Missionary position* 2002 and *Other refuge have I none* 2003 are pithy and witty observations, using objects of kitsch and popular culture, debunking religious posturing and the denigration of Aboriginal values. 'We were all lulled in the comforting thought that the Aborigines were happy and contented in 'Arnhem Land' ... so what was done to these people was 'for their own good' and done by Christian people who 'knew better' and were wise and powerful.'<sup>7</sup> Cochran's portraits of Aboriginal friends living rough in Adelaide celebrate moments of spiritual ecstasy, and Tucker's religious scepticism underpins *The truth of the religion* 2003, a poignant illustration of the nineteenth century Lutheran missionaries Schurmann and Teichelmann's attempts to convert their flock through an understanding and use of the Kurna language.

Ian Abdulla, born on the banks of the Murray River, lived on Gerard Mission, and *My first bible* 2003 is typical of his unique ability to make a simple story pictorially memorable and poignant. He, like Jarinyanu David Downs and Linda Syddick Napaltjarri, embraced Christianity, and the magnificent paintings of the two latter exemplify the way in which these beliefs, and their own traditional law and ancestral religions, could be jointly celebrated. Downs' *Genesis – God, Star, Rain and Heaven* 1991 is inimitably his own creation story, and Napaltjarri's renderings of *The Messiah* 1996 and *The Eucharist* 1998 transform biblical legends, through dot paintings and Aboriginal symbols such as the spear and boomerang, into her own truly Indigenous vision. Finally, Irene Entata, a Hermannsburg potter, alludes to the history of Christianity at the mission from which Albert Namatjira and other Arrernte artists emerged; *Mission Days/Baptism 1* 2002 portrays Pastor Gross baptising three infants.

This exhibition, which will tour Australia, includes a number of contextual works, one of which is Namatjira's heart rending [*Mulga Plaque*] (*Other refuge have I none*) from the early 1930s, about which Mary Eagle commented: 'For me, the exhibition's image of greatest extremity and wonder is

*Other refuge have I none*. I cannot speak for Namatjira, but the Christian message burnt into mulga wood is a cry of alienation, dependence and amazing faith!'<sup>8</sup>

The great strengths of this project are that all sides of this harrowing story are openly revealed and addressed, from a variety of viewpoints in the catalogue, through the many approaches of the chosen artists, in combination with historical photographs and relevant material objects, that bring fully to life more than a century and a half of dialogue between Christianity and the Aboriginal world. I have to say that at the end of the exhibition I felt like cheering (and I am a Christian) at the triumph of a culture with a spiritual iconography able to create an art beyond any denomination or time based containment.

#### Notes

- 1 Bill Edwards, 'Aboriginal missions: a brief overview', *Holy Holy Holy*, Flinders University, Adelaide, 2004, p 16.
- 2 Marcia Langton, 'The word of God' and 'works of the Devil', *Holy Holy Holy*, *ibid*, p 22.
- 3 Varga Hosseini, 'The art of translating: contemporary representations of Christianity in Holy Holy Holy', *ibid*, p 55 and Lammin O Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis Books, New York, p 51.
- 4 Marcia Langton, *ibid*, p 24.
- 5 Judith Ryan, 'The Art of H J Wedge' in Wiradjuri Spirit Man, *Craftsman House and Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-op*, NSW, p 21, 1996, quoted in *Holy Holy Holy*, *ibid*, p 92
- 6 Julie Dowling in *Holy Holy Holy*, *ibid*, p 74.
- 7 Christine McCormack, notes on *Missionary Position*, *Holy Holy Holy*, *ibid*, p 107.
- 8 Mary Eagle, 'Holy, holy, holy', *Holy Holy Holy*, *ibid*, p 47.

*Holy Holy Holy* was at the Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide, from 20 February to 17 April this year, and will subsequently be on display at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, NSW, from 5 June to 1 August; the Brisbane City Hall Gallery from 10 September to 14 November; the New England Regional Art Museum, NSW, from 26 November to 9 January 2005; the Gladstone Regional Art Gallery and Museum, Qld, from 20 January to 12 March 2005; the Araluen Centre for Arts and Entertainment, Alice Springs, NT, from 26 March to 1 May 2005; the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, from 21 May to 7 August 2005; and the Gippsland Regional Gallery, Vic, from 20 August to 28 September 2005.

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