

KINGS, POPES & OTHER FOOLS

Nic Plowman - Kings, Popes & Other Fools

Jacqueline Houghton, 2014

"A fool doth think he is wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool."

As You Like It, William Shakespeare

Enthroned popes and kings represent the embodiments of absolute authority and power. Only the court jesters of old had a 'license' to be at variance without fear of punishment, provided that the contrariness was couched in humorous satire. Traditionally, the fool as prankster is utterly spontaneous and natural, lacking any trace of affectation as he sets out on a journey towards wisdom. Nic Plowman describes his new body of work as being about "a dissection of images and ideologies, a fossicking for meaning and truth, a searching for a moment when the work while teetering, falls into success."

"After working with watercolours on paper for my previous show, I wanted to change my method and mark making, to throw a spanner in the works, push the images and put them at risk. If my last body of work was a meditation, then this show has been an argument. Ultimately, I needed to make some heavier work, both in subject matter and in the mediums and techniques used. I had always been fascinated by icons and the great religious works of art, as well as royal portraiture. Their strong narratives and use of symbols intrigued me. I wanted to make a 'religious' painting. But how do you make a religious work when one's inherited beliefs no longer measure up and your experiences with death hold no great 'other' knowledge?"

Plowman's introspective musings were tempered by the rationalist philosophies of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Aided by a collection of images; "some appropriations of old paintings and religious works, Catholic prayer cards and wildlife photography", he began his weighty task. Although Plowman tells of his desire to get back into acrylics and oils again - "thick meaty paint for thick meaty subjects" - the new works also demonstrate the fine drawing skills that underpin his practice. Copious amounts of gold leaf have been applied to the canvas icon-like, gold being variously symbolic of purity, incorruptibility, divinity, royalty, wealth and human achievement.

In the painting *Pope II: A Little Bird Told Me*, an aged Pope Gregory I sits hunched, engrossed in his rendering of a bird study. Incongruously, it is an Australian lyrebird, ground-dwelling and notable for its ability to mimic the sounds from its environment. A white dove looks on circumspectly, its head cocked to one side and wings outstretched as if about to take flight. The silhouetted face that frames the pope's head denotes Plowman the artist and the "shadow of doubt, the darkness of free thought." Looming in a black arc over both, a gold-haloed chimpanzee appears interested in a mute kind of way, its overt tactility contrasting with the scenario's essential quietude. "I have used the chimpanzee in the past because for me it represents us in our primal state," says Plowman. "The chimpanzee is like the Shakespearian fool to me, appearing to have an all-seeing level of wisdom in his ignorance of our grand schemes. The genetic difference between humans and chimps is less than two percent and that two percent is the cause of music and art but also of war and destruction; of all the beauty in the world and all the ugliness too. In this two percent is our need for reason and our ability to believe in the unreasonable."