

of literary ontologies' serves to recast modern narrative in the unmistakably theological terms of building worlds, bestowing value, creating wholeness, etc. These presentations certainly kept the exploratory edge of the conversation sharp.

Dr Wolfe began the day with something of a challenge to all assembled. He related his hope that the conference would serve to chart as many possible modes for appropriation of Christian imagery as we could discern together. This approach was a welcome departure from the familiar temptation to a reductive assessment of the unmixed goodness or badness of culture. Despite the encouraging change of tone, I will admit that I was skeptical about the prospects of our task, but by the end of the day, I had collected my own growing catalogue of all the curious ways in which such appropriations present themselves in altogether unique terms. Coupled with the lively dialogue of the sessions, this fine cast of papers gave more than sufficient witness to 'religion from the outside' and its unspoken hope that despite all that these images and symbols have suffered, nonetheless they resound still.

Taylor Worley is Visiting
Associate Professor of Art History
at Wheaton College, USA

LETTER FROM VENICE

The good, the bad and the scandalous

In Venice for just a few days during the Biennale, I could only get glimpses of what is a vast panoply of exhibitions. You cannot turn two corners without coming across an art venue, a window display or a poster. As a priest staying with a priest, and invited to write for *Art and Christianity*, I focused on just a handful of exhibitions, those with Christian significance. Some were better than others.

The first priority was to visit the Holy See's pavilion, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ben Vickers, and featuring over 20 artists. There are

in fact two locations, a long way apart. The overarching theme is 'The Ear is the Eye of the Soul', inspired by and responding to the remarkable 12th-century abbess and composer, writer and saint, Hildegard of Bingen. Here I will concentrate on by far the more engaging of the two offerings, which is in a hidden garden, the 'Giardino Mistico' of the Discalced Carmelites. It is long and narrow, with beds of herbs and vines geometrically divided by gravel paths. Having found your way in down the side of the railway station – not an auspicious approach – you step out of the hubbub into an oasis of hush.

Equipped with headphones and a plan of the space, you make your way through a sequence of zones of sound. There are 16, each a subtly different 'sound-work', and all imperceptibly meshed together by Soundwalk Collective. As you move, you are unaware of the shift from one sound-work to the next, but if you take time to pause at each stage you realise you are hearing something different. There is spoken word too, at the Chapel of the Madonna at the far end of the garden: Patti Smith reading her own penetratingly powerful words about the conception of Jesus.

It is a striking commentary on the modern capacity to slow down and attend that a garden in which it should be supremely possible to do that, here functions as a visual – and olfactory – background for a wholly artificial (if very beautiful) sonic, foreground experience.

And the disjunct between the aural experience, fed through high-spec headphones, and the more diffuse, ambient experience of the space, is disconcerting. It challenges you to wonder whether we are so spaced out on our electronic media, that we cannot meditate in a mystic garden without artificial intervention.

Less inspiring was what I found in the magnificent church of San Giorgio Maggiore. This is 'The Shape of Time', 23 works – mostly sculptures – by Barry X Ball. There is a *Pietà*, a gloopy reworking of Michelangelo's *Deposition* in Florence in 'golden white Iranian onyx', as the catalogue tells us. There is *Saint Bartholomew Flayed*, the saint standing rather impassively, and rendered in 'Rouge de Roi' marble. This may be intended to suggest flayed flesh, but you only work that out once you've gone round the back and seen his outer skin hanging down.

Especially eye-catching is a homage to eleven titles of Pope John Paul II, rendered in silver and gold by an uber-smart Italian goldsmith. It is technically brilliant, in a kind of neo-baroque, shamelessly luxurious way. It reminded me of Damian Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull, and had a similar effect on me.

The whole sequence of works is like an apotheosis of fabulous materials and technical virtuosity. I was left a little queasy. I wonder what the resident Benedictine community made of it, given their vowed commitment to simplicity of life.



The Pavilion of the Holy See, 'The Ear is the Eye of the Soul', Giardino Mistico, Venice.
Photo David Levene

Thence to the little Anglican church, St George's, handily located to tempt art lovers as they walk between the Accademia and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. You step through a curtain and down into the tiny space, and find that the church has been emptied of its furniture. The two side walls are draped from top to bottom and up the length of the church with identical hangings on which ranks of little perhaps-angels float, pallid red against a dark red background. The style is photographic, or photo-realistic. But what immediately seizes your attention is the image at the east end, a floor-to-ceiling rendition of a child. Clad only in a loin-cloth, the child bears the wounds of the crucifixion: pierced side, bleeding hands. The face is turned upwards, like so many images of the crucified Christ. The exhibition is entitled *O Lamb of God*, and made by Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein.

At the foot of the main image is a glassed-over plinth, on which lies a little shrouded form, legs dangling over the edge in a childish, artless fashion. It clearly replicates the traditional combination found in so many Catholic churches, a vast painting towering over an altar under which a figure or sculpture is laid out for veneration. Here it calls to mind both the Zurbarán *Agnus Dei* currently to be seen in the fabulous exhibition at the National Gallery in London (on loan from the Prado); and the painfully beautiful early baroque sculpture, by Stefano Maderno,



Barry X Ball, *Pope Saint John Paul II, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of Saint Peter, Head of the College of Bishops, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the State of the Vatican City, Servus Servorum Dei. John Paul the Great, Karol Józef Wojtyła*, 2012–24. Photo: Francesco Allegretto / courtesy of Barry X Ball Studio.

of St Cecilia, shrouded and lying below the altar in her titular church in Rome.

I visited this several times, not least to check in on the invigilator who had been aggressively berated by an angry visitor saying it was disgraceful and blasphemous. He wrote in these terms on the cover of the visitors' comment book, saying it was in breach of the Church of England's Canon F16 (which requires exhibitions in church to be 'consonant with sound doctrine, and make for the edifying of the people').

I would want to ask the angry man, was he more scandalised by this image

than by all the ones we have of Christ on the cross, or indeed by those of lifeless children being dragged out from bombed buildings, day after day?

Some of those children and buildings were to be seen in the Palestinian pavilion, in a terrible array of a hundred equally-sized tarteez embroidered panels under the title *Gaza – no words*. The room, in a palazzo a long way from the main site, was silent.

Andrew Hammond is
Vicar of Wymondham Abbey

Called as we are

A celebration of difference in the Church of England

Called As We Are is a photographic exhibition by Ruth Samuels, which tells the stories of twelve individuals who are leaders in the Church of England and who also live with deafness, disability or neurodiversity.



To keep up to date on new venues as they are added, scan the QR code



Tour venues for Called As We Are:

York Minster
11 July to 10 August

Exeter Cathedral
12 August to 19 August

Liverpool Cathedral
14 September to 4 October

Chelmsford Cathedral
12 October to 9 November

St Albans Cathedral
10 November to 26 November

St Giles Cripplegate
London 18 January to 8 February 2027

