



Art Quarterly winter issue – out now

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By **Claire Wrathall**
Editor, Art Quarterly

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In the winter issue of our exclusive members' magazine Griselda Murray Brown rediscovers Norwegian landscape painting, Oliver Bennett surveys the art of moving image and Peter Blake talks about painting people.

Just as this issue of Art Quarterly was going to press, the British Museum hosted an intellectually exhilarating debate entitled 'What is Art for?' Of course there were figures from the art world among the distinguished panel, not least the artist Abdulnasser Gharem, a former lieutenant-colonel in the Saudi Arabian army, who now devotes himself full-time to conceptual art.

But some of the most memorable contributions were made by those with no obvious connection to the art world, notably Karen Armstrong, a former nun turned historian of religion. 'Art,' she said, 'gives us meaning, and we are meaning-seeking creatures. We fall easily into despair if we cannot find a value in what we do.' Art and religion, she said, are what human beings created in order to find value in our existence. They enable us to gain insight into other cultures. They give us a connection to the past.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that the two have long sat well together and that the Church's continued importance as a commissioner of contemporary art, a tradition that dates back to the 13th century, is, as Ben Luke writes (page 46), a relationship that remains robust.

This year the Vatican not only had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale, for which the Brighton-based artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva was commissioned to respond to a text from St John's Gospel, but the Benedictine communities at San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice and at Santa Maria de Montserrat, near Barcelona, both unveiled major collaborations with artists, respectively Jaume Plensa and Sean Scully. The latter was given carte blanche to decorate a 10th-century Romanesque basilica dedicated to St Cecilia, just as Matisse created the murals, stained glass, altar crucifix and candlesticks for the Chapelle du Rosaire in the South of France.

In this country, four works from Bill Viola's video installation, Martyrs, now permanently installed in St Paul's Cathedral, were also on show at St Peter's Chapel in Auckland Castle, County Durham, itself home to a burgeoning collection of important paintings from the Spanish Golden Age, much of it religious, that has just acquired El Greco's Christ on the Cross with support from the Art Fund (page 80).

Also among the panellists at the British Museum was the cosmologist John D Barrow, professor of mathematical sciences at Cambridge, who drew fascinating parallels between art and science, not least that artists, like scientists, 'specialise in the close observation of the world' and indeed the universe in order to help us make sense of it and our place in it.

In some ways this describes the practice of the American artist Michael Benson, whose extraordinary images of the cosmos are based on hours of painstaking research in Nasa's archives. They will be the subject of an exhibition at the Natural History Museum next year. On page 52, he talks to Robert Poldori, whose compelling large-scale panoramas may feature earthly cities rather than celestial bodies, but share something with Benson's works both in the way they are composed from multiple images and in what one might call their otherworldliness.



