

# EMBODYING FAITH

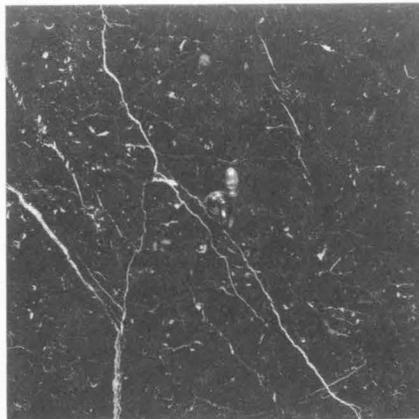
WorkSpace The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York  
May 11 - August 18, 1991

CHRISTINE DAVIS  
CHRISTOPHER DOYLE  
CRISTINA EMMANUEL  
ANGEL SUAREZ-ROSADO  
JON TOWER

*What is divinity if it can come  
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?  
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
Things to be cherished like the thoughts of heaven?*  
Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning"



Christine Davis, *Passion (#6)*, 1988, mixed media. Courtesy the S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Peter MacCallum.



Cristina Emmanuel, *Desde temprana edad*, 1990, mixed media. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



A query, punctuated by first one, then another question mark, is posed by Stevens in a poem concerning our thoughts of heaven. How far they seem from the lush and lazy comforts of the sun. In the poem, one question mark, then another, leave a trail of uncertainties. *Embodying Faith* traces the dualities so construed, posing, on the one hand, the immaterial as formulated by the language and traditions of spirituality and, on the other, the material in the guise of the physical body. The exhibition examines seemingly oppositional terms—body and faith, matter and spirit, form and formlessness—and considers their conflicts, contestations, and reconciliations. As with Stevens, a central question emerges: How is (it possible) that which is regarded as impalpable or immutable, such as faith or divinity, expressed in relationship to and through the corporeal? How is the invisible made visible to the senses?

Organized religion, with its intricate rites and codes, provides the fulcrum around which these issues are explored. The doctrines and iconography of Christianity, in particular, govern and define the precinct within which the five artists presented here work. For Christine Davis, Christopher Doyle, and Jon Tower, it is a monolithic notion of Christianity, broadly based on the Bible and its visual metaphors, which informs their art. Whereas for Cristina Emmanuel and Angel Suarez-Rosado, it is a syncretic form of Catholicism hybridized with other belief systems of their native Puerto Rico, which shapes their outlook. The link to Christianity, because of the potency of its views concerning the body, allows for a focused investigation, yet at the same time necessarily dictates a somewhat narrow approach. Certainly, if other religions and other concepts of spirituality were to enter into this dialogue, the exhibition would follow quite a different script. Inherent in the Christian framework is a dualistic propensity, which determines how the

very terms “spirituality” or “physicality” are conceptualized and employed. It might be more appropriate, then, to consider this exhibition project as a kind of case study.

It is ironic but also apt to be writing this essay on Easter Sunday, the day on which, according to the Bible, Christ was resurrected. From bodily torment and pain to miraculous recovery and wonderment, the passage leading from Christ’s crucifixion to his resurrection comprises a narrative of extraordinary pathos and symbolic power. Arrested by those who opposed his teachings, Christ is crucified and endures intense physical suffering, the ordeal referred to (ironic for those unversed in the Bible and attuned only to the language of *eros*) as “Christ’s Passion.” Through it, he dies and is buried, but two days later, rises from the dead, restoring the faith of his disciples and holding forth the promise of human salvation on the Day of Judgment, when all the pious will be resurrected. Distilling the essential tenets of Christianity, this account maps a hierarchy of values.

The schema seems simple. The story of the resurrection assures us that the soul’s redemption will be the ultimate reward at the end of earthly existence. The soul triumphs over the body, its temporary, corruptible, and denigrated physical vessel. Although this reading prevails, it is not without contradictions or controversies. As some scholars have argued, certain Christian traditions have also granted an abiding place to the body by stressing that the soul must assume integrated physical form in order to be resurrected, that material continuity is integral to human identity.<sup>1</sup> Christianity can encompass both the stringent practices of asceticism and the ecstatic language of mystical experience. The status of the body in Christianity seems, in fact, highly ambivalent, as it has been given varying emphases and interpretations throughout the history of the Church. This ambiguity makes the meaning of Christ’s life, crucifixion, and resurrection all the more enigmatic, for “it is by obliterating himself as a human creature that God has some chance of making himself seen. To obliterate himself is to incarnate himself, to become a body, a real individual,

with his feet and hands pierced, his side opened by the lance, a dead body, immobile and immobilized.”<sup>2</sup> Substantiation and obliteration, figuration and disfiguration, negation and affirmation—the body is continually expressed and made significant through a double movement, opposed yet inextricably bound.

