

‘*News From The Pews*’, No.2, May 1, 1998, St Stephen’s Cathedral

Item 1: Archbishop Maintains Silence ...

Per the first issue of ‘*News From The Pews*’, Cathedral-goers will recall that on March 12 a letter was sent to His Grace Archbishop John Bathersby pointing out that enshrined in St Stephen’s Cathedral as ‘The Human Search For God’ were precisely the sort of pagan symbols and representations described in Sacred Scripture as an abomination before God.

Cathedral-goers were asked to pray for Archbishop Bathersby, that the Lord would give him the light and the strength to do what has to be done. To date, there has been no response. **Please continue to keep His Grace in your prayers.**

Item 2: What Is The Aboriginal “Spiritual Tradition”?

Cathedral-goers will also recall that the plaque at the relevant shrine states:

“The first part, already completed by aboriginal artist, Ms Fiona Foley, gives us a glimpse of the spiritual tradition in Australia which extends back through 40,000 years.”

What is this “spiritual tradition”? According to Djinyini Gondarra, in “Aboriginal Spirituality”, edited by Anne Patel-Gray, Harper Collins Australia Pty Ltd, 1996, at page 43,

“We Australian Aborigines make no distinction between the religious and the secular, between the natural and the super-natural. Our religion can be seen as a particular view of the universe and sets of relationships with it; relationships which include people, gods, Spirit, magical power, totems, the land, features of the landscape, living creatures, trees, plants and all physical objects. All of these are, in some sense, potential sources of power.

Relationships with people and Ancestral Spirits are universally the most important, for at the centre of life is the community of [people] and Spirits, all of whom are alive.”

In short, the aboriginal “spiritual tradition”, that is, the aboriginal religion, incorporates – **multiple false gods, totemic idols, the invocation of magical powers (witchcraft, sorcery and divination), nature worship, and recourse to ancestors.** Such beliefs and practices are common to the general run of pagan religious systems. Further, because the aboriginal spiritual tradition involves *secret* rites and practices, the aboriginal spiritual tradition qualifies as an ***occultic*** religion, (derivation, the Latin for “hidden” or “covered over”).

Item 3: Offences Against The First Commandment

What does scripture tell us about these things? Among a great many references are:

- “I am the Lord Your God ... You shall have no other gods before Me.” (Exodus 20: 2-3)
- “There is no other God besides me, a just God and a Saviour. There is none besides Me.” (Isaiah 45:21)
- “Let no one be found among you who .. practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is an abomination (“is detestable”) to the Lord your God ... You must be blameless before the Lord your God”. (Deuteronomy 18: 10-13)
- “He (King Manasseh) did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations ... he practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger. He even set a carved image, the idol which he had made, in the house of God.” (2 Chronicles 33, 2, 6, 7).

Item 4: Significance Of Fiona Foley's Work

The seven panels in the St Stephen's shrine *'The Human Search For God'* are the work of aboriginal "installation" artist Fiona Foley. Fiona Foley describes herself as an aboriginal first, a woman second and an artist third. Near Ramingining, she has participated in in aboriginal women's ceremonies. The dingo is her Totemic animal according to Bajtala tradition.

In the video-recording "Boomalli: Five Koori Artists", Fiona Foley describes how traditional aboriginal art has different levels of meaning. She shows how in her art, there is an "outer" meaning and a hidden or "inner" meaning. For example, the outer meaning of a work might be "my travelling to Hervey Bay in an aeroplane" and the hidden inner meaning might be "women's fertility". Fertility is the subject of much secret ritual in the aboriginal spiritual tradition, as is the recourse to hidden occultic power.

To the aboriginal believer, the "dreaming" is not just the past; it is here and now and into the future. The very act of creating a ritual object or symbolic painting can be a spiritual act in its own right, accompanied by invocations to spirits and other ritual or magical procedure.

