

*B*EAUTY, CATHOLICISM & THE WHIP OF MORALITY

How Does a 'Catholic Aesthetic' Court Controversy and Contention?

*'Those Catholics, they really nab you when you're young.' [Makes gesture of cowpoke searing calf with branding iron.] 'They sear you. They sear you, they do.'*¹

Morrissey

¹Copeland D.(March 2006) *Papal Attraction* The Observer Music Monthly (interview with Morrissey)
No.31 pg 59

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Theatrical Tantrums, Transubstantiation and the Referential Necessities of Vogue

My First Holy Communion photograph displays freshly coiffured, laundered albeit pensive miniature brides and grooms, 'lovingly' flanked by cane - wielding, black robed Catholic nuns – “old witches who've escaped from the world!” - a vitriolic description my mother would often attribute to Women Of The Order. The morning had started badly. My mum wore polka dots, a white corsage, vertiginous hair, and an expression devoid of the milk-of-human-kindness in response to my protestations of “please don't make me do it!”

My attire ~ seven deadly sins consisting of:

- 1. Bell sleeved, knee length, white lace wedding dress, fitted, with a gentle flair from the waist (despised),*
- 2. Daisy encrusted halo attached to a bulbous silk net veil (abhorred),*
- 3. Pearl- buttoned white cotton gloves (tolerated-due to imaginary macabre surgical implications),*
- 4. White purse (containing a small amount -of what I presumed to be - silence money),*
- 5. Lilac shoes (impractical for riding my beloved bike),*
- 6. Marqcasite silver crucifix and bible (beautiful),*
- 7. Short white socks (no strong opinion).*

Incredulity surmised the situation. I was under the impression that I was to marry Christ and aware that the nuns in my primary school had willingly surrendered to this, I had never seen them happy with their marital lot or happy with anything whatsoever. I had not chosen my betrothal dress or indeed the groom; I was without a voice in this whole pitiful debacle. The Communion church hall was festooned with ribbons garlands of flowers and a barrage of diminutive brides indulging in competitive dress wars spurned on by covetous mothers - and grooms! A plethora of grooms, were they to marry Our Lady? So many questions all dismissed as being inopportune or inappropriate, as the sacred event neared its crescendo. At the helm, the formidable Sister Mary - the female incarnation of the child- catcher from Chitty-Chitty Bang Bang - informed trusting faces that we would receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and not what the uninitiated eye perceived as bread and wine. I was fraught with suppositions of what this actually meant, and glancing at the faces of other children, could see their desperate need for a return to the comfort of oblivion. Transubstantiation was not a buzzword in my class at the time.

During a recent telephone conversation with my mother, I asked if she thought the Holy Communion ritual of veiled brides slightly archaic and odd. After what seemed to be lengthy and protracted thought she said, 'yes it was really very odd' I waited '...I dressed you in short white socks, when the vogue for the day was clearly knee – highs.'

PERFECT UNKNOWING²

*I love you: I work at understanding you to the point of not understanding you, and there, standing in the wind, I don't understand you. How good it is not to understand you. I don't understand you with an incomprehension so vast it surpasses all my great understanding of you.*³

The invaginating process of introspection is one that will rarely offer the benevolent gift of solace. The exercise is akin to avoiding the damp patch in the connubial bed; irrespective of which way you turn you will always roll towards discomfort. If it were not for the soporific half-light you would avoid the area it at all costs; past pleasure lives in the residual stain of desire, the damp afterthought of carnality and seduction. In my work I metaphorically loot and pillage the aesthetic of the Catholic Church. I have to now consider how the claims of such a notion as the Catholic 'incarnational imagination'⁴ may have visually stained mine and other art practices where iconographic ecclesiastical backdrops dominated childhoods. Trying to extricate myself from Catholicism in order to examine its aesthetic feels like investigating the fine hairs on the back of my neck, they are part of me yet remain unseen and unacknowledged. Grasping the concept of the analogical imagination whilst incognizant to its mental pretzels feels like collecting water in cupped hands, it glimmers and for a second clarity, but its rapid disappearance leaves only the nameless and the unexplained.