Christopher Doyle’s project *The Production of Relics* brings the symbols of Christian belief vividly and literally to life and, in turn, sets the disintegration of those very symbols and their ideological framework into motion. Two boxes, the size and shape of caskets, conceal microscopic theaters of experience. A living plant, *euphorbia millii*, flourishes in one box; the plant is known colloquially as Crown of Thorns, which recalls the prickly wreath donned by Christ during his crucifixion. The other box harbors the carcasses of doves and snakes—resonant symbols of the divine spirit and the Fall from Eden in Christian iconography. The animal remains undergo disintegration through the course of the installation, their flesh eaten to the bone by a colony of ravenous beetles. Doyle’s work is a stark and startling reversal. Traditional reliquaries, containing the body parts of saints or their belongings, were objects of deep veneration and decorated with precious materials such as gold and gems to emphasize the permanence and incorruptibility of their sacred contents.<sup>3</sup> Doyle’s version inverts the process of sacralization and symbolization, reinserting hallow icons back into the cycle of birth, decay, and death from which they were lifted. Through inversion, Doyle exposes the gap usually imposed between biology and theology and points to a suppressive drive to control and distance the natural world.

The disjunction implied by Doyle’s installation is dislodged and dissolved in Cristina Emmanuel’s work, in which the body appears subject simultaneously to fragmentation and restoration. Talismans in the form of metallic limbs, which are frequently offered in Hispanic cultures as a call to divine healing, are incorporated in Emmanuel’s work, evoking physical vulnerability but also the possibility of cure. Just as the amulets mediate between

heavenly powers and earthly concerns, Emmanuel’s work straddles and unites these realms. Its conciliatory impetus brings together the traditions of Roman Catholicism and the African and pre-Hispanic religions of the Afro-Caribbean area as well. Her collage drawing *Madre Dolorosa/Erzulie* is based on a “double” figure: the compassionate Virgin Mary who has a counterpart in Spiritism in Erzulie, the goddess of love and abundance.<sup>4</sup> The echo image of Madre Dolorosa/Erzulie, her heart pierced by an arrow, is further reverberated in one corner of the drawing by the likeness of a woman, her hair flowing about a lovely face, her heart emblazoned. “The Dolorosa’s suffering is a transformation, an opening of the heartspace,” writes the artist.<sup>5</sup> Encircled by lacy heart motifs, Emmanuel’s work opens a space for the dialogue between devotion and desire, spiritual faith and physical healing, cultural tradition and personal memory, all filtered through an iconography of the feminine.

Doyle’s and Emmanuel’s work crisscrosses in a series of counterpoints. In their portrayal of corporeal experience, for instance, emphasis falls on opposing states. In Doyle’s installation, the raw and rotting carcasses, irrefutable facts of decay and death, challenge Christianity’s tendency to sublimate questions of mortality in a rhetoric of the divine. Although Emmanuel acknowledges the body’s fallibility, she also offers the hope of remedy. With that faith comes a sense of integrated physical and psychic well-being. In one, the body is framed in terms of pain and limitation and, in the other, in an embrace of pleasure and fulfillment.

Doyle’s and Emmanuel’s work also intersects in their preoccupation with a kind of material object—the relic and the talisman—both of which may be described as exhibiting the characteristics of a fetish. As defined by the anthropologist William Pietz, the fetish, among other attributes, is a thing of “irreducible materiality,” “that embodies socially significant values,” and is “established



Jon Tower, preparatory drawing for *Nativity (After Giotto)*, 1991, acrylic on wall. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Christopher Doyle, *Reliquary (for the head of St. John the Baptist)*, detail, 1990, installation at Art in the Anchorage, Creative Time, Brooklyn, NY. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Angel Suarez-Rosado, "Room III" from *315 Holy House*, 1980-present, mixed media installation. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived as inseparable from their bodies.<sup>76</sup> The relic has at times been vested with tangible curative forces, just as the talisman has been presumed to ward off evil and heal the sick. In matters of belief, however, the two artists' attitudes diverge. Doyle's work demystifies and defetishizes the material object, revealing its link with the transcendent to be symptomatic of Christianity's tendency to obscure biological realities. In contrast, Emmanuel remains open to the object's powerful mediating and "fetishistic" possibilities—to a kind of "material space," as Pietz writes, that gathers "an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity."<sup>77</sup>

