Marys, Lindas and other spirited vessels

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The letterbox Marys. Just the title of Mikala Dwyer's installation makes me chuckle. Marian devotion, roadside shrines and the postal service collide in this marvellous image. It is worthy of the British television comedy series *Father Ted*. The plotline might be that a parishioner gives the parochial household a statue of the Virgin and as the house is already chock-full of Marys they decide she has to go somewhere outside yet highly visible. Closer to home, a letterbox Mary could be the kind of practical accommodation to religious feeling one might find in rural or outback Australia, sort of 'statuary with a purpose'. I can well imagine a Marian devotee deciding no better saint should oversee and safeguard the dwindling supply of delivered mail. As Marina Warner has noted in her book *Alone of all her sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), the meagre references to Mary in the Bible have in no way limited the many and varied uses made of her story or, indeed, her body.[1]

In the first installation of **The letterbox Marys** at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney in 2015, two wonderful prototypes for a Mary letterbox were exhibited alongside a range of earthly and metaphysical objects: three large banner-like paintings titled **The angel**, **Possession** and **Sigil for heaven and earth**, two shadow lamps, a wall necklace, uranium glass vessels and a large acrylic puzzle. Foregrounding the Virgin Mary in the title of the work is both a feminist gesture and, of course, a typically Catholic one. Dwyer has previously woven Catholic references into her work – it is a spiritual tradition familiar to her from childhood – but in a less direct fashion. In her 2008 installation **Moon garden**, for example, an appliqued banner listed the placenames given to the lunar surface by the seventeenth-century Jesuit priest Giovanni Battista Riccioli (see pages 60–61). Dwyer observes with characteristic acuity the fabulous range of topics conjured in these names: 'There's success, love, and rot, and there's rainbows, sleep, fear, and forgetfulness – but no sex.'[2] Similarly, in the version of **The additions and the subtractions** exhibited at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2012, Catholic kitsch features: a small Jesus on top of a tall plinth performing a puzzling Toyota-type 'oh what a feeling' leap.

The letterbox Marys 2015
(detail)
see pages 86–87

In **The letterbox Marys** Dwyer puts Mary on a pedestal of sorts – her traditional location – but also brings her down to earth. Such a location better serves Mary's role as the messenger, conduit or medium that connects the physical and spiritual realms. The so-called pedestals are actually typical minimalist-style gallery plinths but painted a deep grey instead of the customary white; both have apertures suitable for standard-sized letters cut vertically into the fabric, and below the slits are open cubes that could be used for receiving newspapers and other larger items. This section of the sculptures in proportion and design reminds me of the expensive bespoke letterboxes one often sees outside swish architecturally designed houses in Australian cities. On top of these structures are standard-issue religious statues of Mary but in this instance she is turned to appear in profile. In fact, the two Marys face each other; their doubling is somewhat disconcerting given the singularity so often attributed to her – alone of all her sex, et cetera. Surprisingly, it is hard to describe the standard pose she displays; it is puzzling,

not part of normal bodily comportment or movement. The head is slightly bowed, presumably in modesty rather than shame; the arms are slightly raised away from the body; and the hands are turned palm-outwards in a gesture redolent of supplication and possibly welcome. It isn't exactly a gesture of open arms but it suggests some kind of availability, confirming her status as an intermediary, more approachable perhaps because she is a mere mortal and a maternal figure. Hence she intercedes on our behalf. Her pose is seemingly meant to suggest that task and indeed this particular stylisation of Mary is usually referred to as Our Lady of Grace; she is invoked as a go-between to obtain God's grace on our behalf.

In Dwyer's hands the pose is made strange and thus available for close and curious attention – partly, as I mentioned earlier, because Mary appears in profile, an unusual orientation for a religious image, but also because the figure is framed by highly coloured acrylic sheets that throw her form dramatically into relief. We notice her slightly stooping position and the elaborate folds of her drapery when our routine ways of seeing – or, more accurately, not seeing – are disrupted. The sheer beauty of the two pieces, their perfect proportions and scintillating colour contrasts, disarm or disallow any suggestion of derision that this radical, almost fluorescent, illumination provides. The wonderful quirkiness of a psychedelic Mary atop a letterbox is nonetheless very apparent.

Mary appears in other parts of the installation, including as a small figure atop one of the gallows-like structures that support the shadow lamps. There are two shadow lamps that, as their name implies, cast shadows instead of emitting light. These anti-lamps of dark acrylic are shot through with colour like black opals. The small Mary on the lampstand has her arms raised to bring her hands closer to her chest in the gesture typical of Mary of the Immaculate Heart. Mary also features as a kind of caryatid for the hind legs of the bedframe in **Possession**, the most minimal of the three wall-to-floor paintings. The bed is positioned obliquely across an abstract painting simply divided into two blocks of colour: blue and green. Two of the bed legs terminate with small statues of Mary. **Possession** moves to the darker side of Christianity: demonology. The infamous bed scene from the film *The exorcist* (1973), where actress Linda Blair projectile vomits at the attending priest, is conjured by the title of this component of the installation and the clump of putty-coloured material stuck to the bedframe. Studded with coins and stones, this abject bulge contrasts with the carefully painted frame. The hard-edged abstraction of both canvas and painted bedframe lends a compositional formality and restraint to this component of the installation that reins in or contains the humorous touches.

