

## As below so above

### Deborah Prior: Tangled Saints

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'...it's lonely feeling like a saint / which I do one second every five weeks, / but that one second is so intense I can't stand up / and then I figure out it's ersatz, I can't be a saint...'-

Ron Padgett

Sleep, the slumber between life/death, is a frequent mode of being in Deborah Prior's work. Seen in darkness and fashioned in the half-light of a poorly lit bedroom the artist has 'translated' a series of images.[1] Deborah takes the process of recording dreams in words and drawings to another level as she arranges ready-at-hand materials on her rumpled bed and bedroom floor. Later as the need for light and space arises, the works and their component parts are moved to various locations in the house: the kitchen for wax dipping, the lounge room for cutting, inverting and stitching. Occasionally over the last several weeks Deborah has emailed and messaged images of her perverse kitchen, lounge room and bedroom labour. It's a labour of intense repetition that at times demands a production line approach. Images of plastic mixing bowls brim-full of hand-stitched pink satin cones set in woollen cuffs; knitted sacks of faintly speckled glittering yarn, transformed by wax dipping, hang to dry from copper threads. One could read Jacques Ranciere's take on Lyotard's take of Kant's sublime and still be left wanting.[2] And that's what's left, a wanting and desire for a mirrored experience of gendered female life; or art as resistance to *techne* sans human, plus joy, plus a kind of whatever (such that *everything* matters), the things our mothers and grandmothers made, the endless silent necessary work, the piercing of fabric over and over to make another skin, perhaps one more sure, responsive and specific to each person. Prior writes that her process is driven by "...a lot of gut instinct. A lot of sheer enjoyment of the materials – obsessiveness? Fetishising? Penitence?" and later; "... thinking about devotion and such things...one needs to bow one's head for prayer and also sewing... of course, bones & relics etc too...but which is deliverance and which is ruin?"

*Lost flock* is the work that wakes me at two am, it's a curious object both forlorn and action-inciting (in masochistic/sadistic re / action). A modest piano stool stands alone minus the instrument it was designed in relation-with (to?). A pillow has been attached in seeming haste to its underside (what is that space under a stool, a chair, a bed?), tied there in a tangle with what appears at first glance to be an uncared for dressing-gown chord. This juxtaposition of objects animates a scene with an impossible before and no after. Seed pearls embellish a stain, while text in a wonky will-do manner writes *lost flock* in gold thread. It's all there, a material expression of toil, effort, and sickly sweet nostalgia. To my message 'Folorn!' Deborah returns an image of William Holeman Hunt's Scapegoat (1854-56): a pretty picture of a goat exiled in the salt pans of the Dead Sea, horns wrapped deliberately in red cloth. Pathos or bathos? Bathos I'd say like most of this work: either and or; serious and a joke; pretty and ugly; religious and secular. Back and forth between, tied to both and never quite either. The 'dressing gown chord' turns out to be a hand knitted tube, both intestinal and umbilical, made from a mix of sheep wool and possum hair. Constructed from countless knitted stitches the tangled heap of endless insides ("there's so much of it, it's so revolting,

walking around as a sack of organs”) turn up frequently in Prior's work, most recently in *Fleece* where it was knitted in-situ from the unravelling yarn of the dress she wore.[3]

References to saints are everywhere in *Tangled Saints*: Saint Teresa, Saint Vittoria, Flora the Roman Goddess, and the incredibly productive being Hildegard von Bingen, 12th Century writer, musician, dramatist, painter, physician, political moralist and visionary mystic. *When death comes into the sleeping room / as through a tiny hole, / like a rent in the Covenant, it hurts*. [4] Pentecost is the title of the work aimed to confront the viewer on entrance, with its pert little tongues of filial flame the work is a direct material trace of 'Egg of the Universe' by Hildegard von Bingen.[5] These often highly sexualised illuminations leave no doubt that Hildegard's experiences were intensely libidinal, the paintings the inscription of a shock. The other component of Pentecost appears on the interior side of the entrance wall, a linen body bag with a 'deep lip' sewn to size from the real thing around the measurement of its zip.

