

The Edge of Logic

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A lot of the Biblical book of *Revelation* has gone into Irene Barberis and a lot has come out again.

It has inflected her aesthetic and philosophical life for nearly thirty years and since the mid 1980s she has repeatedly visualised its images and structure in her own practice. In the 1990s she studied representations of the Apocalypse “from the year dot”¹ in seventeen cities in five countries, wrote a doctoral thesis on *Abstract and Figurative Elements of the Apocalypse and its Representations*² and in 2000 Macmillan Art Publishing published a book, *Revelation Apocalypse*, about her work. She has translated *Revelation*’s words and startling figures into both imaginative and abstract images and objects and transcribed its words over and over on various surfaces using paint, chalk, ink, wood, textiles, silicone, acrylic, pvc and light.

But to read evidence of the artist’s Christian beliefs in her work as a form of crude religious proselytising makes no more sense than saying Emily Kngwarreye was trying to convince the viewers of her paintings to like yams or Jeffrey Smart to sell his viewers on freeways.

This exhibition brings together that preoccupation with Barberis’s physicality as an artist, her love for declarative high chroma colour, her practice of using smaller parts to build larger works, her engagement with the everyday and with artistic processes connecting the handmade to the industrially fabricated and the literal and figurative to the abstract and architectural; her interest in the edge, her attraction to the big.

“I found that I could never really make a middle-sized work. I either had to make small works or really large, and the idea of components . . . reflects on my entire childhood of studying a language [during 16 years of classical ballet] where one step moved into another step into another step into another step and every step had a different idea behind it.” The steps were not just mechanical movements but elements loaded with history and “when you melded the steps together it had to have a form of logic.”

Barberis brought this mental structure into painting, from the beginning, building large works out of small elements. As a student in the late 1970s she won a prize allowing her to paint a billboard for the City Square. “It was about 18 feet long and eleven feet high. It was huge. I remember thinking I’m just going to paint it as a story but not knowing where the story goes, starting from a point which was a cup and then allowing it to grow through colour [and] space – basically me travelling. I didn’t construct it to start off with but I knew what the process of construction was – I guess a little bit like moving through a set of algorithms or a set of movements, but not restricted to an absolute

classic language; so in a sense it's like contemporary dance now . . . I couldn't do it through a logic to do with the hand, I had to do it and deal with it through a movement of the whole body so the body was still moving through space."

Since the 1970s Barberis has also worked with cut-outs, cut edges and smaller parts assembled into bigger pieces. Outdoing herself for this exhibition, she has made a multi-coloured 12,552- piece acrylic laser cut-out assemblage put together with 12,552 imported pins stretching 18 metres along the longest wall in the gallery. *Cut it out! It's a wonderful world: Resurrection in Melbourne (after Stanley Spencer)* refers to Spencer's 18 foot long figurative oil painting *The Resurrection in Cookham Churchyard* painted between 1924 and 1926 in the English village where he lived most of his life.

Spencer's biographer, Kenneth Pople, called *Cookham Churchyard*, one of the greatest of twentieth century English paintings. "It offers so many levels of meaning that it can be considered a poem in paint. If it seems odd to speak of a painting as a poem, the parallel is justified in that both can source from comparable emotions."³

Pople says that the painting's first appearance as a "formless cluster of odd figures rising haphazardly from their graves" is misleading. The figures are in fact not the dead rising, but Stanley's living friends – "they are his 'loves'. They are helping him 'resurrect' into a new world of enlightenment he is exploring within himself."

Spencer himself told the BBC that "Everything has a sort of double meaning for me, there's the ordinary everyday meaning of things, and the imaginary meaning about it all, and I wanted to bring these things together"

Barberis's riff on Spencer, through her own *Resurrection*, is at least three times the size of his and is greatly abstracted from its beginning as drawings, converted through CAD into a pattern for the laser cutters. "It's a giant work," she says. I've blown the everyday up or I've multiplied it so that you can't get away from it. In a sense – and I haven't seen it set up (the big risk – I think art is about risk!) – it's like a fantastic beautiful idea, but at the same time it's so large you can't get away from it."