My recent encounter with James Kirkup's work *The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name*⁵ (1976) was somewhat of a personal revelation. A poem I had been meaning to look up for the last ten years, but with a combination of forgetfulness and a presumed hindrance of access (due to the successful prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemous libel upon its publication), the poem had eluded me. The necrophiliac content of the work combined with sperm, blood and other bodily emissions juxtaposed with descriptions of the dead yet- still - warm - Christ became the word made flesh and that flesh was now an inescapable image burnt onto the retinas of my eyes, I clutched metaphoric rosary beads to my chest and reeled with horror and revile. By looking at the words I was guilty by implication, a condoning spectator, a willing participator of blasphemy and sacrilege. I rued the World Wide Web for its efficiency in locating, that which had previously been evasive. I shook with shock; my writer friend (who had read it at the same time) shook with laughter. He thought it to be perfectly inoffensive, ill - composed and silly, and suggested my primordial reaction had only arisen because of the use of the word 'Christ' in this sexual dead / undead context. And then it was obvious; I was clearly an *ingrained* Catholic. I had no critical distance concerning this work, I had bestowed upon it monumental authority for its referencing of

² Hanson E. (1997) *Decadence and Catholicism* Harvard University Press pg 108 ref; A Rebours "Preface" in J. K. Huysmans Oeuvres Completes de J. -K. Huysmans ~ (Paris; Cres, 1928-1934), vol.7 Translation by E. Hanson

³ Cixous H. (1998) *Stigmata* Routledge Publishing pg. 106

⁴ Heartney E (2004) *Postmodern Heretics; The Catholic Imagination In Contemporary Art* Midmarch Arts Press New York

⁵ Tatchell P. (2002) *Blasphemy Law Is Dead* www.petertatchell.net - (in regards to the illegal reading of *The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name* on the steps Of St. Martins in the Field, London 11th July 2002

religiosity. Because the text contained the word 'Christ' I couldn't read it as a piece of text objectively, I had approached it piously as I would have a hymn. I need to find lucidity through other artists and writers of Catholic heritage - whom embrace 'neutrality' and court impartiality - to lead me away from the gilded distractions, and temporarily curb the dazzling scopophilia and recognize my correlation of visual beauty to the Catholic aesthetic structure.

*'In order to clearly "see", simply recognizing ones blindness is not enough. Recognizing the factors that sustain the oblivion is equally important'*⁶

⁶ Hwang Moon (2005) *Historical Imagination; Leo Steinberg and Modern Oblivion*, www.washington.edu/~research

*R*eligion, Sex And The Long Term Effects of Mispronunciation On The Ears of the Young

In my early childhood my mother and her siblings upon hearing of tragedies or sombre occurrences, would reverently hang their heads, make the sign of the cross and exclaim; 'God save us in garters!' This was a regular and communally prescribed reaction to sad news, but its announcement never failed to highlight the imminence of my catastrophic and inevitable demise at the hands of the Satan himself.

I was aware of garters – courtesy of a Saturday afternoon film on can-can dancers and probably starring Tony Curtis – I also knew this attire resided in the realm of the unreachable closet of adulthood, deeming it unsuitable and morally 'child unfriendly' as a genuine line of enquiry. I had previously experienced this mortifying territory with my unrelenting questions as to what was the meaning of 'virgin', and had no desire to revisit that uninformative red-faced arena again. Garters, I had decided, must be kept resolutely to myself – but then what of stockings! If garters were at the forefront of allegiance with God heroically battling it out with forces of evil, then surely stockings were the foot soldiers, the necessary enforcements to ward off the corpse eating demons.

My mother and her sisters went about their daily concerns-no doubt - garter clad and, I assumed, secure in the knowledge that they were cocooned from the darker realms of ungodly terror. I was easy prey – anxious and vulnerable unable to neither fend off iniquity nor fight the swooping wings of malevolence, unprotected and all alone. Clearly I was product of bad parenting. It became apparent with a short passing of time; my melodrama and mental histrionics were both unreasonable and unfounded. I came to fully appreciate the soft nuances of my mother's Irish accent, as she and her sisters continue to declare upon hearing of ill-fated events – 'God save us and guard us!'

IN THE BEGINNING

*Beautiful is what we like when we merely judge it (and hence not through any sensation by means of sense in accordance with some concept of the understanding). From this it follows at once that we must like the beautiful without any interest. Sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses we like directly.*⁷

Beauty is so intangible, inconsistent and elusive a word almost impossible to describe with no set formula or principle. It is an arrogant adjective, needing no explanation or justification, it stands proud without excuse. Why do we bestow this judgment on certain objects and not on others, we look at certain works of art, poetry, music, nature and without hesitation launch into proclamations of their certain pulchritude. Beauty is not certified, so what actually endorses it? Is it an elevation of an ideal, is the object of beauty and the viewer mutually exclusive, or is it reliant on a viewer? Beauty is wherever we allow our selves to find it, so therefore it is aesthetically lawless. Immanuel Kant opined, 'A person who describes something as beautiful insists that everyone ought to give the object in question his approval'⁸ therefore do we need others approval for justification? Does beauty begin and end with appearance, by just offering itself for admiration, is it a vehicle for perceived goodness and truth, or does it prove a meaningful context for order and harmony? Beauty rightly or wrongly stands independently, and can cherry pick whatever reign of concepts it desires, or carry the weighty responsibilities of social representation, political and / or religious issues.