The material object is transposed to another plane, to that of the two-dimensional image, in the works of Jon Tower, Angel Suarez-Rosado, and Christine Davis. For Jon Tower, Giotto's spectacular cycle of frescoes at the Arena Chapel in Padua, which chronicles a master narrative from the life of the Virgin through Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, has provided the blueprint for a series of "recycles." Taking individual fresco scenes from the Chapel as a de/generative structure, Tower extracts the haloes marking divinity. Discs of gold, dislocated and unanchored by the weight of the figure, are the only traces left on the wall. At once flat and flotational, they hover. Still, the size and position of the haloes are potent mnemonic devices, recalling the pre-existence of a once unitary composition, as in Giotto, where the single figure is "dictated by the will of a larger economy, while the total action reflects an ideal order."<sup>78</sup> Tower's work for this exhibition is all the more ironic, for *Nativity (After Giotto)* is based on the scene in which Christ is born into the world, assuming human form. If the halo was once a sign of absolute truth and of unequivocal differentiation separating angel from human, eternal from temporal, in Tower's work it becomes a fragmented circle, an empty cipher. The golden discs break open and away from a theological closure. Yet

their placement on the wall also acts as a series of physical markers, as if intimating our projection into a new, transformative space. Presence, once defined by a burgeoning Western perspectivalism, is alluded to, critiqued, and refigured through absence.

An alternative visual order informs the infrastructure of Angel Suarez-Rosado's work. Since 1980, Suarez-Rosado has been creating environments, sculptures, and related performances that are associated with the syncretic ideas of Spiritism, of which he is an ardent practitioner. In an ongoing project, *315 Holy House*, Suarez-Rosado has sought to create the sacred temple of Spiritism through an assemblage of natural, found, and fabricated objects within a configuration of three rooms at his own "home-house." "Room III" of *315 Holy House* is the site of the *mesa blanca*—white table—the altar around which all lectures, healings, and ceremonies are conducted. On the *mesa blanca*, symbolic objects, including a white bowl, which signifies an empty container to be filled with spirits, are profusely arrayed. Chromolithographs of saints, gathered by Suarez-Rosado in his travels, are hung row upon row as a kaleidoscopic backdrop to the *mesa blanca*. Known as *estampas de santos*, these popular prints are staples of the home altar in Latin America and an integral element of rituals aligned with agricultural cycles, affirming the synchronization between heavenly and terrestrial rhythms.

As an iconographic and ethnographic collection assembled from diverse religions and cults, the prints document a cross-fertilization of beliefs and demonstrate Suarez-Rosado's syncretic approach. Arranged in families of related images to show how Catholic saints are variously reinterpreted and merged with deities from other faiths, the prints present a kind of cosmic diagram radiating colors, forms, and significances, densely layered around the symbols of the *mesa blanca*. In Suarez-Rosado's work, the material object is linked to a resonant material practice and a unifocal perspective gives way to a richly multifocal vision through a surfeit of images, with "meaning[s] emanating from their accretion, arrangement, and display."<sup>79</sup>

Tower's perspectival allusion and Suarez-Rosado's multilinear structure contrast, in another visual mode, with the sense of optical dispersal of Christine Davis' work, which combines photography with installation formats to indicate the shifting framework of our viewing positions. From the wide angle, through the foreground, to the zoom, the camera traverses the field of vision and then settles to impose its viewpoints. In Davis' work, this monocular tendency is raised and then shattered. *Passion (#4)* and *Passion (#6)*, two diptyches from a larger installation project, pair black-and-white images of sculptures with marble panels embedded with objects. The sculptures are by Bernini—a group of angels of luxuriant Baroque modeling who hold the instruments of Christ's Passion: crown of thorns, whip, pillar, nails.... The objects implanted in the marble slabs come from the modern world of communications—a microchip, a compass—that strive to transmit the truth, and from the everyday—a coathook, a keyhole—that symbolize the stance and gravity of the body. Each of the eight diptyches by Davis pictures a different angel from alternating and competing vantages. Just as the Bible spiritualized Christ's physical ordeal and thus diminished the question of the palpable body, Bernini eliminated Christ from his sculptural grouping. In a parallel movement, Davis scatters the narrative through shifting glimpses that circumnavigate the central paradox of the body as epitomized by the Passion story. "The Passion as such is not only a theme...[of] Biblical exegesis," writes the artist, "but the object of a method, a particular need for spectacle and visual proof."<sup>10</sup> In another photographic diptych, *Les Cent Vingt Jours*, Davis alludes to the 120 days of Sodom, a period of debauched abandon that resulted in decimating punishment by God. The work splits our point of view. In one part of the diptych, we follow the gaze of a man who looks up the skirt of a woman standing on his shoulder, attesting to fleshly weight and temptation.

