



***Cathedral***

**Rebekah Pryor**



# Cathedral

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*Cathedral* is a playful exploration of architecture and the idea of the body as 'sacred canopy'. Using the pattern of mother and child as a starting point, Rebekah Pryor's fabric, paint and paper installations transpose the scale and materiality of domestic space to the vast cathedral. The work makes way for an opening up of alternative spaces for seeing, negotiating and sharing the world.



*Dear Mr Butterfield* 2015  
Felt, exterior house paint, paper  
Dimensions variable

*Portable Cathedral* 2015  
Mixed media  
240 x 120 x 300 cm

*Fleur de lis* 2015  
Digital printed wallpaper  
200 x 200 cm

*Swaddle* 2015  
Muslin, fabric paint, brass rings, fishing line  
45 x 600 cm



## **Conversation**

Rebekah Pryor + Michael Needham

Rebekah Pryor: It has been a privilege and a great artistic challenge to work in such a beautiful sacred space as St Paul's. I thank the Dean, Cathedral staff and community for their generosity in opening it up to me.

The privilege has been in locating my own experiences and perspectives in the context of the long history of people who have dwelled on this site and in this building before me. The challenge has been in making art that sensitively acknowledges the physical context of the Cathedral as an exhibition space while also rigorously engaging in the contemporary concerns that inform my artistic project.

Michael Needham: The range of work you have for the exhibition clearly shows a continuing interest in activating the space in which the viewer finds themselves. Being a traditionally sacred space, this suggests you are giving / adding more to the space within the Cathedral, as if you are conceding to something that is missing. This is my initial thinking. And yet what you are offering is something less than 'sacred'-set apart, something more recognisable, more ordinary and homely than what the cathedral architecture sets out to achieve; another dimension of the sacred... one that is, I think, your thesis.

RP: Perhaps I am, as you say, 'conceding' to an absence of something. The cathedral is a beautiful building and I appreciate the logic of its architecture that means to open us up to the vastness and grandeur of God. But the solidity and certainty of its hard structure, seems not to also represent the breadth of human experience. And this might feel to some in contemporary audiences, dislocating. My experience of mothering children at home (a place less than vast and grand!), has always been one of spiritual challenge and insight. So, perhaps it's an absence of imagery that acknowledges the maternal body as a key site of encounter with 'the divine' that I am responding to.

I've been reading James Grant's recent account of the history of St Paul's Cathedral and learned that the architect William Butterfield's design for the reredos (the main mosaic panel that decorates the sanctuary, and creates a focal point in the building's interior) was rejected because the donor who was to fund this part of the project back in the 1890s took exception to the vesica shape in which a mosaic rendering of the nativity was to go.<sup>1</sup> The vesica (*mandorla*, in Italian) is that shape made by two identical, intersecting circles. A kind of almond shape that represents an in-between space, a convergence of spirit and body, divinity and humanity. A symbol of the feminine maternal...

Of course, the reaction of the donor must be seen in the context of the culture of the day, but it must also make us ask how can we represent that which is important to us today? The things that as a society we have learnt about ourselves and the world, about the divine, since this building was made.

Mother and matter. That's what I feel is missing from this building, from history and perhaps still from our collective expressions of spiritual or religious story and experience.

MN: So, pink felt, for example, inlaid into the architectural ornamentation, is brilliantly simple, sympathetic and also perverse! I mean that in the best way... it unsettles the seriousness of the dark, rich, (patriarchal) timber craftwork. Fluffy florescent celebrates even while it plays against its frame through contrast of colour and sensuously touchable texture.

RP: I love that fuchsia pink felt can be sympathetic! It means to both decorate and soften the solidity of the architecture. There is already softness here of course... embroidered kneelers, altar linen, flowers faithfully arranged... But like the *fleur de lis* that quietly resides in the wall tile pattern, it is so discreet in comparison to the heavy timbers and stone that

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<sup>1</sup> James Grant, *St Paul's Cathedral* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014).

comprise the bulk of the structure. Gothic architecture always meant to be emotive and invigorating. In his day, Butterfield's Gothic Revival vision reflected this and I think – hope – that this play with colour and texture accentuates it for our own time. Despite being criticized by some for his 'ugly' polychromatic interiors, Butterfield designed architecture that, for him, expressed the majesty of God and the order and patterns of the universe in a way that evoked a physical response. Pink felt, while conforming to the shapes that 'point to heaven', invites us to come close and touch it.

MN: It's really nice to hear your own take in re-reading Butterfield's vision. It builds the picture, adding layers of context and intimate interpretation to what (speaking as a visitor) one might otherwise experience regarding the physical space at St Paul's. It's as if the 'soft', decorative ornamentation in the building has always been pushed into the background, subservient to the grander structural edifice, playing its role as you say, but relegated to a more secondary 'domestic' level. Thus, interacting with the ornamentation and giving an invitation to touch it is your implicit defense of its role in activating and representing the sacred within the overall order of the Gothic. It's a conversation with Butterfield.

The 'paint' tent is also sensitively procured as a response specific to the space. Clearly it is an 'echo' of the central spatial shape. But it is fragile, impermanent, demanding attention to the intricacy of the patterns and evidence of the hand-made as opposed to the excess of generically untouchable, unreachable, hence almost 'invisible' features throughout the Cathedral. If there is anything stagnant about a cathedral as fixed architecture, this portable one isn't.

