

**ROSE  
NOLAN**

**"On the Threshold of Holy Sanctuaries"**

**TOLARNO GALLERIES  
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## 1. The Way of the Cross

Along with the monochrome and the grid, the cross constitutes one of the fundamental formats of modernist abstraction. Its formal simplicity complements a concretist approach to the reality of materials. It can be thought of according to a constructivist logic, as in the cross of Malevich, as two rectangular elements overlapped. As the figure made by inverting the co-ordinates of the edges of the generic canvas it has been used as the emblem of an art concerned with declaring its autonomy - the separateness of the aesthetic realm from 'nature' (i.e. Stella). In the work of Reinhardt the cross emerged in his late 'black' paintings as the result of an attempt to reduce painting to its purist form:

"A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas...trisection (no composition), one horizontal form negating one vertical form (formless)"<sup>1</sup>. In the work of John Nixon the singularity and constancy of the cross motif is used as a tension against the variety and diversity of materials he uses as support for his work, bringing the "plethora and richness of the material base"<sup>2</sup> into view.

But in all of this work at the same time that the form of the cross is being used as a vehicle for emphasizing the materiality of the work of art, its autonomy, and status as a thing-in-itself, the power of its symbolism is also being used to underwrite a claim of access to a transcendent 'spiritual' realm. Rosalind Krauss has written of the 'mythic' power of the modernist grid in regard to its ability to simultaneously accommodate two seemingly antithetical positions, holding them in a "kind of para-logical suspension":

...it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).<sup>3</sup>

Modernist abstraction conceives of 'the spiritual' as a generalised and universalised essence. It is a secular form of belief. The symbolism of the cross, considerably more loaded than that of the grid, is kept within strict limits; its Christian significance subsumed within the ambit of a more ancient elemental gnostic cross describing the forces of a cosmic nature in balance - the cross which formed the basis of Mondrian's grid. Whilst modernist abstraction can be said to hold 'the spiritual' and 'the material' in "para-logical suspension", it is a select spirituality and materiality it plays host to. In the modernist cross there is no religion as such, or as commonly understood, no doctrine, no Church-on-Sundays, no guilt, no boredom, no feeling queasy at the thought of the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ - no body. Rose Nolan's work upsets the comfort of this arrangement.

For Nolan the cross cannot sustain the neutrality of modernist practice. She faces off the abstract notion of the 'spiritual in art' against a 'religious upbringing' - specifically a 'catholic girlhood'. The 30 piece My Way to God of 1990 was the first work in which Nolan bent geometric abstraction in the direction of a 'religious' imagery. Since then she has concentrated almost exclusively on the figure of the cross/crucifix putting the image through a number of different incarnations in successive series of work.

Specifically Nolan revises the modernist cross by involving religious sentiment as expressed in a popular cultural form. In the installation March On (1991) at Store 5, six shelves were laden with close to one hundred small, paint on perspex, images of the cross against backgrounds of swirling colour and sunbursts of celestial light. In the 1960s and 1970s there was an attempt to popularise religion, to give it a contemporary relevance (viz. Vatican II, the evangelical trail of Billy Graham, priests on talk-back radio talking to teenagers about their problems with inter-personal

relationships and working out what 'love' really means). As well as this there inevitably arose a popular culture of religion: the Illustrated Children's Bible, the musicals Jesus Christ Superstar and Joseph's Technicolour Dream Coat, the Singing Nun's hit single The Lord's Prayer, Jesus freaks, the God Squad, Bible bashers. (A religious experience in this context could be defined as watching The Flying Nun on television or dealing with Seventh Day Adventists at the front door.) The funky vibrancy of Nolan's images capture some of the nuances of visual style associated with these phenomena.

Her more recent work elaborates the inherent figurative nature of the image of the cross, its suggestiveness (both formal and symbolic) as a body double. In a series of collage works from 1991 an anthropomorphised cross figure is represented within a landscape tableaux in different states of passion: cross crying, proud cross, struggling cross, sweating cross, lonely cross, mighty cross, cross of the bleeding heart. In these images Nolan uses the graphic devices and styles of comic book illustration, and cinematic animation, framing and lighting, to achieve her effects. The current exhibition of painted relief constructions returns to a more sober abstract idiom, re-establishing a tension between the objecthood of the work and the image. However, these cubo-futurist machines retain distinct anthropomorphic qualities. Their faceted forms have a sense of a jointed articulation and possible movement. Nolan has in various ways using nylon rope, string, or plastic covered wire either 'connected' or 'constrained' her creations in a bodily sort of way - they are wired up, cathetered, bound, gagged and collared.

Nolan works in series usually as dictated by the availability of materials. But while process oriented her explorations of the possibilities of any format is not systematically ordered. It is closer to play - repetition as a delirious rather than disciplined activity. These latest constructions are not analytically based, but rather constitute an almost ornamental

elaboration of structure. And the works are not simply individuated, but individualised. Their generic likeness is dispersed, as in the way of cartoons, by awarding to each a 'personal' attribute. Rather than abstract variations on a theme, Nolan gives us a cast of characters - absurdist Strong Men of Christ.

### **Robyn McKenzie**

- **1** Ad Reinhardt, [The Black-Square Paintings] (1963) in Barbara Rose [ed.], Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt, University of California Press, 1975, p. 82.
- 2** Mike Parr, "Historical Times (Criticising the Critic)", in Robyn McKenzie [ed.], Art Papers, Special Supplement, Agenda 2, August 1988, p. 6.
- 3** Rosalind Krauss, "Grids", in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, MIT, 1986, p. 12.

