

Hidden Voices
Martin Holman

... *Thanne longen folk to goon on
pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge
strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes ...*

(From the Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*)

There is more than imagery in Jonathan Michael Ray's latest work. Yet the territory beyond the image requires some persistence to enter. Any space with potential returns its fullest rewards in art beyond the point where the eye meets the surface. Penetrate that surface and this artist offers the moving textures of forgotten journeys and hidden voices kept mute by the lost key of common understanding.

On the level of imagery alone, Ray stirs the imagination. He constructs an ambience in which the present day habit of splitting any rational, cohesive whole into ambiguous fragments merges with a past time when the bigger picture was composed of superstition and dread.

The process of deconstruction is the leading factor behind the stained glass pieces. The silhouette of the coloured, arched window alone generates the presumption of religious faith and the habit of memorialising. The practice is embedded in the past and uses a visual vocabulary that is now hard to translate. Ray acknowledges this present-day predicament—and by his treatment of these reclaimed glass fragments, twists it further into incomprehension. The outcome is a toy box of colours and designs from which to assemble a new story – not one given by others but a fresh narrative of each viewer's devising.

In Redruth, Ray mounts these cacophonous frameworks on gibbets to let the images hang out into the room. Light pours through the glass to give perspectives from rear and

front. Their installation resembles pub signs as if confirming the work's transition from hazy ecclesiastical history to the familiar, lived environment of the material world. The association can revive the complexity of medieval lifestyles: pubs once existed in monasteries and monks brewed the beer. Hostelryes provided shelter for travelling pilgrims, and to locals they were refuges of another sort, then as now, from the pressures of life.

The Japanese term *mono no aware* literally means 'the pathos of things.' The weightiness of that feeling defines the items that make up *Landslip St Wite*: a composition of mostly organic parts including a wooden frame around a rubbed and textured black and silver moonlike expanse; a wooden shelf, topped with a broken length of clay and an arrangement of objects and a pallet supporting the work's main feature, a mass of chalk, which might have been felled by the landslip of the title.

The objects of the shelf are spaced apart with intention, although what that might be is initially uncorroborated by the items themselves. This work will satisfy the fan of cryptic crosswords, who might interrogate the clay, chalk and wood for traces of landfall and the objects for evidence of veneration. The reference to St Wite is a signpost to meaning, but an obscure one as it recalls the medieval holy woman of Dorset whose tomb, one of only a few in England to survive the reformation, can still be visited today.

St Wite was believed to restore sight. On the chalk block rests a stereoscopic viewer and photograph. The double sepia print has faded. Seen through the lenses of the viewer, the image can just about be made out. The value of stereoscopic images lay in the depth of focus they offered: they enhanced sight. The eye burrows into an early record of a famous landslip on the Dorset coast in 1839. It was an event which gave way to conceptions of the earth's history contradictory to the Biblical description of the planet's creation.

Ray withdraws and suspends past meaning to objects in a tidal ebb and flow of time and memory. He allows for new journeys that project the imagination into an image of the future. Without physically stepping into one, the onlooker nevertheless might sense having entered a cell-like setting from which to view these works.

As a process, layering buries, obscures and reveals. Ray intensifies its multiple actions in the film, *At The Root*. Patterns, forms and surfaces are submerged beneath water or overlaid with new surfaces. The film extends the scrambled messaging encountered in the stained glass pieces into the unvisited dimensions of movement and sound.

Layering is taken to a higher level in the cyanotype print on paper, *Pritchard's Crypt*. Across the textured blue field are scattered a mass of line drawings superimposed one upon another in palimpsest style. Lettering jostles with leaf forms that appear tucked under symbols; there are many figures and heads and a few hands. Medieval churches are rife with deeply-engraved graffiti, so much so that a modern visitor will wonder at the anti-social tendencies of congregations in the Middle Ages.

However, the authors of these marks were not defacing the holy places with territorial markers, in the manner of today's graffiti artists. They embellished the fabric with prayers, and their actions were both accepted and acceptable. With this work, Ray has netted hidden voices from past centuries.

But what if these inscriptions are actually a premonition of the future? Impressed by the 'what-if' literature of Russell Hoban and Will Self, Ray does not neglect the possibility of a world to come that has more in common with the brutish dystopia of the Middle Ages than the relatively benign present.

The fony could not forbear from affecting a tone of great reverence and informing them that:

- Viss, yer reervús, iz ware íall Bgan 2 fouzand yeers ago, wen Dave berried ve Búk. Eer í lay til ve Kings great-great-grandad - but an umble woolly bloke on ve burbz - duggí up.

(Will Self, *The Book of Dave*, chapter 13, page 384)

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Martin Holman is a writer based in Penzance. He is a regular contributor to *Art Monthly* and the *Burlington Magazine*.

This text was written to accompany Jonathan Michael Ray's solo exhibition, *Mono No Aware*, at Auction House in Redruth, Cornwall, November 2021.