RP: Grant mentions that the first structure to be put on the site following John Batman's 'purchase' of the land from the Wurundjeri people around 1835, was a tent: 'The Port Phillip Association's 'catechist', Dr Alexander Thomson a Presbyterian, arrived in March 1836, and pitched his circular Indian tent under a great gum tree on the site of the future St Paul's Cathedral. Here, for some weeks, he conducted public

worship according to the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>2</sup>

It got me to wondering... what if Butterfield's brief was to design a portable cathedral? Something moveable, flexible, that could be pegged into the soil and open at both ends or from all sides to movements of air. Something more like our bodies as they shift and change shape in order to make space for each other. This sort of space calls to mind contemporary feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's 'interval' that she describes as the 'intermediary between the boundaries' of two others.<sup>3</sup> It is a distinctly dialogic and relational space where 'God' is encountered not only on a vertical plane of transcendence but in relationship with the human other, on a horizontal plane as well.

Throughout the development of work for *Cathedral*, I have been consistently drawn to one particular tile pattern that lines the walls of this building – the light on dark green encaustic tile that, together with the buff and orange tile beneath it forms 'the green dado', an interior feature that was apparently never overly popular in St Paul's early history.<sup>4</sup> Its pattern is made up of intersecting circles that make these very feminine mandorla shapes. And in the spaces between, these most delicate, floral-like forms – generative and communal, and repeated, eternal. The pattern is architectural and theological, with its intersecting circles, *fleur de lis*, and triquetra: all ancient symbols of eternity and Holy Trinity (itself a pattern of relation, according to Rowan Williams<sup>5</sup>), and in the case of the *fleur de lis*, of Marian goodness and spirituality as well. It seemed logical to lift that pattern off the wall and make it the primary decoration of this 'sacred canopy'.

MN: I love that description of 'lifting the pattern off the wall', thereby giving it primary attention rather than merely cerebral theological reconsideration. It's like picking the flower and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray and translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993). p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, *St Paul's Cathedral*.

<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 2000).

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experiencing its actual object-hood, thereby deflecting any oversaturation of visage and divestment of meaning.

Your swaddle text is also more to the point, materially, that something needs softening here. And yet it speaks a similar language as you'd expect in the space. Something biblical but not exactly the clichéd verse. More the message of reassurance, even while the cause is unknown or unspecific. This is clever and sophisticated in terms of negotiating the language parameters set-up within the space and culture of the Church. There's a rhetorical question somewhere but this is not really given... always 'subjective', and always relevant. A very unwavering tenet of comfort, undoubtedly a maternal trait, which was always there...

RP: The text on the muslin is a quote from Julian of Norwich. Her mystical writing is poetic at times and the title of her key work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, so apt a reference for my own project. Julian writes about 'Christ as Mother' – a daring proclamation in the context of the patriarchal church culture from which she emerged – and despite her own brief yet dramatic experience of suffering, she carries on with a sense of certain comfort.<sup>6</sup> Her account is one of divine care, grounded and experienced through the body in whatever condition.

For me, the banner-like font used in this work shouts discontent with whomever/whatever is not 'well'. But the protest rests in the swaddle, and the swaddle persists: holding, binding, swaddling...

MN: And this is surely the paradox of faith that Christ offers right? That there is suffering, but one has hope regardless, always.

RP: Yes. It's childlike in this sense. Not in a foolish, lacking wisdom kind of way, but in a trusting, restful way. For the critical thinking adult, the swaddle is entirely paradoxical.

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<sup>6</sup> Rhona Pipe Halcyon Backhouse, ed. *Revelations of Divine Love: Julian of Norwich*, Hodder & Stroughton Christian Classics (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1987).

MN: The wallpaper for me is a clever disguising, again within the Cathedral's own ornamentation and a nice development of your central concerns around maternal body as sacred motif. The second-take / second-look seems like a primary motivation, as if there is reward in 'seeing' *fleur de lis* – like ornamentation anew. I'm guessing that this is important for how the valued sign is given to repetition, and/or how repetition such as in domesticity of motherhood can re-write or re-find value that in turn can be re-found as sacred.

R: Yes, repetition is certainly something I was playing with here. Repetition both as a method of active or associative learning, like old-school rote; as a means for remembrance; and as a signifier for human experience. The continuous wallpaper pattern, applied in panels one after (and before) the other, is poetic in materially locating a single posture in the context of atemporal maternal action.

In all of the works, repetition of patterns and materials is essential to evoking spiritual contemplation. Like their use as ornamentation in orthodox Christian iconography and Islamic architecture (in both cases, derivatives of widespread Greek and Roman motifs from late antiquity, first developed for religious purposes during the medieval period), familiar patterns work to draw us through the surface of the image into its spiritual meaning and significance. As with tropes of Christian liturgy, Islamic *adhan* and Buddhist mantra, repetition functions not to obliterate meaning but to enhance and clarify it.

In terms of the art object, repetition can have a similar effect. The viewer is invited to enter, through the material surface, into a contemplative space that is also an equitable space, where singularity is held always in relation to an other. The image, the icon, the sculpture, the art object is not merely something to observe but, like Butterfield's cathedral, to inhabit.

- Grant, James. *St Paul's Cathedral*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014.
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**Rebekah Pryor** is a contemporary artist based in Melbourne. She is a PhD candidate at the Centre For Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Rebekah's interdisciplinary arts practice explores the spatial and iconic potential of the body via a range of media and through the lenses of feminist theology, philosophy and architecture. Her practice currently interacts with the writing of French philosopher Luce Irigaray, as well as 14th century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich to investigate the link between the mother's body in domestic space and notions of the sacred. Rebekah's work plays with the idea of the body as 'sacred canopy' as a means for imaginatively exploring Other-ness and transcendence.

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**Dr Michael Needham** is a Melbourne/ Kyneton based visual artist and lecturer whose practice primarily incorporates drawing and sculptural installation. Among other things, his work explores myth, belief and residual melancholia in the contemporary psyche. Michael Needham is represented by Daine Singer, Melbourne.

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