

Richard Lewer's Questions of Faith

By Peter Simpson

Between 2006 and 2008 a concatenation of circumstances both personal and career-related brought about recurrent attention in Richard Lewer's work to aspects of the Roman Catholic religion of his childhood and upbringing. One was a residency (February-December 2006) at St Vincent Hospital in Melbourne, a Catholic institution; another was the death in 2007 of his grandmother in Hamilton, New Zealand, which brought him back to his home town and the embrace of family for her funeral in his childhood church; a third was the Colin McCahon Residency in Titirangi, Auckland (September-November 2008), involving renewed engagement with the artist – much admired by Lewer in his student days – whose name the residency carries, and who, while not formally a Catholic, was nonetheless preoccupied throughout his career with “a question of faith”¹ and whose work is permeated with the iconography of Catholicism. This is not to say that religion had not appeared before or since as a subject for Lewer, for instance in the series *Impending Doom (God is Everywhere)* (2004) – also represented in this survey – and *Confessions* (2009)², nor that in this period it is at all an exclusive preoccupation, but the events of these years, resulting in the series *Get Well* (2006), *As I stepped out into the bright sunshine* (2007) and *The Fourteen Station of the Cross* (2008), made engaging with his childhood religion inescapable.

St Vincent's Hospital, founded in 1893 as a Catholic hospital owned and operated by the Sisters of Charity, is now a major teaching, research and tertiary referral centre situated in Fitzroy close to Melbourne's central business district. Among the works Lewer made during his residency were large portraits in graphite on white museum rag board of several of the Sisters of Charity who were the original nurses and managers of the hospital when it was founded over a century ago. Basing his drawings on black and white photographs held in the hospital archives, Lewer depicts these Catholic women as both formidable and reassuring. All are clothed in religious habits with crucifixes around their necks. *Mother Berchmans Daly*, a remarkable Irish-born organizer, initially set up St Vincent's and later oversaw the construction of a new hospital and clinical school associated with the University of Melbourne; she eventually became superior general of the Sisters of Mercy in 1920 dying in 1924. Her strength of character is clearly conveyed in Lewer's skilful portrait. She is enveloped in voluminous black robes against which her chunky white crucifix shows out vividly. The tight smile on her pale, strong-jawed, determined face is a horizontal slit like the opening of a letter box. *Mother Dorothea Devine*, by contrast, depicts an older, more comforting type wearing glasses, a smile creasing her cheeks, her piety emphasized by the crucified figure hanging round her neck, which shows up strongly against the broad expanse of her snowy white habit, echoed by another crucifix on the wall behind her. *Mother Sato Peardon*, is youthful, her slight smile in a round face

¹ Colin McCahon's *A Question of Faith* (1970, private collection, California) provided the title for a survey of his religious work first exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 2002 and later shown in Wellington, Auckland, Melbourne and Sydney, 2002-04.

² *Confessions* was shown as part of the OREXART display at the Auckland Art Fair, May 2009

lighting up her dark eyes which chime with the dark cross hanging against her white habit. Her gaze is calm, straight and confident. She would be a reassuring presence hovering over a sick child, like an angel of deliverance.

In these drawings – drawing always being a significant part of his practice – Lewer makes marvelous use of black on white or white on black contrasts, facilitated by the colours of the religious garments, the black graphite and unmarked white supports. There is nothing cynical or satirical about these portraits. Absent, for instance, is any skeptical contemporary attitude towards the church as an oppressive institution sometimes capable of abusing those in its care. They seem to preserve an awed sense of the church as authoritative, monumental, caring, truth possessing. In Lewer's own words: "the nun portraits are as integral to the narrative drawings as the sisters themselves are to the history and function of the hospital: an omniscient presence, both benevolent and forbidding".³

Also included in *Get Well* are narrative drawings of inhabitants of the contemporary hospital and the varieties of pain and suffering, physical and mental, that they are undergoing. In *Visiting hours are now over* a dark bed-ridden figure, with staring eyes, her hands stiffly clasped above a white counterpane, is surrounded by grotesques, like a weird combination of Munch and Casper the (unfriendly) ghost, an image of misery, anxiety and fear – a graphic projection of the shrinking patient in the bed. Even the bed itself takes on a nightmarish distortion and oppressiveness. In *Code Blue* the perspectives are disturbingly skewed; we seem to be looking down on scenes in a hospital ward as if from a spy hole in the ceiling. In *Good to see you back Mr Cruel*, a female patient is surrounded by agitated and ambiguous shapes and lines which convey an impression of neurasthenic intensity and discomfiture. Mr. Cruel, a hooded, bearded figure, may be as much a figment of fever and hallucination as any actual visitor. The memory of Goya haunts these powerful drawings.