In the other, the eye drops to focus on a pair of feet standing on an open book, contrasting *logos* and *corpus*. Our gaze flickers up and down and across the divide of the two images, polarized, and finally left adrift in the gap between the embodied and disembodied, between image and reality, visibility and invisibility.

Five artists, five bodies, and an array of strategies—*Embodying Faith* surveys the material terrains and the visual horizons where the immaterial and the invisible are potentially realized. For some, the question of faith is not so much (or no longer just) one of belief in transcendental values, but of belief in the adequacy of art to respond to such impulses and concerns, whether or not they may be true. In a development perhaps parallel to Christianity's ambiguous attitude towards the body, the material practice of art-making has itself become fraught with ambivalences. It is regarded as a fragmentary, rather than comprehensive, gesture. For others, however, faith remains firm and its embodiment a matter of choosing the fullest means available. It is striking that, in comparison with other artists who have adopted a more distanced and critical stance, religious meaning remains fervid and genuine for Emmanuel and Suarez-Rosado. Perhaps it is because, as Victor Zalmudio-Taylor suggests, for those of Latino identity who have suffered a profound violation of their cultures, "it is the battered body and the mutilated corpus of a shared tradition where difference and specificity as well as resistance and change has and is to be grounded."<sup>11</sup>

But to return to the larger question with which this essay began. Is the attempt to visualize the invisible a contradiction or a folly? Is the embodiment of faith an impossibility? Or, as Maurice Blanchot suggests, do the terms shift every time we pose the question? *[W]hat speaks in the name of the image "sometimes" still speaks of the world, "sometimes" introduces us into the indeterminate region of fascination, "sometimes" gives us the power to use things in their absence and through fiction... "sometimes" makes us slip*

*into the place where...the image is the moment of passivity, having no value.... Nevertheless, what we distinguish by saying "sometimes, sometimes" ambiguity says by saying always, to a certain extent....*<sup>12</sup>

What speaks in the name of faith "sometimes" still speaks of the divine world, "sometimes" introduces us into a nether region, "sometimes" gives us the power to use things through their lack, "sometimes" makes us slip into a place of non-faith. Nevertheless....

Alice Yang, *Assistant Curator*

1. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts," *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 139-97.
  2. Louis Marin, "The Body-of-Power and Incarnation at Port Royal and in Pascal or Of the Figurability of the Political Absolute," *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, vol. III, ed. M. Feher et al. (1989), p. 422.
  3. See Bynum, "Material Continuity," pp. 274, 295.
  4. Blending Catholic, pre-Hispanic and Yoruba beliefs, Spiritism was developed and brought to Puerto Rico in the mid-nineteenth century by the French occultist and mystic adept, Allan Kardec, who promoted the central tenets of charity and justice.
  5. Artist's statement, *Ceremony of Memory*, organized by Amalia Mesa-Bains, Ph.D. (Santa Fe: Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, 1988), p. 30.
  6. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I" *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): p. 5-17. The fetish is considered strictly in its anthropological sense here. Although psychoanalytic and Marxist readings of the fetish, as elaborated by many contemporary critics, may be interesting to examine in this context, they are beyond the scope of this essay.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
  8. Richard Offner, "Giotto, Non-Giotto," *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes*, ed. James Stubblebine (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 139.
  9. *Ceremony of Memory*, p. 46.
  10. Christine Davis, artist's unpublished working notes.
  11. Victor Zalmudio-Taylor, "Contemporary Commentary," *Ceremony of Memory*, p. 16.
  12. Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary," *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (Barryton, New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 88-89.
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