Martyrs and saints played important roles in the early Christian Church, first as a resistance to Roman paganism, and later as resistance to the rise of Christianity as Empire. One very early set of practices believed the source of the divine was not biblical texts, nor the church but the 'living spirit' revealed especially through the visions and dreams of women prophets and seers.[6] Incorruptible saints and material bodies are those that appear not to decay in the manner of ordinary mortals and thus signify the hand of god, the touch of the spirit, and the mortal made saintly. The materialist version of that story has it that bones found in the catacombs of Rome (just a couple of years after the 1555 agreement between the Catholic Church and Martin Luther) were put to good use by decree of Bishops in various chapels and cathedrals to hold up the lineage of miraculous interventions through the lives of ordinary mortals. Glued together bones and missing body parts fashioned from wax, wood, and papier-mâché were clothed, bejewelled, and posed (Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull had its precursors here), sometimes reclining around, under, and next to the altars, and sometimes held in reserve for occasional parading around the streets. Apart from the clear association of the industry of women and womens' domestic craft (one of the very few ways poor women could earn a living), Prior also references decorative arts and the baroque as an architectural and painterly force. Following up on Deborah's clue I found that the term *baroque* as an adjective comes from the 15th C French *baroque* meaning 'irregular,' in turn from the Portuguese *barroco* 'imperfect pearl,' and in turn perhaps related to Spanish *berruca* 'a wart.' [7] A lovely connection considering all those seed pearls stitched to embellish stains. In its architectural form the baroque features fold upon fold, excess in form and lustrous materials always to do with divine embodiment and the dark shadowed recesses of baroque cathedrals that reve(a)l in the drama of light. According to my google image search the 16th C Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome is an example of baroque encrustation taken to its extreme manifestation, though most of the crust was applied in subsequent years. This is the chapel where Deborah saw Saint Vittoria, the skeleton refashioned with satin and jewels as an incorruptible saint, laying in her glass coffin; and (bombshell 'til last) it also houses Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St Teresa*.

The use of wax as material in art history is 'made up of births also of abortions, ... of natural deaths and ghostly apparitions,' a tellingly gendered interpretation. Wax references embodiment as a plastic state, 'wax goes too far as far as resemblance is concerned,' an excess of dead-real pushed into the realm of creepiness.[8] Other artists that have or do work with wax castings of the human form include Duane Hansen who, although considered unfashionable at the time (1970s), always remains popular with audiences for his super realism (that's real art isn't it, the super real?) and now the subject of a major posthumous retrospective at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London. Hansen posed his supra real usually solo figures in full colour tableaux of domestic ordinariness. Given more recent attention Virgile Ittah, a much younger and still living artist, makes exquisite cast and sculpted human figures of wax and marble dust that are closer in affect to Bernini's Saint Teresa. Ittah's is the work of another new classicism bound for the spaces of impressive architectural shrines to Global Capital, the new church of neo-liberalism.

Deborah Prior's work has a protestant modesty of means and intent. Her considered arrangement of things, of (im)materialities and the bringing together of materials, permeates substance with memory. The qualities of texture, colour and light are handled with succinct care in *The Tender Trap*. Pink was always a colour to be 'ignored' or at best resisted. Placed here in the guise of a carefully folded woollen blanket on the simplest of church chairs, the field of pink anchors two severed slightly greenish pony tails of lustrous hair, pearlescent beads are stitched where the repurposed hair of two creatures touch. Headless hair is as undead as a wax cast of the artist's head. Picked out of the velvet black by pools of light *Tangled Saints* is a celebration of the force of sleeping life and the singular life of dreams. A theatre of labour, love and pain – all with a sharp sense of humour. As the obverse of the modernist white box this could be the Museum of Gothic Secular Religious Experience. Each work is a singular tableau of exquisite attention: grubbiness of the human stain made immaculate like a talisman, or collectively an accumulation of promissory notes. Or forget all that, enter *Grotto* and make an offering to art, the most human of hopes.

Teri Hoskin, August 2015

<http://too-also.com>

## Notes

Ron Padgett, 'The Absolutely Huge and Incredible Injustice in the World,' from *Collected Poems*, 2013, Coffee House Press.

1. 'translated' was the term given to the process of transforming skeletons found in Roman catacombs into the bodies of saints and martyrs and installing them in the vicinity of altars in 16th century churches. Anthony Grafton, 'Time Lords,' *London Review of Books*, 31 July 2014.

2. Jacques Ranciere, *Aesthetics and its discontents*, Polity, 2009, 'the disaster that is born of the forgetting of disaster,' 105.
3. All unreferenced quotes are from the artist in conversation. Deborah Prior, *Fleece*, (2014-2015) a research-based performance-action with sculpture between the South Australian Museum and Adelaide City Council's Art Pod.
4. Carol Frost, 'Waking' from *Love and Scorn: New and Collected Poems*, TriQuarterly/ Northwestern University Press, 2000.
5. The holy spirit, the third manifestation of the triune Christian god, made its first earthly appearance on the Jewish celebration of Pentecost soon after Jesus was crucified as tongues of flame above the heads of his disciples and other makers of the early church.
6. Eamon Duffy, "Conspiracy Theories," *London Review of Books*, 29 Jan 2009.
7. *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
8. This and the previous quote are from Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Viscosities and Survivals' (1998) in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, Getty Research Institute, 2008. A fascinating book on loan from the artist.