The beliefs and practices of the aboriginal spiritual tradition are very important to Fiona Foley. They are also a central element of her work as an artist, as are the use of symbolism and the expression of meaning, including coded meaning in her work. She is opposed to mere superficial influence in this regard. Cultural and personal authenticity matter to her.

Fiona Foley's works in St Stephen's Cathedral, displayed untitled, clearly evidence the symbols and representations of her **pagan aboriginal spiritual tradition**. **Present are:**

- the lone **dingo**, which is her **totemic** animal ("sacred emblem" or idol, related to ancestor beliefs and veneration);
- the symbols of **fertility** and aboriginal **conception beliefs**;
- the representations of the **ancestors**; and
- the **moon** in various **phases**, significant both to aboriginal spirituality and to the occult generally;
- etc.

This is truly a shrine to a **pagan, occultic** spiritual tradition. If one were tempted not to believe this, the wording of the nearby plaque confirms it. Fiona Foley is entitled to her traditions and her spirituality. This is not in issue here. What is in issue here is a compromised Catholic and Christian spirituality.

Item 5: Significance Of Enshrinement

Contained in the *'Human Search For God'* are the symbols and representations of a living, pagan, occultic aboriginal spirituality. As indicated previously, these are precisely the sort of pagan symbols and representations which in Sacred Scripture are described as an abomination before God, and detestable in His sight.

The presence of this shrine in St Stephen's itself represents an apparent breach of the first commandment, a challenge to the Catholic and Christian integrity of the Brisbane archdiocesan authorities.

The *'Human Search For God'* is, by its own designation, a shrine. In the Catholic Church, a shrine is a sacred place set aside for devotion to God. There is no legitimate role for pagan superstition in such a place.

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Item 1: It’s Still There ...

Despite being made aware some time ago - and despite the circulation of thousands of newsletters on the matter - that the shrine “*The Human Search For God*” in St Stephen’s Cathedral represents an effective breach of the first commandment, His Grace Archbishop John Bathersby has still not responded in any way. Indeed, *if* His Grace has a view at all, it has not been communicated. The prayers for His Grace continue ...

Item 2: Apparent Breach Of Church Law

Issue No. 2 of “News From The Pews” set out the biblical basis for the view that the presence in St Stephen’s of the shrine “*The Human Search For God*” is an apparent breach of the first commandment.

Cathedral-goers will be interested to know that the presence of this shrine in St Stephen’s Cathedral also constitutes an apparent breach of the law and policy of the Catholic Church. The **Code of Canon Law** provides:-

- “The term shrine means a church or other sacred place ...”, (Canon 1230).
- “Sacred places are those which are assigned to divine worship or to the burial of the faithful by the dedication or blessing which the liturgical books prescribe for this purpose.” (Canon 1205).
- “In a sacred place only those things are to be permitted which serve to exercise or promote worship, piety and religion. Anything out of harmony with the holiness of the place is forbidden. The Ordinary may however, for individual cases, permit other uses, provided they are not contrary to the sacred character of the place.” (Canon 1210).

Under church law, the only artwork permitted in a church is that which promotes worship, piety and religion, that is, only holy or sacred art which is in harmony with a church’s sacred, devotional character. A church, set aside and reserved for the worship of God, is no place for non-sacred or “profane” artwork, much less artwork specifically honouring pagan traditions and practices.

In the case of “*The Human Search For God*”, the artwork extends to representations and symbols relating to ancestors, fertility practices, the totemic dingo, the invocation of spirits, magical power and the like. All this is clearly “*contrary to the sacred character of the place*”. The breach of church law could scarcely be more evident and undeniable.

One can only wonder if the reason for the lack of a response from church authorities is - simply - that there is no credible response available.

Item 3: “Sacred Art”

There can be no real doubt that church authorities know that only art which is sacred is permissible in a Catholic church. Church law, tradition, the statements of Vatican II and biblical precedent speak with one voice in this respect.