On the other hand, Barberis used a Gideon *New Testament* the size of a pack of cards to transcribe the text of *Revelation* into *Slow Release* and onto *Writings on the Wall*, choosing that volume simply because it was light and fitted easily into the hand that wasn't drawing. "I really enjoy the process of having such a tiny little book and then standing in front of either a huge wall or a big canvas . . . focusing deeply into the text and then drawing/writing. Because it's so big . . . your whole body's drawing. "

Writings on the Wall is "an important piece to me", she says, for its almost monastic discipline as well as "the performative element of writing in spaces".

Although she made that work following the traditional steps taken in producing certain illuminated manuscripts on pages "densely saturated with a dark bluey purple" Barberis's construction of the work was more industrial than monastic.

She wrote with a chalk - marker along lines struck with a builder's chalk line onto blue canvas the size of church doors, into which she'd rubbed red pigment from a paint factory "to give it a bit more depth".

"The heart of this exhibition is *Revelation* [but] I haven't presented a hot, dramatic, figurative vision of *Revelation* which is what most people who have worked with *Revelation*, such as Dürer, John Martin [*The Great Day of His Wrath*] even Peter Booth have done – hot and destructive. The ways in which the Apocalypse is generally understood and looked at, are horrific. I wanted to find another way."

It's worth noting that the alternative name of the last book of the Christian *Bible* is a word simply meaning the unveiling or revelation (of Jesus Christ) in its original Greek but, in English, *Apocalypse* has acquired a primary definition of terminal catastrophe. In this case it refers to God's last judgement, the end of this world and the end of time symbolically prophesied; though apocalypse is now colloquially used for any real or imagined disaster in which anger, hatred or indifference to the fate of others plays a part.

"Because all the disaster perspectives are focusing on the end, I wanted to focus on the fact that that book describes another beginning. It describes something beyond the end of what we know."

"I also wanted to have a female point of view in the way I was presenting work from the Apocalypse . . . My work is female work. It's come from female sensibilities."

For Barberis this means herself being a powerful agent, and expressing on a large scale what she identifies as female qualities – laterality, multiple simultaneous connections to the world. "So what I've hoped to do with my work, however long I've been practicing, is to keep it open-ended, to keep the ideas moving. I haven't funnelled it into a product or into one line of engagement. . . I'm hoping that by the time I get to my end, I'll have maybe four or five lineages of work that have real depth in them as well as serious laterality. I feel I haven't been moved by fashions nor shifted from the ground I started with. The manifestations of those multiple lines of thinking will hopefully be so fully 'present' and have such resonance in my area of articulating the Apocalypse – that this will be, and is my female statement."

Barberis has described the Apocalypse as "a Biblical terminus" with a contemporary application – an end and a beginning and, where they meet or separate, an edge.

"If you were going to talk about God anywhere in an art work, it would be seen most clearly for me on the edge. The continuum of the edge in my work has always been a deregistered highly coloured space, where one transited from an object, a tangible thing, into air or into space, and now for me the edge is the edge of logic, the edge of knowledge . . . a philosophical edge."

For her this exhibition is a reflection; stock taking. "I'm re-looking at work and lineages of work that have been in my practice for a long time, to just see how the thinking's changed, and what new dialogues are taking place between the

works.”

It includes, older work but also digitally treated details of the Angers Tapestry, a massive 90 panel medieval depiction of Revelation, presented in day-glo colours as if rock posters, samples from a tapestry woven in filament lights at the Australian Tapestry workshop and a massive pink inflated ‘book, transparent but closed’, in the shape of a cross, *Slow Release*.

Six by five metres, filled with pumped air and the artist’s breath, *Slow Release*, was industrially welded from sheets of a fluorescent polyvinyl chloride. It glows orange along the edges distressed by cutting and, locked inaccessibly inside this monumental pillow, handwritten in white along the sides, is the whole of *Revelation*.

“*Slow Release* is about the architecture of the word and what the actual book is, because the book seems like it is almost incomprehensible but as you move through it you realise that the architecture of the book is incredibly solid, that every word and sentence is referenced somewhere else in the Bible. The Revelation text moves from something that is seemingly illogical, intangible, into a type of order, something logical and tangible, almost like a substance,.

“Where do visions happen? Perhaps it’s that space I feel at the edge of logic, where you move into the unknown ... that is what interests me, because for me that actually reflects faith.”

¹ All quotations from the artist, unless otherwise specified, are from an interview with the author in September 2012.

² 2001, Victoria University, Melbourne.

³ <http://www.ikpople.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/cookres.htm>