What is the purpose and reality of beauty? Research presented me with an opportunity to analyze and examine my own evaluative criteria regarding this subject, along with the established rudimentary aesthetic beliefs I held. Baroque excesses, decadence, theatricality, along with countless other, high kicking cami-knickers clad adjectives, all vied for top billing in my beauty stakes; delectable, desirous attributes with a clear intention of visual and cerebral seduction. In April 2005, whilst visually feasting on the media frenzied *recherché* drama of the Papal funeral relayed worldwide by every television station, it became evident that my aesthetic judgment had been conceived in a Catholic primary school classroom, and I had been unwittingly nursing its nuances ever since. By interrogating beauty's function I had to challenge my own fundamental conceptions on the subject, and question any pre-existing judgmental roots that may have entwined themselves around my aesthetic belief system. Catholicism piquantly garnished my childhood (irrespective of active religiosity) and provided an environment abundant with devotional statues, flowers, incense, religious rituals, guilt /guilt (?), carnality of word, and a general

⁷ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment* translated by James Meredith Claredon 1953 Oxford Press pg 268

⁸ Strathern, P. (2002) *The Essential Kant* re; Immanuel Kant's ' Critique of Judgment pg. 21

sexualization of the spiritual. These attributes propagate a visual language, which can be morbidly alluring.

In previous work I have dealt with ‘conventionally beautiful’ subject matter - large paintings of fecund flowers / figurative paintings nude and attired - I wanted to investigate the importance of beauty to my own practice and my perception of it, along with beauty’s historical and philosophical implications. My interests lie not just with the ethereal transient lightness of beauty, but the beauty which can be found in dark dank corners, - the pleasure of the unacceptable. Nature can be cunning, shrewd and violent but these qualities become inconsequential when we look at an object such as a flower. Through development of practice and theoretical research, new dialects have become audible regarding issues concerned with identity, desire, fragility and ultimately absence. These arenas have revealed themselves, need simultaneously addressing, and are borne out of the role and accountability of beauty. Consequently, now aware of this influence, I have gained a new understanding of the voice within my work, which now is no longer solely dependant on the immediacy of large-scale gesticulatory marks. I have witnessed a plurality of materials entering my practice, this shift seems to convey with accuracy that which I presently need to articulate. Objects are playing a greater role in material application of concepts, mostly gathered from e-bay, relatively worthless and valueless curios, accumulated from a void to express a void. . Resurrecting the visible to describe the invisible. It is not just the physicality of producing work, which informs my practice. It is understanding through practice and practice through understanding – inter-dependence. It has become evident that within my work, there is an omnipresent liturgical spirit that had previously lay latent and undisclosed. My work is in the process of ethnological debate. These enquiries are neither cynical, ironic, traditionalist nor reactionary, just a genuine search to question identity and perception through a religious structure, such as Catholicism, the aesthetic values and judgments it imposes on contemporary art practices. Catholicism presents a decorous and opulent façade, whilst its followers are expected to inhabit the realm of sexual denial, austerity and sobriety of life – in spite of itself it creates an atmosphere of high drama and theatricality.

The first decadent ‘bible’ a novel *A Rebours (Against Nature)* by J.K.Huysmans published in 1884 marked a pivotal turning point in my research combining Catholicism, beauty and salacious possession. Aesthetically gluttonous to the extreme, it gorges chapter by chapter on pulchritudinous pageantries of prose, ostentatious ornamentation whilst simultaneously relishing in its irreverence regarding nature and religion. The critic and writer Barbey d’Aurevilly noted at the time ‘*After such a book, the only thing left for the author is to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of a cross*’.⁹ Huysmans converted to Catholicism eight years after the publication of this book - he had made his choice, he became a Benedictine oblate. In a preface written twenty years after *A Rebours* publication Huysmans pondered on

⁹ Joris-Karl Huysmans *Against Nature* translated by Margaret Mauldon Oxford World Classics 1998 pg.197 originally written by Barbey d’Aurevilly and published in *The Constitutionnal* 28th July 1884.

his florid chapters *'without realizing it at first, I was led by the very nature of my work to study the Church from many different points of view...Being outside the faith, I looked at the Church somewhat suspiciously, surprised by her grandeur and her glory, wondering how a religion which seemed designed for children could have inspired such marvelous works'*,¹⁰ and later states *'I must confess that this clear and obvious Catholic orientation of Against Nature remains incomprehensible to me. I was not educated in a school run by a religious order... and the element of childhood memories, of a First Communion, of schooling, which often plays a significant a part in conversion, played no part whatsoever in mine'*¹¹

Using autobiographical vignettes and examples of current art practices this paper intends to broach correlations between beauty, 'the Sacramental Imagination', the role of a childhood religious structure imposing itself on the artistic adult aesthetic. My intention is to investigate the existence of a Catholic aesthetic and question what role it plays in contemporary art practices today whether it be in a troubled, devotional or subversive landscape.

