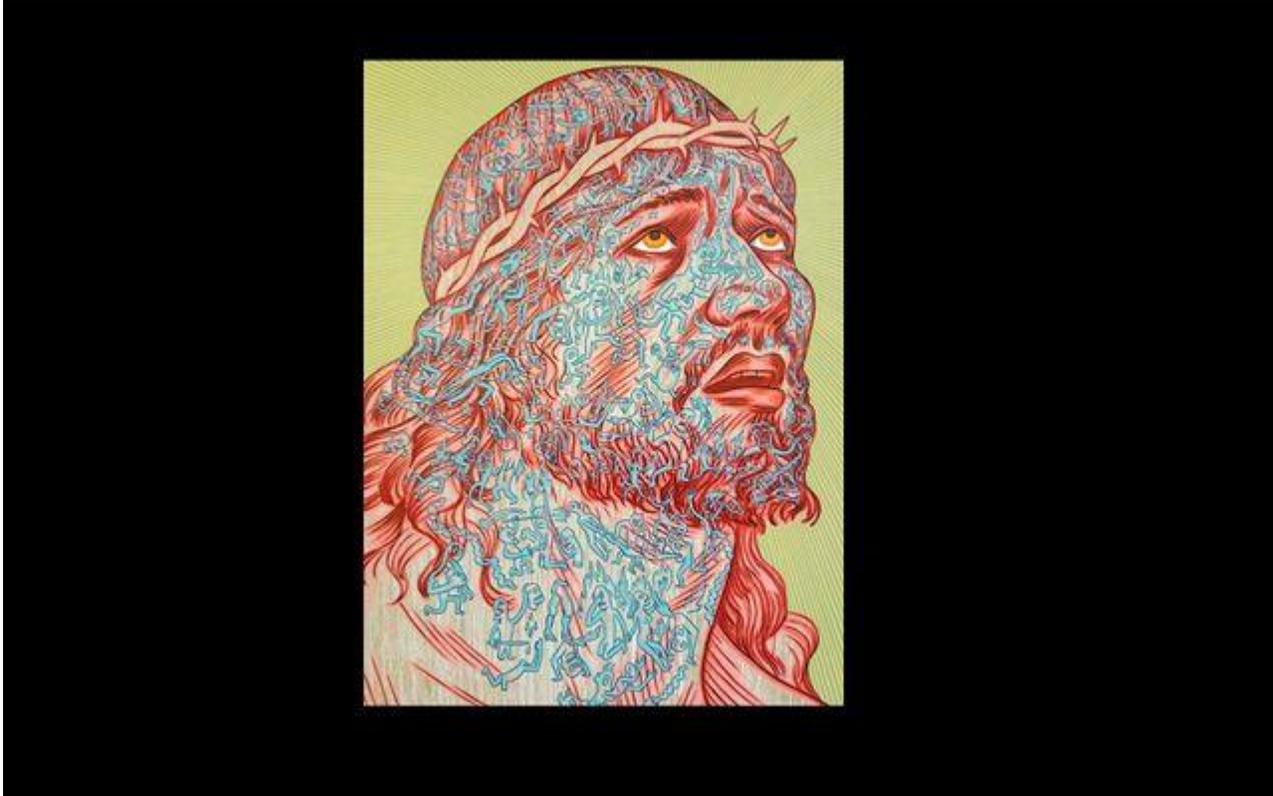


Crossing from Christianity to commentary

by Chris Thurman, May 08 2014, 04:32



LOOK AGAIN: The exhibition at UJ Gallery is not a derision or parody of Christian beliefs. Rather, it appropriates and subverts familiar Christian imagery to offer critiques of social phenomena, such as patriarchy.

DAN Brown wasn't the first person to point out that the Church Fathers were not an altogether saintly bunch. But the melodramatic action and blunt prose of *The Da Vinci Code* certainly helped to popularise scepticism about the process by which, over the course of three or four centuries, these venerable figures refined Christian theology: deciding what would and wouldn't be included in the Bible, separating "heresy" from "truth", and generally making the early Church conform to their own image.

Of course, there have since been, and continue to be, substantial disagreements between Christians of various stripes. The greatest gulf is that between Catholicism and Protestantism, but minor denominational frictions abound; there are also appreciable differences between "Western" traditions and the "Eastern" Orthodox churches. Nonetheless, certain tenets are accepted by all who profess the Christian faith.

Or are they? From Original Sin to the Virgin Birth, Christian dogma presents numerous difficulties to those who would like to embrace the possibility of human reconciliation with divinity (whether the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ is viewed literally or is understood as a metaphor — well, that's a different matter altogether). This is aggravated by a form of exegesis that reduces the poetry and narrative complexity of the Bible to a set of rules and regulations.

These laws, in turn, are embodied in the visual symbols developed over two millennia by artists whose images have bolstered Christian doctrine: stained-glass windows, statues, frescoes, framed paintings, bas-relief carvings on the edifices of grand cathedrals, illuminated manuscripts and illustrated books. Works of art have reinforced beliefs and assumptions that are not inherent to Christianity but are often presented as such — for example, that the normative Christian subject is straight, white, European and male.

The desire to challenge such implicit (and often explicit) precepts provides the impetus behind the works collected for *Deconstructing Dogma*. This exhibition of "transgressive Christian iconography in South African art", curated by Karen von Veh and on display at the UJ Gallery until May 29, should not be seen as an exercise in easy derision or parody of Christian beliefs *per se*. Rather, it appropriates and subverts familiar Christian imagery in order to offer critiques of wider social phenomena.

Foremost among these is the relentless patriarchy that takes its cue from, among other things, the denigration of females by Church Fathers such as Tertullian. Even Augustine of Hippo, whose *Confessions* present their author as a sympathetic figure, was guilty of endorsing the idea that Eve (and therefore all women) should be blamed for "the Fall of Mankind".

A handful of the works in *Deconstructing Dogma* tackle the hypocrisy of the Adam/Eve binary directly. Jacki McInnes chooses a different Old Testament subject: the story of Lot and his family. Lot's apparently callous treatment of his daughters is matched by the notorious fate of his wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt because she looked back at Sodom while they fled the city. McInnes's response is bitterly playful: her *Wife's Lot* is a sculpture, cast in salt, of a woman kneeling "in a pose as submissive as it is provocative".

Unsurprisingly, typical portrayals of the Virgin Mary are also undermined, or at least destabilised. One of the quotations that Von Veh has selected to frame the works on display comes from Simone de Beauvoir, identifying the "supreme masculine victory" represented by Mary kneeling before her son: "she freely accepts her inferiority". Reciprocally, Majak Bredell's *Black Madonna* triptych and other works emerge from a desire to privilege "a woman giving birth" over "a man dying on a cross".

The intersection of gender and race is addressed in Lawrence Lemaona's *The Discussion*, which reconstitutes Da Vinci's famous *Last Supper*. Gordon Froud also uses this device to provocative effect, collapsing the "sacred" into pop culture.

The artists who are thematically in dialogue with Lemaona situate Christian iconography in a specifically South African context: Conrad Botes and Derek Zietsman consider the consequences

of Calvinist perversions in our country's history; Diane Victor's remarkable altarpiece renders the everyday horror of violence against women; and Wim Botha's crucified Christ emphasises the biblical text itself as the source of both oppression and liberation.

<http://www.bdlive.co.za/life/entertainment/2014/05/08/crossing-from-christianity-to-commentary>