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Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva *Transpire* 2011
Photo: Sheona Beaumont

Commissioning

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and Michael Pinsky

*St Bede's Catholic College &
St Bernadette's Catholic Secondary School*

Bristol City Council has recently commissioned two contemporary art works for St Bede's Catholic College and St Bernadette's Catholic Secondary School. Respectively, *Transpire* by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and *Intersection* by Michael Pinsky (both 2011), have transformed two public spaces where the footfall of staff and students enact the threading and crossing of ideas that created these pieces. From the outset, these art works were created alongside major building projects for the schools, as part of the Building Schools for the Future programme – indeed, they were a conditional part of these projects. As such, the integrated nature of the results speaks for the depth of encounter and consideration given to the commissions.

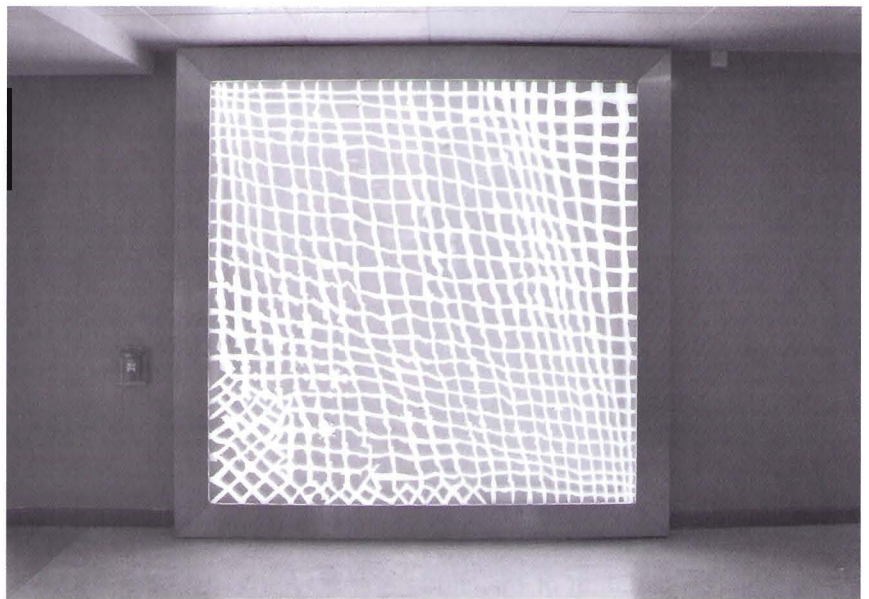
Hadzi-Vasileva's piece, *Transpire*, is an installation of winding, stretching tree branches/roots which spill across the stairwell linking St Bede's art and technology faculties. Traditionally-applied stucco and gold-leaf form a tracery along the walls and ceiling, with etched detail continuing the pattern across two windows. The windows, in fact, seem to be the site of the source of this spreading energy: a site of in-between, where the idea of the liminal space offers a particular resonance for the concepts of the work. The artist has identified the piece as representing 'a search for something deep within us', where 'what lies beneath reflects above' (the subtitle for the work); the Vice Principal Patrick McDermott has reflected on the course of knowledge passing from inside to outside and vice-versa.

What could remain as something of a Gnostic homage becomes richer for the setting of the school itself as a place of faith – it is as a tree of life, with its organic, tangled lattice and gleaming veins of flowing sap that the work is enlivened. Here is the acknowledged reference to St Bede's interest in the natural world and to the biblical idea of a tree (or vine) that represents lineage and rootedness in God. Here too is the reference in the materials used to the highly decorated interior facades of Byzantine churches, where precious-

ness (both in the care taken and in the monetary value) is a fitting acknowledgement of the sacred.

In this regard, it is revealing that the commissions were organised by Art and Sacred Places, who seek to connect artists and their work with places of worship or similar sites. The commissioning process necessarily entails interaction and discussion as to the matching of ideas, faiths and hopes. For both schools, this was a lengthy process, taking several months alongside the inevitable questions about material suitability and safety. It might be a pertinent question to ask how successfully the sacred emerges from such conversations, there being a danger perhaps of dilution-by-democracy. Happily, it is to the credit of the contributing decision-makers that here the resulting art works embody something of a map of faith.