A point of connection between *Get Well* and *As I stepped out into the bright sunshine* is *Nana Mills*, a portrait of Lewer's grandmother, whose death and burial brought about the family reunion that occasioned the 2007 series. Nana Mills is a kind of spiritual sister to the nuns of St Vincent's. Smiling affectionately, she is nicely dressed in her Sunday best, a bunch of white flowers pinned to her striped pink blouse. Her head and torso are enclosed in an oval reminiscent of the sort of cameo brooch she may well have worn. The circle may also suggest a kind of halo, a reflection of her piety and the love held for her by her family. A thick black border makes of the portrait an object of mourning.

In this series Lewer uses commercial hi-gloss enamel house paint on canvas. This is a difficult medium to control but its slippery indecisiveness adds both distance and emotional intensity to the presentation. In Emily Cormack's words: "The figures... seem to have been wrestled into form... with the family groupings, and narrative scenes isolated on planes of common house paint cream. [Lewer] describes

³ Richard Lewer, quoted in "It's getting better all the time", catalogue essay by Emma Bugden in *Get Well*, Oedpius Rex Gallery, Auckland, 2006

how painting these moments was an unpredictable, uncontrollable process – with the paint behaving willfully and Lewer unwilling to ebb this flow.”⁴

The series title derives from the opening lines of S.E. Hinton’s teenage novel of small-town gang violence, *The Outsiders* (1967), possibly better known to Lewer in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1983 film version which coincided with Lewer’s own teenage years and which opens with the same (slightly misquoted) line.⁵ All the outdoor scenes in Lewer’s series (as distinct from those inside the church) are bathed in bright sunshine, so that the figures all cast strong shadows; everything has a glossy patina lent by the house-paint medium. In *St Joseph’s Church, Hamilton*, an empty hearse stands waiting outside the modest suburban church with its red-brick façade waiting for the coffin. Standing around are humanoid figures representing mourners reduced to their most elemental humanity as forked pink shapes.⁶ The vestigial rendering of the figures was in part imposed upon the painter by the recalcitrance of his medium, but their reductiveness is somehow simultaneously distancing and engaging. *We lift up our hearts* is a scene inside the church overwhelmingly dominated by a statue of the risen Christ – red-robed, pink-skinned, arms outstretched, towering over the plainly decorated building and the sparse congregation huddled in the pews like pink blobs. This is no doubt the vision of Jesus held by the dead woman, whose coffin is just visible in the foreground – Christ triumphant, saviour of the world, the guarantor of eternal life. *My mother and father and sister and brother* is one of several group portraits in the series, family members brought together by the death of the matriarch, awkward in their best black clothes, standing shoulder to shoulder in front of bands of greenery and a simple black picket fence. They are more carefully differentiated by clothing and features than the pink homunculi in other pictures, though the wobbly indistinction of their features makes of them a generic family rather than anything more individualized; the rituals by which we handle death are universal and almost anonymous. In *Eternal rest grant her O Lord* the scene shifts to the graveside, offering a kind of God’s eye perspective of the coffin sitting in the centrally situated grave, the surrounding pink, bare-forked mourners casting sharp black shadows in the blinding sunlight. Only the white-and-purple robed priest is afforded the dignity and individuality lent by clothing. The rest are, as it were, stripped naked by grief.

A year later Lewer was back in New Zealand again, this time in the flash new studio perched like a tree-house within the towering rain-forest of Titirangi, contemplating the falling rain (it was an unusually wet spring) and the daunting example of the great Colin McCahon who nearby had painted some of his finest mid-career series, such as *French Bay*, *Northland Panels* and *Elias*. Lewer had always aspired to paint a Stations of the Cross, so familiar to him from childhood and renewed through his recent return. As he was well aware, the Stations became a major motif for McCahon from the mid-1960s, stimulated by commissions from Catholic churches. McCahon had largely abandoned figurative imagery by this stage, so he never painted a *Stations*

⁴ Emily Cormack, catalogue essay, *As I stepped out into the bright sunshine*, Oedipus Rex Gallery, 2007

⁵ The novel (and film) actually begin: “When I walked out...”