It can safely be taken that the church experts who were involved in the design and installation of the shrine “*The Human Search For God*” were fully aware of the church’s requirements. So how did this “shrine” get to be where it is?

Perhaps this is a question which His Grace Archbishop Bathersby could raise with those responsible. The answers would be likely to be of more than passing interest not just to His Grace but to many Cathedral-goers.

Cathedral-goers will also be interested to know that the artist’s own records indicate that the commission for the shrine is dated to 1987, some two years before the revamped St Stephen’s Cathedral was re-opened. Details of the “shrine” appear not to have been offered for public consumption throughout the period. The commissioning and installation of the shrine appears to have been taken forward in an atmosphere wherein information was restricted. The shrine appears to have been installed as a “*fait accompli*”.

Item 4: Christian And Catholic Integrity

For the record, “News From The Pews” fully accepts and supports the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the human search for God, as outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the various pronouncements of the Holy Father. “News From The Pews” fully supports all that the teaching holds regarding indigenous peoples and the human person’s right to freedom of religion.

As outlined in previous issues, the object of “News From The Pews” attentions has been and remains the issue of Christian and Catholic integrity in relation to St Stephen’s Cathedral. Readers will note that the biblical strictures concerning breaches of the first commandment were not aimed primarily against the pagans whose beliefs and practices were in question.

Rather, the biblical strictures were directed first and foremost at the unfaithful Israelite people of the Covenant who were compromising themselves through inappropriate honouring of false pagan beliefs and practices. It is one thing for a pagan to be involved in false beliefs and practices; it is entirely another and more serious matter for the People of God to be so involved.

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Archbishop Bathersby Responds ...

Cathedral-goers will be interested to know that a response to “News From The Pews” (“NFTP”) has been received from His Grace Archbishop Bathersby. The letter, dated 29 June 1998, is reproduced in full below, as is a further response on behalf of NFTP.

ARCHBISHOP’S LETTER	“NEWS FROM THE PEWS” RESPONSE
<p>Dear Mr Pemble-Smith, Thank you for your recent correspondence to Archbishop Bathersby. His Grace has asked me to respond to your enquiry concerning the Cathedral Shrine: “The Human Search for God.” The Archbishop has directed me to make the following points. It would be appropriate that you reprint his response in its entirety in any further editions of your newsletter. The Archbishop has asked me to thank you for your prayers and support. Yours sincerely in Christ. (Signature) Father K. Howell ARCHBISHOP’S SECRETARY</p>	<p>Your Grace, Thank you for the letter on your behalf, via the good offices of Fr Howell. As you no doubt appreciate, the questions raised in relation to the shrine are concerned with the shrine’s <i>meaning</i> and <i>spiritual significance</i>, concerns which are common to Church law and teaching and which are not specific to any particular context, whether geographical, ethnic, cultural or other. Please be assured of the continuing support in prayer of myself and those many people who frequent St Stephen’s Cathedral who are concerned about this issue. Yours Sincerely, Tim Pemble-Smith</p>
<p>In response to the requests of Mr Tim Pemble-Smith for information concerning the Cathedral Shrine: “The Human Search for God”, Archbishop Bathersby has asked me to reply on his behalf. His Grace has asked me to make the following points:</p>	<p>(NFTP No.3 had posed the question: how did the shrine get to be where it is?)</p>
<p>The Holy Father spoke passionately of the rich and enduring spiritual orientation of the Aboriginal People in his address to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Alice Springs in 1986:</p> <p><i>“You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land...[where] you touched the sacredness of man’s relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.” [4]</i></p> <p><i>Some of the stories from your Dreamtime legends speak powerfully of the great mysteries of human life, its frailty, its need for help, its closeness to spiritual powers and the value of the human person. They are not unlike some of the great inspired lessons from the people among whom Jesus himself was born. It is wonderful to see how people, as they accept the Gospel of Jesus, find points of agreement between their own traditions and those of Jesus and his people. [5]</i></p>	<p>(Completing the wording of [4]: “.. <i>with its animals, birds, fishes, water holes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land, you touched..</i>”). Agreed in full.</p> <p>It seems reasonably evident, for example, that “<i>points of agreement</i>” between indigenous and Christian traditions can provide pathways to Christ and that “<i>man’s relationship with God</i>” is sacred.</p> <p>It is not clear to NFTP exactly what the use of this quote is meant to establish in terms of the issues associated with the shrine “The Human Search For God”.</p> <p>Perhaps the use of this quote is intended as support for a proposition that the shrine in question is “sacred art”.</p> <p>Is this what is being proposed?</p>
<p>These passages point to the Church’s recognition of Aboriginal people’s spirituality and their authentic search for God.</p>	<p>Agreed.</p>
<p>The acknowledgment of these realities has motivated the inclusion in the renovated St. Stephen’s Cathedral of aboriginal art that would form part of the overall concept of this particular Chapel entitled: “The Human Search for God.”</p>	<p>Motivations aside, as outlined in previous NFTP issues, the presence of this shrine in St Stephen’s Cathedral represents a breach of the first commandment and of Church law on the part of the responsible parties within the Church.</p>