¹⁰ Joris- Karl Huysmans *Against Nature* translated by Margaret Mauldon Oxford World Classic 1998 pg. 186

¹¹ Joris- Karl Huysmans *Against Nature* translated by Margaret Mauldon Oxford World Classic 1998 pg 194

***E*xorcism and the Realization That Your Only True Stability Comes From Your Shoes**

My beautiful burgundy shoes weren't suitable for school, apparently the colour was wrong. Tell me how can a colour be wrong? It wasn't fighting any political, humanitarian or economic causes, it was just being burgundy, and presenting a splendid colour co-coordinated case in its teaming with a cherry pink blazer. There were also additional problems, the wedge was too high, and the ankle straps "were not to be encouraged" – so that morning I was sent home to change my footwear. I did not return.

The next day, sporting an inferior pair of regulation black shoes and a cavalier attitude, I attended my designated 'O' level religious class the tone of which was usually informal, addressing relevant topical issues, consciously heralding a new liberal bent and headed by the perpetually anxious Father Jordan - a tall, white cloth-clad Franciscan monk. On arrival I was informed I was to be one of a number of teenagers chosen by the school, to attend a weeklong religious retreat in the Lake District. I suspected subterfuge, but at this point in my life didn't really know what that meant. Doubts rapidly turned to elation with the arrival of undisputable confirmation that it was not to be a silent retreat, relieving all my initial fears. I was aware there must be an underlying objective to this sojourn, but it constituted a week off school, and that overshadowed any reasoning. My questions during the Religious class debates had been contrary and controversial, my essays purposely provocative, this made Father Jordan uncomfortable – I knew this to be true; Father Kelly, an Irish Catholic priest who taught at the school, had already told me so.

A furious sky accentuated the daunting chiseled features of the manor, all set in a landscape that would never recognize the term forgiveness; this naturally appealed to the ever-present sensationalist within me. Once inside, a handsome oak staircase took precedence attended by a superfluity of ostentatious reliquaries and liturgical ornamentation. Mufti appeared to be de rigueur for the resident priests and nuns, some of who had accessorized with acoustic guitars thrown with a deliberate nonchalance around their backs. Our days were spent in groups stoically philosophizing on teenage concerns, and questions were answered in colourful and enlightening ways devoid of patronization. The evenings were spent languorously exchanging ghost stories into the early hours; the whole aura of the place lent itself to the total pleasure of communal petrification, and general scaring the beJesus out of one another, I adored it but this is where everything went hideously wrong.

Day three, at daybreak I was summoned to the office. Apparently I had caused "mass hysteria" among my fellow houseguests the previous night - obviously I had found my own stories soporific and had slept soundly unencumbered by any form of disturbance and / or demons. A call had been hastily made to Father Kelly the old laconic priest at school, in regards of my immediate removal from the manor and he was assigned - reluctantly I'm sure- that pastoral duty. As I waited in the music room, looking forward to

seeing the refreshingly grounded priest, (I didn't suppose he was looking forward to driving over 50 miles to see me), I found one of my favorite albums, Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells. This had been the bane of my parent's life with my incessant and inexorable re-playing. As I placed it on the turntable I resigned myself to the wait and the consequent admonishment that lay before me. Before long, a pink-of-cheek, red-frocked priest entered the room, and requested that I come with him, I dutifully did. I was led to a small enclosure similar to a confessional box but larger, which contained a wooden seat and four red robed fretful faced priests. I was summoned to sit – I obliged, and then in sonorous unison the room swayed to the sounds of Latin incantation, sprinklings of holy water sprayed about me, through it all I could hear still hear the now faint sound of Tubular Bells. I was not alarmed; I was bemused and bewildered as only a fourteen year old can be, at this unnecessary farcical event unfolding before me. I wanted to laugh, but felt like this would be far too ill mannered, so indulged in the opportunity, to study the exquisite symbolist details of the scarlet liturgical vestments

I was asked to remove my shoes; I gazed down at the continually demonized burgundy ankle-strapped shoes and realized that they were the only thing providing me with balance and stability within those four walls, through hell and high water they were staying firmly where cobblers intended them to be.

What were those priests exorcising, teenage high spirits; petulance; the ability to entertain with a ghost story; pernicious leanings toward theatrical and dramatic; my taste in contemporary music; my proclivity toward burgundy wedged shoes? I never did find out, but suspiciously I have never listened to Tubular Bells since.