⁶ These figures make an interesting comparison with those of early paintings by Jeffrey Harris, another New Zealand painter with Melbourne connections.

which treated the sequence narratively.⁷ Increasingly, it was the bare numerals 1 to 14 (or, more often, I to XIV) that he highlights in *The Shining Cuckoo* (1975) or *Teaching Aids, Clouds and Rocks in the Sky* of 1975-76. Lewer, however, swerving away from McCahon in this respect, engaged directly with traditional iconography of the *Stations* in rendering the series figuratively and narratively.

As in *As I stepped out...* Lewer again uses hi-gloss enamel paint, but instead of canvas he painted his *Stations* on framed reproductions (not originals) fished from junk shops or picked up for a song at suburban auctions. These came in assorted shapes and sizes, variously framed in styles redolent of 1970s and 80s domestic interiors. Perhaps it was the element of nostalgia which rendered these pictures interesting to Lewer, though he proceeded to cover the images entirely with a ground of cream paint, leaving only the frames visible. What green-faced Oriental model, sparkling marine panorama or autumnal rustic scene lies behind particular *Stations* we will never know. It was, I suspect, the desire to re-connect with the environment of childhood – in which the *Stations* first became familiar to him through the gaudy polychrome plaster versions in St Joseph's (Fairfield) where he weekly attended mass – that accounted for the unusual choice of support.

The figures in the familiar Christian narrative are painted according to the same conventions he had adopted earlier, that is to say, pink flesh-coloured figures in drastically simplified form. Onlookers of and participants in Christ's drama coalesce into a scarcely differentiated mass. The exceptions are Jesus himself, who, as in *We lift up our hearts*, is always robed in blood-red, the same colour that streams from his crown of thorns and marks his stigmata. Mary is identified by a white sash and veil (also used for the winding sheet in *Jesus is laid in the sepulchre*), while black is used for the judges in *Jesus is Condemned to Death*, for weapons and for mysterious small architectural rectangles (spy holes?) that recur throughout. The only other colour in this simplified schema is the dark brown of the cross and crown of thorns. Except for the first and last *Stations* the cross recurs in every image, its stark geometry – varying according to whether it is carried on Christ's shoulders, lies across his fallen body or prone on the ground as he is nailed to it, or stands emphatically upright during the crucifixion itself – articulates the pictorial space and defines the role of the dramatis personae throughout all the permutations of the story.

Catholicism, these three series suggest, provides Lewer less with a system of belief than with a cast of characters, a set of rituals, a slew of memories, a conduit to the matrix of family and childhood and a visual language for registering a world of suffering, pain, violence, comfort, pity and belief. You don't need to share the faith to be moved and impressed by its sustaining efficacy for his art.

⁷ In some early examples McCahon dispersed the fourteen stations across a figuratively represented landscape, as in *The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* (1966, Auckland Art Gallery), a sequence in acrylic on paper.

Unaccommodated Man: Richard Lewer's *Stations of the Cross*

By Peter Simpson

“Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art” (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III, iv)

Dominant among the various projects Richard Lewer has undertaken during his tenure of the McCahon House Residency (September-November, 2008) is his remarkable *Stations of the Cross*, a rendition that is traditional in conforming to the sequence of fourteen specific moments in the narrative of Christ's final hours – from being condemned to death by Pilate to his entombment after the crucifixion – but idiosyncratic in its medium and mode of figuration.¹ Back home for an extended stay after more than a decade based in Melbourne, Lewer has in this ambitious and courageous work responded to two powerful imperatives: his Roman Catholic upbringing in Hamilton, on the one hand, and the example of Colin McCahon, in whose name the residency is established, on the other.

