



## REVIEW

April 2024

### ***Contemporary visions: works from the ACU Art Collection***

Published by Australian Catholic University (ACU), 2022, pp. 120, 64 mainly colour illustrations. Managing editor: Caroline Field, Curator, ACU Art Collection  
ISBN: 978-1-922325-12-9

Mother and child are represented in a state of complete repose. Face turned from the viewer's gaze, eyes gently closed, the mother rests. A sense of harmony and balance, a completeness is achieved as the chest of the small child melts into hers. He also sleeps peacefully.

This is how artist Peter Schipperheyn interprets the iconic image of *Madonna and Child* in his 2002 bust in white Carrara marble. There is a beauty in the fluid and flowing nature of the figure's forms that defy the rigid nature of the material from which they are made, but unlike a traditional interpretation of this scene, Mary's robe, while still discretely covering her head, falls gently away from her shoulders, exposing parts of her upper body. The artist has drawn the viewer into a private moment between mother and son, giving a sense of their shared humanity.

In contrast, Chris Orr's 2019 print *Motherboard Portal (Verde)*, rendered in archival pigment ink on rag, eludes to something darker. Based on Raphael's original work of mother and child, the artist draws the viewer's gaze from the serene scene of Mary perched on a rock, with infant Jesus and John the Baptist at her fore, to the object of the children's attention at the centre of the painting, a tiny goldfinch; the red of the bird's head as a symbol for the crucifixion. The overlay of a computer-style motherboard gives the image both decorative interest and a 21st-century significance.

These two works from the Australian Catholic University's (ACU) third published volume on its art collection draw from the contemporary works in the university's collection and beautifully capture both the duality of the Christian experience as well as the curatorial trajectory that explores the 'contemplative tradition' in new and contemporary ways.

A young university, ACU opened in 1991, following an amalgamation of four Catholic tertiary colleges. The university now boasts seven campuses around Australia, a campus in Rome,

Italy, and a campus online. The true genesis of the ACU art collection began with the inaugural appointment of art curator Caroline Field, in 2016, who inherited a disparate range of artworks after the merger. Faced with the herculean task of identifying, documenting and cataloguing the initial works, Field has since built a collection that boasts more than 1200 art pieces dating from the 13th century to the present day across a range of genres and mediums – from works on paper, paintings, ceramics, textiles, sculpture to metal works, glass and the decorative arts.

These artworks are accessible on the ACU Arts and Culture website and the Australian online library database, E-hive, as well as via the 'curated spaces' that can be found across the university campuses, showcasing many artworks in its collection. Building on the aim of reaching a audience beyond the lecture theatres, libraries, chapels and the Vice-Chancellery, the three books in the series beautifully complement online and display spaces by capturing some of the collection's highlights in a more intimate way, allowing time to contemplate, encourage critical thought and inspire spiritual and creative practice.

The third volume, *Contemporary Visions*, expands the range of works in the previous volumes, focusing purely on the contemporary in the ACU collection. Pieces such as the commissioned mixed media work on glass, *Ciphers: Stations of the Cross*, 2000, by Janet Laurence and Julie Rrap explores the interconnectedness of all things. Unlike the traditional 14 stations of the cross which are purely devotional, depicting the series of events that led to Christ's crucifixion and death, this work seeks to capture the essential meaning of the traditional 'stations' as points of meditation – the space between the material and the spiritual in a less literal way. Using Rrap's photographed fragments of emotional intensity, such as hand gestures, Laurence overlays the images with glass sheets onto which she has poured translucent colours, to symbolise both revelation and concealment.

Imants Tillers' 2012 work, *God Seen in the Mirror of the World*, is made up of 25 acrylic and gouache canvas boards to create a grid-like effect. Tillers appropriates from various sources; the title and form of the work are drawn from late 19th-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, while the iconic spiral form used by artist Louise Bourgeois is suggestive of both life's cycle and the thumb print of human identity. Floating text overlaying the piece evokes philosophical and spiritual concerns.

This handsome coffee-table book contains full-page, high-quality photographic images of the artworks, supported by informative and erudite commentary from a range of arts writers, artists, academics, religious and community figures. The book gives insight into the ACU collection and celebrates creativity in all its forms. This wonderfully diverse art collection stands as an example of not just artistic achievement but the power of art to transport us beyond ourselves.

Mem Capp, April 2024

Mem Capp is a Melbourne-based artist and writer. In her art practice she creates works using print and mixed media. She writes articles and reviews for a range of arts and literature publications.