FOR WHAT WE ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE

*The Cross is laid upon the ground, and Jesus is stretched upon His bed of death. At one and the same time, He offers his bruised limbs to His Heavenly Father in behalf of sinful man, and to His Fierce executioners to be nailed to the disgraceful wood. The blows are struck! The Blood gushes forth!*¹²

Nothing is more provocative than sex and religion, and sex and religion in the same bed makes for explosive coupling. Many artists today are working within the confines of these areas and exploring these religious tensions that are so prevalent in our times. Generally we are all exposed to and have a respectful awareness of many other religions and only the hardened fundamentalist would claim that their religions traditions are the sole treasury of truth and enlightenment. The relationship between religion and art has come under-fire in recent decades predominantly from religious organizations, and has had to face many public crises and verbal cat fights. When art is seen to be too critical of religion, exaltations of blasphemy are rapidly aired and resonate with many of the fund - giving institutions; as Holly Golightly declares in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (regarding the press intrusion at her incarceration) '*there are certain shades of limelight that can ruin a girl's complexion*'¹³ and yet controversy's child is notoriety and notoriety consequently begets infamy / fame. Often artists who work within these challenging fields are lumbered with sensationalist tag lines such as self promoting, contentious with debatable intention – a cheap-yet-effective ploy to drum up attention for an artist's career. It seems like the only acceptable explication for fear of offending, is within the sole confines of the traditional religious motif and authoritative historical narrative, which is far too reductive and only offers the binary structures of the sacred and the profane. These oppositionals hinder the progress of the investigation, the search of an alternate perspective from where to ask the questions.

Metaphorically there is a ritual cleansing amongst fearful funding organizations, but undeterred artists continue to develop the religions implications within their work. Richard Hecht in his essay '*Unveiling The Sacred In Contemporary Art*'¹⁴ puts forward that artists today working within a spiritual context do so as the corpus not the periphery and that this spiritual creativity is the '*maintenance of the conviction that life makes sense*' in the hope of providing moments of transcendence to the viewer. Our corporality and transience, mortality and immortality have been major concerns for thousands of years for both religion

¹² J. Moore (1936) The Eleventh Station from *The Way Of The Cross* commonly called *The Stations* from the French of Pere Martin Published by W. Poulton at St. Josephs, Birmingham.

¹³ Edwards B. (dir.), (1961) *Breakfast at Tiffany's* adapted from the book by Truman Capote

¹⁴ Hecht, R. & Ekstrom, L. (2001) *Unveiling The Sacred In Contemporary Art*, Department of Religious Studies and Studio Art, University of California, www.soc.uc.edu/project/ct3/docs/hect1.doc

and art, and for many artists referencing the body, bodily emissions or bodily pleasure in the context of religion, this may be seen as a blasphemous statement when the artistic sentiment was never sacrilegious in origin.

After the Reformation in the 16th Century art could address the viewer directly without the hindrance and forced responsibility of bureaucratic meaning. The art and the viewer shared a communality of space, the painting asked to be observed and a mental and visual dialogue encouraged. Today we do not have to wait for these historic mediators, the Church or the state to solely bring art to us; we can also consume and receive art through other institutions and channels. If artworks require a more complex and elaborate reading from the viewer and bears the complications of a religious subtext there may be sensationalist accusations and implications from religious groups and fund- givers. Unless veiled in allegory, uses of the body within this context cause severe ructions among the self appointed guardians of public morality as the definition of religion becomes small and oppressive. By this very nature artists working within this domain can come to be seen as confrontational, bellicose and antagonistic, resulting in the prevention of acceptance of genuine examinations into the fulfillment, ambivalence, indifference, absence and religiosity in the everyday.

The most virulent detractors of such art are the conservative Catholics who take issue with homosexuality, reproductive rights and feminism and which more often than not are the main staples of the work. Eleanor Heartney's essay ¹⁵ on Catholicism in contemporary art centers around Catholicism's *incarnational* emphasis where the physical body, behavior, and emissions become main components of the work; and where the Catholic body serves as a main porthole where humanity makes its approach to God. Heartney's argument states that the most controversial art made in the last 15 years was nearly all produced by artists who were raised Catholic; artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Dorothy Cross, Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, Chris Ofili, Robert Gober, Janine Antoni. Whether these artists are practicing, questioning or rejecting, all acknowledge the role it has imposed on their work. Issues of Catholicism and feminism merge for the artists Kiki Smith and Janine Antoni both admiring the strength, but not the underlying narrative of submission with the Virgin. Antoni chews on corners of large cubes of chocolate and lard in *Gnaw* (1992) her body obviously being integral to the work. The act of chewing becomes significant as it allowed her to connect to the material, the body is evident in the work and her presence is still evident after her departure. In *Loving Care* (1992 ~ 94) she uses her hair dipped in dye as a brush on the gallery floor; the whole body is used to get from one parameter to the other, the documentation appears excremental. *'I like the idea of eating, the notion of incorporation and for that matter, communion...Then there is the washing, which brings us to Baptism and holy water, not to mention Mary Magdalene drying the feet of Christ'*¹⁶.