With Michael Pinsky's work *Intersection*, this seems both the implied and the literal result of the commission. A pulsating, illuminated grid appears to glow at one end of the main school passageway, alternating between a negative and positive image. It is a composite image featuring the digitally-transcribed hand-drawn crosses of all 750 pupils at the school, whose individual post-it-sized drawings have been incorporated into one larger pattern. Formed from glass layers within a steel frame, the LEDs which contour the pattern create the rhythm of a light-house's sweeping beam – a rhythm markedly different from the school bell – where the measure of place and situation is slowed and deepened.



Intersection works by opening up routes for the sacred. It makes sense both of an individual's singular description of a cross, and of the interconnectedness which such descriptions suggest for a whole community. It is also a sign for a literal journey of faith through secondary education. More than the simple use of an abstracted symbol, it prompts the static form to become spiritually meaningful in its (and because of its) context. Like Hadzi-Vasileva's work, it brings dynamism to the appropriation of religious symbol, neither sealing it tightly with doctrinal declaration nor allowing it to disintegrate in irony, cynicism or pluralism.

Perhaps this is a strength of the particularly conceptual approach of both artists. In numerous successful exhibitions, internationally as well as locally, both Pinsky and Hadzi-Vasileva have produced work which facilitates other people's worldviews – from the green cross understood to signify religious divide in Mas d'azil, France to the tree as representative of our living systems in the New Forest. In the schools, to the surprise of the management groups, concepts can and have become the malleable carriers of meaning through a style of art that is not readily celebrated by such institutions. While this may still seem to be a 'strange place of religion in contemporary art', it nevertheless champions the sacred in deeper and richer forms.

Sheona Beaumont is an artist based in Bristol and a regional associate of ACE



Left: Michael Pinsky *Intersection* 2011

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva *Transpire* 2011

Censing Angel

Norwich Cathedral

One of the most remarkable of the treasures of Norwich Cathedral is the set of 250 carved and painted nave roof bosses that tell the Biblical story from the creation to the last judgment – a ‘Sistine ceiling’ in medieval gothic dress. Despite their exquisite workmanship and lively detail, they were unlikely to be intended as a *Biblia pauperum*; they are just too difficult to see with the unaided eye. Instead their function was more sacramental than practical: to enfold the whole space and those in it within the embrace and power of the sacred story, past, present, and future.

In the very centre of this collection of bosses, however, is a deliberate void, a circular boss with a hole in the middle. From this was originally hung at great feasts the figure of a ‘censing angel’. We know nothing about its appearance save that the accounts of the cathedral

priory in the late fifteenth century include annual expenditure for renewing the silver leaf with which the angel was decorated. The figure must somehow have combined the figure of an angel with the censing function of the great *botafumeiro* at Santiago de Compostela. Symbolically the angel linked the sacred story in the roof with the life of the contemporary church.

Intrigued and tantalised by the void in the vault and where the angel swung and inspired by the enduring of legacy of Norfolk angels in wood, stone and paint, Canon Phillip McFadyen and I were determined to recreate the angel for the 21st Century. We worked with willow sculptor Joy Whiddett, tempera artist Maz Jackson, and staff and students from Notre Dame High School and Norwich School to produce the new figure which has hung in the nave of the cathedral since Easter.

Its design deliberately brings together ancient and modern, traditional and contemporary. Willow weaving is an ancient handicraft, but it is a novel method of making liturgical sculpture. It connects the cathedral with the landscape of the county, and the sinewy weft of the willow echoes the tree-like branches of the vault above. Angels are literally messengers, and this sculpture proclaims the good news of the gospel. The words on the wings – peace, joy, hope, family, love, faith, happiness – were chosen by popular poll of the students at the schools as angelic messages for our own day. They are strikingly congruent with the message of the gospel. Shaped and cut by the students in Perspex, their colours mirror the stained glass of the Victorian west window and glint in even the faintest of lights. A woven bowl decorated with tempera symbols of angels painted by students is used to burn incense under the angel.

Perhaps most important of all, the angel brings a kinetic quality to the space of the nave. Gently twisting in the drafts of the building, in the heat generated by the hundreds of bodies at a large service, or by the torsion of the steel wire from which it hangs, the angel is never still, an abiding reminder of God’s reaching out from our scriptural past into our wounded present to lead us into the healing peace of his coming kingdom.

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