<p>Archbishop Bathersby has particularly noted Pope John Paul's recent Encyclical Letter "<i>Tertio Millennio Adveniente</i>" on the Year of Great Jubilee where he speaks of the Synod for Oceania and the Holy Father's hope that it will study in particular the encounter of Christianity with what he describes as "<i>the most ancient forms of religion, profoundly marked by a monotheistic orientation</i>" [p.52] His Grace says that the Pope is obviously referring to Aboriginal religion.</p>	<p>The Holy Father here is recognizing a monotheistic "orientation", not monotheism itself.</p> <p>No doubt many indigenous Australians would have been offended had the Holy Father said that the Aboriginal religion is monotheistic.</p> <p>As traditional Aborigines have an entitlement to the integrity of their religion, so do Catholic Christians. That is why the issue is one of Catholic integrity.</p>
<p>The Archbishop affirms that, in the light of the Pope's statements, the small space in the Brisbane Cathedral is entirely in harmony with the wishes of the Holy Father.</p>	<p>NFTP would be surprised were the Holy Father to approve of the presence of this shrine in St Stephen's Cathedral.</p>
<p>Archbishop Bathersby also added that in his time as Archbishop of Brisbane, he hasn't been aware of any long term controversy regarding this Shrine in the Cathedral. It is situated in one small, enclosed, corner space of the Cathedral and in no way takes away from the major Shrines and places of devotion within St. Stephen's. The Archbishop noted that the overall concept of the chapel is still to be completed.</p>	<p>These considerations, to the extent that they have some merit, are secondary given the specific and, to date, un-denied breaches of the first commandment and of Church law.</p> <p>It is noted that the letter of response appears not to have directly addressed the core questions.</p>
<p>However, he said that he is "very happy that it is there. It is a fitting tribute to the Aboriginal people who originally owned the land on which the Cathedral is built. As well it acknowledges the Aboriginal people's search for God." Father K.M. Howell Secretary to the Archbishop 29 June 1998</p>	<p>No reasonable Catholic could object to the presence within St Stephen's of indigenous art which meets the requirements of Church law. NFTP has no general objections to Aboriginal art. There are many fitting ways to acknowledge indigenous people, their culture and history. The <i>enshrinement</i> of the specific symbols and representations incorporated into this particular shrine is not one of them.</p>

Your Grace,

Thank you for raising the matter with those responsible for the installation of the shrine "The Human Search For God". Unfortunately, the points contained in the response do not appear to have directly addressed the core issues.

Perhaps the responsible parties could be prevailed upon to provide you with a **full disclosure** of the **meaning** and **spiritual significance** of the **symbols** and **representations** incorporated into the shrine. As part of a disclosure, it would be appropriate that the following be specified:

1. *If the responsible parties do know* the full meaning and spiritual significance, on what basis do they contest "News From The Pews" claims?
2. *Alternatively, if they do not know*, on what basis can and will they provide Your Grace with the necessary confirmation that the shrine is acceptable?