¹⁵ Heartney, E. (2004) *The Bawdy Art Of Catholics; Catholic Imagination shapes Contemporary Art In Daring, Sometimes Shocking Ways* National Catholic Reporter, <http://www.findarticles.co>

¹⁶ Heartney, E. (2004) *Postmodern Heretics; The Catholic Imagination In Contemporary Art*, Midmarch Arts Press pg 160

Kiki Smith explores the concept of virgin and whore with her flayed *Virgin (1993)* and *Mary Magdalene (1994)* sculptures. She uses the word 'meandering' to describe her work to emphasize the non-directive route of her investigations. Smith was raised a Catholic and her life and work remain coloured by this belief system. She began to focus exclusively on the female form and sited it in the realm of women's lived experience and not the harmonious body of classical art. It is the uncontrollable body that leaks and stains that she wants to present to us. Smith considers religion to be fundamental to her art and has stated, "*One of the things about Catholicism is, it's a religion that's about making things physical, about taking emotional and spiritual ideas and making them physical.*"¹⁷ In another work such as *Train*, the life-sized, nude female form made from plaster, ejects strings of beautiful red glass beads like an uncontrollable body menstruating profusely in polite society. It is naked in every sense of the word, viscous, visceral and vulnerable containing a multiplicity of meanings. She speaks of her upbringing as being suffused with death and morbidity, which she associates with her Irish Catholic background. For both Kiki Smith and Janine Antoni Catholicism and feminism are inextricable entwined, and their work is questioning of those roles and motifs.

Andrew Greeley¹⁸ an American sociologist and Catholic Priest states that the Catholic imagination is analogical, which transcribes as a God who is present in the world disclosing himself in and through creation. Objects, events and people all tend to be somewhat like God, He can be seen everywhere. The Protestant imagination is seen to be dialectical, opposing forces deeming a God who is radically different from the everyday. He argues that the Catholic mind set strongly leans towards analogy, where one reality speaks to another deeper reality. Fonts, flowers ashes, oils each stand alone as natural objects, but all signify something deeper; with the exception of the Eucharist all sacraments are analogical. With the Catholic metaphorical narrative, the domain firmly resides in the visual. All the major Mysteries of the Catholic faith, Resurrection, Crucifixion, Transubstantiation all revolve around the body. This is in stark contrast to the Protestant imagination, which relies on the word and the Bible for its Truth. Interestingly the time of the Reformation (early fifteenth ~ sixteenth century) coincided with the first movements towards the printing press, allowing the publishing of religious literature in the vernacular of the people, which was rigorously opposed by the Catholic Church. Christianity presented itself as the prime source of modern morality yet for many, especially in England, Roman Catholicism was regarded as a scandal. Catholicism relies on sensual experience to convey its Truths. Protestantism evolved to counter Catholicism's decadence of carnality and undisputable rife corruption. This prejudice was especially severe between 1850-90 when the Roman Catholic Church was trying to re-establish its hierarchy in England. In Nina Butorac's essay *The Sacramental Imagination and Catholic Literature*,¹⁹ she quotes Eleanor Heartney;

¹⁷ Posner, H. (2005) Kiki Smith, Moncelli press Inc pg 22

¹⁸ Greeley, A. (1995-04) Why I'm still A Catholic <http://www.agreeley.com/articles/why.html>

¹⁹ Butroc, N. (2005) *The Sacramental Imagination and Catholic Literature*, <http://w.w.blessed-sacrament.org/njb/si.html>

Since the Reformation, Protestants have tended to regard the Catholic practice of venerating Christ and the Saints through richly ornamented religious statuary as a form of idol worship. Sensual imagery and sensual language are seen as impediments, rather than aids to belief. The body and its experiences are things to be transcended...The tension between Catholic and Protestant sensibilities outlined here can be summed up as a conflict between the Catholic culture of the image and the Protestant culture of the word. Catholicism values sensual experience and visual image as essential tools for bringing the faithful to God.²⁰

Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) is a photographic image of Jesus on the Cross submerged in a liquid golden haze surrounded by minute jewel like bubbles and set against a red background. An arresting and stunning image, which saw Serrano being charged with blasphemy, obviously for the use of the word 'piss' in the title. This was a case of the word winning out to the image, as it would be virtually impossible to tell that the enveloping liquid was urine without the aid of the title. It was a shocking piece for all the wonderful reasons shocking should be – ontological. The Crucifixion is shocking as an emblem, a barbaric act against a tragic recipient. Serrano's crucifixion submerged in with bodily fluid expresses a basic human physicality. It serves to remind the viewer that Christ took on the physical form of a man, and that the suffering on the Cross was a human felt pain. When countless crucifixes are victims of visual oblivion due to familiarity, this brings home the earthly manifestations of human pain. Dorothy Cross's crucifixion work *Mantegna / Crucifix* (1996) juxtaposes a photograph of her splayed naked body next to a cross where the body of Christ no longer hangs, the shadows of her pubis mirroring the crucifixion pose. The crucifix is startling purely because of bodily absence, Christ has been mislaid and where the figurine previously resided there is only a worn time mark. This marking replicates the unnerving quality reminiscent of murder scenes where a chalk line outlines the victim's body, and loudly proclaims God Is Dead with the assured sensationalism of a tabloid newspaper. The image makes the viewer stop, and search; for the figurine; for an explanation; for oneself. It's power lies in the void where Christ once hung, and does more to question ones belief system than any gilded crucifix residing in an over - embellished Church. The two works shown together bring up questions of Mariology and gender politics. This same bone – chilling loss is present in Dorothy Cross's *Bible* (1995), a beautifully engraved Victorian bible with a 1.5-inch hole purposely punctured through it. Apart from the perverse visual satisfaction of a perfectly drilled hole revealing the 'textuality' of the text, by the appropriation of objects she allows them a multiplicity of meanings. Cross uses a variety of media to create her works and they seem to take on a religious / spiritual questioning involving the everyday realities pointing to desire; she challenges the single dominant narrative.

²⁰ Heartney E. (2000) *Blood, Sex and Blasphemy The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*
http://herbercollege.asu.edu/news/newsreleases2000/sao_catholicism_021100html.

In further work *Virgin Shroud* (1993) the Virgin is a faceless Madonna or bride. A life-sized sculpture wearing Cross's own grandmother's wedding veil and a shroud of cowhide crowned with udders. A bride facing the abattoir perhaps? A nurturing cloaked figure? Pleasure mixed with the sense of unease, (a clever lyrical play on the Cork dialect, 'udders' which sounds like 'others', it is where Cross hails from and incidentally my mother also.) In her *Jellyfish Drawings* (2003) there is a certain resonance of loss / absence. This work was based on a Victorian Irish woman who had a fascination for jellyfish and bred them in bell jars. The unsubstantial forms, balletic in movement now removed from the sea and left to dry out on lavender scented Victorian handkerchiefs their bodies leaking onto the cotton and leaving a residue of life not dissimilar to the aesthetic of the Turin Shroud. Dorothy Cross's interest in death, domesticity and elements of Catholicism are the main staples of her work, and has commented '*In Catholicism life is a preparation for death.*' She urges an analysis of desires and obsessions, whilst keeping a watchful eye on suspicions, stereotypes and myths which invariably attach themselves to them.

Andres Serrano, along with Robert Mapplethorpe took the brunt of attacks from the American far right regarding blasphemy allegations. As a former Catholic, Serrano focuses on emotionally charged symbols reworking Catholic imagery with a concentrated voyeuristic approach. Serrano resented the censoring of his work, as he stated iconoclastic imagery had played an important role in his childhood.

*I am drawn to symbols of the Church, I like the aesthetic of the Church. I like the furniture. I like going to Church for aesthetic reasons, rather than spiritual ones. In my work I explore my Catholic obsessions. An artist is nothing without his or her obsessions, and I have mine. One of the things that has always bothered me was the fundamentalist labeling of my work, as anti-Christian bigotry*²¹

In the New York *Sensation Show* (1999) terms abounded that all pointed towards blasphemy and profanity – these terms foreran the artwork and immediately labeled it, making non -judgmental viewing a virtual impossibility. Chris Ofili with his work *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) stood as one of the accused regarding his use of elephant dung on the Virgins Breast. The offended Mayor Giuliani and The Catholic League didn't necessarily want the work removed but funding for such shows removed. They were offended buy the use of dung but didn't look at the work long enough to see the employment of pornographic magazine montages surrounding Our Lady. Ofili a practicing Catholic, who obviously uses dung in most of his work to symbolize fertility, was the subject of a high profile American lawsuit regarding this work.