Contrasting with the simple geometry of **Possession**, **The angel** is a much more complex composition. The interlocking shapes of brilliant colour with their clean contours have a bold, playful quality that reminds me of childhood delights like Fuzzy-Felt or similar construction sets that utilise colour and shape

opposite:
The angel 2015
see pages 130, 132–33, 135

Mary detail in **Possession** 2015
see page 130

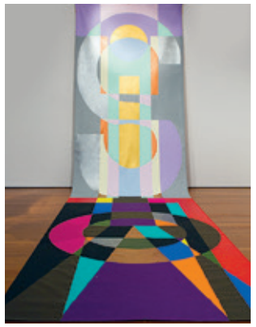
to stimulate the fledgling imagination. The scale of the shapes, well outside the parameters of such games, in no way diminishes the association. It is as though the largeness simply delivers to us a feeling of comparative smallness.

As so many commentators have noted, the playfulness and inventiveness of Dwyer's art is also tempered by its knowing engagement with the dense and complicated history of abstraction. For example, the title of **The angel**, with its clear reference to representational content, reminds us of the figurative underpinning of much early abstraction, particularly in the early work of Wassily Kandinsky, but also the more recently discovered women pioneers of abstract art like Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz. The mystical and spiritual traditions of abstraction guide Dwyer's practice. She, like the pioneers of abstraction, refers to incorporeal beings, alchemical experiments, number magic, sacred geometry and occult symbolism. The idea that there are dimensions to artmaking and its reception other than the perceptual and the rational is well articulated by Kandinsky. As he put it: '[It is] not an obvious ("geometrical") construction that will be the richest in possibilities, hence the most expressive, but the hidden one, which emerges unnoticed from the picture and hence is destined less for the eye than for the soul.'[3] The unconscious communication suggested here, from picture to psyche bypassing the eye, is perhaps more routine than we suppose. How often do we see, without really seeing images? Art historians' stock in trade is precisely the capacity to make explicit in an image what most others overlook.

That said, Dwyer does not believe images can hasten change in the world by speaking directly to the soul, or that they provide a more perfect model of it – both common theories of early abstraction, Kandinsky and Mondrian respectively. But images are not without effect, albeit that power or capacity is very hard to quantify. Of course, Dwyer is much, much less earnest than the pioneers of abstraction; humour, whimsy and absurdity always bubble away in the background. **The angel**, for example, could be described as almost cartoonish. The shapes that create an angel-like form in the top half of the canvas also recall the simple ciphers of children's drawings: a circle for a head, a triangle for the body, and arms formed by an upturned crescent. The interlocking forms of the whole composition and the complex colour interplays are, of course, all very far from childish. Dwyer's capacity to hold in tension contradictory positions, states or feelings is abundantly evident in this extraordinary amalgam of simplicity and complexity. Just as the painting can slide between abstraction and figuration, the composition can seem entirely abstract; the angel simply disappears if one chooses not to assemble the various shapes into that particular form.

The third wall painting in the installation, **Sigil for heaven and earth**, calls forth the occult side of spiritualism. A sigil is a magical symbol, talisman, action or word. In this case the magic word is a well-known expletive: 'holy shit'. The top half of the painting rendered in delicate pastels spells out 'shit' while the section running along the ground in highly saturated hues spells

out ‘holy’. Base matter and the ethereal world of the spirit are nicely condensed in this everyday expression. As an expression of surprise, famously associated with the comic superheroes Batman and Robin, it has a camp quality. It is another instance of a Mary-like bridge between the polarised domains of the sacred and the profane. And, of course, it has a comic twist; it is highly irreverent but not in an obvious in-your-face way. Indeed, it takes some time to decipher the superimposed letters that spell out the two words.



All three wall paintings join wall and floor in an intriguing fashion, reminiscent of the sculptures of Eva Hesse, such as her 1968 work **Area**, which similarly climbed the wall and crossed the floor. Often seen as blurring the line between sculpture and painting, Hesse’s late works (including **Area** and **Contingent** 1968) are strange shadows that haunt the space of both. With literal surfaces rather than painted ones they seem sculptural, yet their transformation of space into two-dimensional form is entirely painterly. Dwyer’s three large paintings, along with her allied series **In the heads of humans** 2016, operate in this same domain between wall and floor, real and illusory, two dimensions and three.

Dwyer’s use of vibrant colour is, of course, a substantial departure from the tenets of minimalism and post-minimalism. So while the form of her work retraces minimalist and post-minimalist concerns, the content is aligned with early abstraction, including the embrace of colour, as well as the many and varied references to the spiritual in art. Dwyer thus blends together the languages of early abstraction and the late abstraction of minimalism and post-minimalism.

It is interesting in this regard to consider the rejection of this part of abstraction’s history by the minimalist painter Frank Stella. In a 1984 interview he explicitly criticised what he calls the anti-materialist aspect of early abstraction:

> I have no difficulty appreciating (and up to a point understanding) the great abstract painting of modernism’s past, the painting of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, but I do have trouble with their dicta, their pleadings, their defence of abstraction. My feeling is that these reasons, these theoretical underpinnings of theosophy and anti-materialism, have done abstract painting a kind of disservice which has contributed to its present-day plight.[4]

Materialism versus anti-materialism: one can’t help but wonder whether these two alternate in some seasonal or cyclical fashion. Each one returning to correct the imbalance caused by the previous bias. In Dwyer’s work, however, there is the demand to think of the position of the go-between, the Mary, the conduit between any two positions. Only in that way can we hope to escape the eternal return of successive extremes. And when we laugh at the whole situation, we are truly delivered from such extremism.

opposite:
Mikala Dwyer installing
The letterbox Marys in
A shape of thought, Art Gallery
of New South Wales, Sydney, 2017

Sigil for heaven and earth 2015
see pages 130, 132–33, 135

The letterbox Marys 2015
(detail)
see pages 134–35