Naturally, the responsible parties will be prepared to confirm in clear language that the shrine does not contain ambiguity, that there is nothing in it pertaining to magic, superstition, spiritism, or vengeance, and that there are no sexual connotations. If satisfactory answers are available, no doubt the responsible parties would have no objection to the release of this information to the people of St Stephen's Cathedral.

Yours Sincerely,

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No Response

Cathedral-goers will be interested to know that 5 weeks on from “News From The Pews” (“NFTP”) No.4, no response has been received. Readers will recall that NFTP No.4 ended with the following:

“Your Grace,

Thank you for raising the matter with those responsible for the installation of the shrine “The Human Search For God”. Unfortunately, the points contained in the response do not appear to have directly addressed the core issues.

Perhaps the responsible parties could be prevailed upon to provide you with a **full disclosure** of the **meaning** and **spiritual significance** of the **symbols** and **representations** incorporated into the shrine. As part of a disclosure, it would be appropriate that the following be specified:

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2. Alternatively, *if they do not know*, on what basis can and will they provide Your Grace with the necessary confirmation that the shrine is acceptable?

Naturally, the responsible parties will be prepared to confirm in clear language that the shrine does not contain ambiguity, that there is nothing in it pertaining to magic, superstition, spiritism, or vengeance, and that there are no sexual connotations. If satisfactory answers are available, no doubt the responsible parties would have no objection to the release of this information to the people of St Stephen’s Cathedral.”

Current Position

Essentially what we have is a shrine in a Catholic Cathedral which is stated to be a *“tribute to the Aboriginal people who originally owned the land on which the Cathedral is built. As well it acknowledges the Aboriginal people’s search for God.”* Yet, somehow, a **full disclosure** of the **meaning** and **spiritual significance** of the **symbols** and **representations** incorporated into the shrine is still not available for release ... Why? What manner of tribute would relate to information which, it seems, cannot be revealed?

In the five months since this matter was first raised, nothing NFTP has said has been denied. No one has denied that the presence of this shrine in St Stephen’s Cathedral constitutes a breach of Church law and of the first commandment on the part of the responsible parties.

The Clarification Process

Your Grace, in order to assist in clarifying details relevant to the above questions, NFTP offers the following further questions and observations:

- As you appreciate, if the shrine fails on any one of the criteria listed above (ambiguity, magic, superstition, spiritism, vengeance and sexual connotations), it cannot be accepted as “sacred art” and therefore under Church law cannot be lawfully allowed in St Stephen’s Cathedral. In the opinion of the responsible parties, does the shrine pass any of the above criteria?