'Until we figure out a way to convince our public officials that art can't simply be read like a cereal box, its unlikely that this wont be the last time a Catholic artist is made an emblem of all that is wrong with the amoral, pornographic and ungodly art world'.²²

²¹ Fusco C (1991) *Shooting The Clan* www.communityarts.net (reprinted 2002)

²² Heartney E. (2004) The bawdy Art Of Catholics; Catholic Imagination Shapes Contemporary Art, National Catholic Enquirer, <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles>

Dave Hickey ²³ comments on the images in Robert Mapplethorpe's *Portfolio X Series* (1978) “ *these images are too full of art to be about art*” and makes comparisons to Michelangelo Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas* (1601), how we the viewers are the compliant spectators. We are asked to override our doubt in much the same way as Thomas, but we remain the incredulous disbelievers in both Caravaggio' and Mapplethorpe's eyes,

“Thus do the “religion of Christ” and “the religion of Art” erotically infect one another in our complex encounter with the image and the word. As our desire and control are arrested by the beauty and grace of the image – humbled” ²⁴

When we look at the *Portfolio X Series* art, sex and religion are all contained within the imagery. Looking at Mapplethorpe's *Self Portrait* (1982) it implies crucifixion, a yielding up of desire, although we are only witness to a section of the bed and a solitary stray arm. There is no question of an essence of succumbing, a death, or 'petit mort'. Mapplethorpe's discarded Catholicism comes through these works although his religion was the recording of marginalization. *The Portfolio X* images freeze the eyes; they leave you suspended, holding your breath, waiting for their breath to continue. Never once do you slip off the image or wander off to the periphery, they seduce with a cool nonchalance. Once the physical technical marvels have been digested you invite yourself in to the image, as there seems to be ample room for the viewer to observe further. Mapplethorpe found himself in the dock for these images, defending the nature of beauty and religion in his work. The defense gallery was based on the redemptive formula of beauty and the sophistication of the viewer to be “courageous” enough to look at the images and understand the artists “tortured private pathology.” Robert Gober was once an altar boy who left the church because of its stance on homosexuality and there are complexities and dichotomies that arise with him, and many other artists, concerning the Church's refusal of acceptance of gayness. Gober's *Holy Virgin Mary* (1995) didn't cause as much national notoriety as Serrano or Mapplethorpe but it was still very controversial. A life-sized statue of The Virgin Mary, her stomach punctured with a large pipe visually and physically impaling the sculpture from front to back. Gober was raised a Catholic, and although his relationship with the Church is a complicated one he draws inspiration from its iconography. As Gianlorenzo Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647 ~ 52) was pierced with an arrow implying blatant sexual overtones, Gober's Virgin is pierced with a pipe leading onto a drain. There are many metaphors regarding the use of the drain in his work with an obvious nod to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) but other implications such as the piercing of the flesh of Christ by the Roman soldier, the water that sprang from his body, the baptismal and the fountains of life, reinforce his obsession with sink drains and pipes.

²³ Hickey D (1993) *The Invisible Dragon; Four Essays On Beauty*, Art Issues Press. Pg 27 Chapter; Nothing Like The Son

²⁴ Hickey D (1993) *The Invisible Dragon; Four Essays on Beauty*, Art Issues Press Pg 27 Chapter Nothing Like The Son

Since Andy Warhol's Death it has transpired that he is the author of the largest group of religious paintings in America in the twentieth century. His reworking of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495-1497) *The Last Supper Red* (1986) is sumptuous in blood curdling reds. Warhol's aesthetic and spiritual roots were firmly placed in Catholicism, but it wasn't until after his death that it emerged what an active churchgoer he had been throughout his life. He sat in the shadows of the pews daily not wanting to be recognized or acknowledged:

*'...A lot of his friends were Catholic. He may have related better to us Catholics because we all had the same background: mass, priests, nuns, Catholic school, a sense of guilt. His religion was a very private part of his life....it restored him a perspective of the world that he had grown up with. In church he was the anonymous Catholic.'*²⁵

In this vast series of Last Supper paintings the normally noncommittal and detached Warhol lets his own personal religiosity into the work. He had an obsession for the face of Christ as painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. Leonardo's breakthroughs in artistic perspective had brought the Christ figure into the viewer's world, and although the term classical and realist can be applied to both artists, the five hundred years separating them make for radically different metaphysical questions and cultural meanings.

*"I have become increasingly amazed and dismayed at the continuing persistence of dated modern conventions concerning the canonical status of "flatness" and the inconsequence of beauty in twentieth century images.... And such is the Protestant hegemony of this ant-rhetorical flatness that contemporary artists have been in effect, forced to divert their endeavors into realms of speech, dance, text, photography, and installation design in order to explore the semiotic space and rhetorical felicities that are still available in literary and theatrical practice – so they might be at best, crudely approximate effects that were effortlessly available to Titian on his worst day."*²⁶

²⁵ Daggett Dillenberger J. (1998) *The Religious Art Of Andy Warhol*, Continuum Publishing pg38 re. Makos, C. A Personal Photographic Memoir

²⁶ Hickey D. (1993) *The Invisible Dragon Four Essays On Beauty* Art Issues Press pg 40