In 2007 Lewer exhibited *As I stepped out into the bright sunlight*,² a series that focussed on the death, funeral and burial of his grandmother, an event which returned him to the embrace of family and the neighbourhood church of his childhood, St Joseph's (Fairfield), with gaudily polychromatic relief plaster Stations arrayed around its walls. Some features of this series anticipate the *Stations* – in particular, the use of commercial enamel paints and the presentation of the mourners as anonymously nude pink homunculi, emphasising their common humanity and emotional vulnerability. In *Hearts*, a pink-fleshed, long-haired, bearded, crimson-robed statue of Jesus, arms outstretched, prefigures the central figure of *Stations*.

As for McCahon: working in the cantilevered studio of the McCahon Residency, thrust into the Titirangi bush like a glorified tree house, inevitably brought Lewer into daily confrontation with the painter to whom he had paid more attention than any other in his student days,³ and who had spent seven years (1953-59) working in this precise environment. McCahon, too, became obsessed with the Stations of the Cross, especially after 1965 when he had immersed himself in the study of Catholic iconography to paint the windows of the Convent Chapel for the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, in Upland Road, Remuera. Though McCahon never painted a figurative Stations (unless we include the landscapes of his 1966 *Stations*⁴), the numbers one to fourteen remained an important structuring device through many later series such as *Beach Walk*, *Clouds* and *Teaching Aids*.

The most direct connection between Lewer's *Stations* and McCahon is his use of the same commercial enamel paint (in Lewer's case Dulux Hi-Gloss) as McCahon used for his *Elias* series painted in 1959 in his garage-studio just along the road from where Lewer has been working. This slippery, unpredictable medium governs to a considerable extent Lewer's figurative style. It precludes fine detail and is hard to control, so that the figures (poor, bare forked animals indeed) have a wavering, tentative, urgently inchoate pathos that is intensely moving. As supports Lewer has used commercial reproductions of paintings (never originals) picked up in junk shops, many no doubt dating from his childhood in the 1970s. Lewer has retained their variable retro frames, and their non-standardised shapes and sizes, but has

entirely painted out the original pictures with an all-over coat of Dulux “Ivory” as ground for his figure studies. For the figures he has confined himself to a small range of colours which recurs from station to station. Pink for bodies, white for veils, sashes and Veronica’s cloth, brown for the Jesus’ cross and crown of thorns, crimson for his robe and the blood of his wounds, black for weapons (clubs, axes, lassoes) and the garments of his judges, and black also for the mysterious rectangular shapes let into the background like so many witnessing eyes. This tightly limited colour scheme imposes an impressive unity on the sequence.

All the figures are group studies. Jesus is never seen alone but always surrounded by others, whether tormentors or protectors. There are never fewer than four, never more than six figures. Jesus is always identifiable by his robe, cross and crown of thorns, or (when naked) by the crimson gouts of his stigmata. Mary, too, is recognisable by her white sash or veil. Otherwise the figures tend to coalesce into a barely distinguishable pink lump, as if to suggest the collective nature of the crime being committed or the grief with which it is surrounded. The harsh geometry of the cross, whether upright, prone, or leaning diagonally according to circumstance, and present in all but the first and last of the stations, serves to articulate formally the dramatic situation (Jesus receives the cross, falls – three times – meets his mother, and the women of Jerusalem, is stripped, nailed to the cross, dies on the cross, is taken down etc. etc.) that unfolds so awesomely and affectingly in this impressive rendering.⁵

¹ It was in 1731 that Pope Clement XII in 1731 definitively fixed the number of stations as fourteen. Prior to that both the number of stations and the events which constituted them varied widely.

² Oedipus Rex Gallery, 2007

³ Richard Lewer, in conversation with Peter Simpson, October 2008

⁴ Colin McCahon, *The fourteen Stations of the Cross*, 1966, acrylic on paper, Auckland Art Gallery

⁵ The titles of the Stations as used by Lewer is as follows: 1. Jesus is condemned to death; 2. Jesus receives the cross; 3. Jesus falls for the first time; 4. Jesus is met by his blessed mother; 5. The cross is laid upon Simon of Cyrene; 6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus; 7. Jesus falls the second time; 8. The woman of Jerusalem mourn of our Lord; 9. Jesus falls for the third time; 10. Jesus is stripped of his garments; 11. Jesus is nailed to the cross; 12. Jesus dies on the cross; 13. Jesus is taken down from the cross; 14. Jesus is laid in the sepulchre.