- Central to the difficulties associated with the shrine is the question of its *ambiguity*. Indeed, NFTP understands that the shrine is loaded with ambiguity to the extent that it is clear that the ambiguity itself was a key part of the design intent. Do the responsible parties contest this view?
- Does the lone totemic dingo, among other things, represent the Thoorgine (Fraser Island) dingo, which because of its island existence is a symbol of purity of breeding and, hence, an emblem of “racial purity”?
- Do the “female fertility” panels have anything to say about what may be termed highly sensitive “population control” practices? NFTP notes what appears to be a message involving certain leaves painted in a mixed colour tone, in a panel featuring what appears to be “death notice” bordering (a convention from western art). Does the lone dingo bear any reference to this message? Could meanings of this kind amount to an infringement of Commonwealth law on the part of people within the Church? Relevant provisions for your consideration include sections 17 and 18C of the Race Discrimination Act 1975 and sections 5, 6 and 7A of the Commonwealth Crimes Act 1914. The section 18D (RDA) exemption may well not apply in the circumstances. The archdiocesan solicitors should be able to provide advice on these questions and on other legal implications. It would seem prudent to seek the necessary advice without delay and to ensure that whatever is done conforms with appropriate accountability processes.
- Does the shrine portray marks of ritualized processes of preparation and installation? Does not the shrine proclaim its “authenticity”? Is it not the message to those “in the know” that this is an “exoticised” shrine, a shrine and a site of “presence”? NFTP recommends that you take specific advice on this from independent experts.
- Is not the shrine in the form of what is known in the art world as an “installation”, (another of its western artistic dimensions)? Part of what this would mean is that the shrine is not merely the artwork itself, but includes its surrounds. The physical alterations to the surrounding space, the stones, the stonework itself, etc., would be an integral part of the work. Is it not the case that the work is “site specific” and is intended to be a “challenge”, a “contestation” with the “host institution” and to “desanctify the space”? Do the responsible parties contest this?
- By its context, does not the shrine bear connotations which mock Christ and His sacrifice, in particular, the Holy Eucharist? Do not these messages relate among other things to Aboriginal burial rituals and to one or more practices “of great antiquity” including at least one which has often been misunderstood and is of great sensitivity? NFTP prefers not to be specific here. With your knowledge of the relevant area, you will understand.
- The shrine incorporates both western and Aboriginal dimensions. Are not certain connotations offensive to many black, white, mixed race and other Australians?
- Is it not the case that messages of rage and “racial disregard” bear reference both to male transgression and to Australian colonialism? Is it not the case that the connotations are alien both to Christian forgiveness and to **reconciliation** as the Church understands the term?
- On one level, is it not the case that the shrine incorporates elements of parody? Would this account for the curious wording of the accompanying sign?

As always, please be assured of our prayers.

Yours Sincerely,

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“News From The Pews”

ISSUE NO.6, 11 SEPTEMBER 1998, ST STEPHEN'S CATHEDRAL



• Meanings Revealed ...

This issue of NFTP is devoted to the question of the meaning and significance of the second in the series of seven panels in the St Stephen's Cathedral shrine, the "Human Search For God". As with the other panels, there are multiple levels of meaning, based on how the elements work together.

An art critic might call this the art of "bricolage", or a work of art in which seemingly haphazard or incongruous elements come together. The elements used by the "bricoleur" have been described as like "the constitutive units of myths, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre." (*La Pensee Sauvage*, C. Levi-Strauss.)

1. Creation Story

On one level, this second panel represents an Aboriginal creation story involving two lovers whose affair is discovered by the elder who is betrothed to the female lover. The aggrieved elder throws a boomerang at the male lover (the Rainbow or Rainbow Serpent), severing it. The panel itself presents the symbols of the relevant body parts of the lovers.

2. Word Play

The symbols of the body parts in the panel are represented and juxtaposed in such a way as to form a play on words in English, the relevant word play concerning "a black cockatoo", with "or two" substituting for "atoo" in a colloquial metaphor well known to many Australians. Indeed, the panel itself might well be titled, "Black Cockatoo".

3. Additional Connotations

The "Australian National Dictionary" states that the cockatoo was considered to be "a great delicacy" and was "often killed with the boomerang". The artist's own material also provides additional correlating references illustrating similar themes to those above regarding the "black cockatoo". The catalogue from the artist's exhibition "Lick My Black Art" is particularly instructive.

4. Burial And Sequencing

Returning to the "shrine", the first panel, that on the immediate left, is on one level a representation of an Aboriginal burial scene. In Aboriginal mythology, it is the black cockatoo which, shrieking loudly, accompanies the spirit of the deceased to its destination. Sequentially then, the second panel would logically concern the black cockatoo - as indeed it does.

5. Eliza Fraser Connection

To fully appreciate how this "black cockatoo" theme plays out into further levels of meaning in panel two, it is necessary to appreciate that the male symbol also serves as a representation of Fraser Island, the home territory of the artist.

It is also necessary to understand something of the story of the pejoratively labeled "English gentlewoman" Eliza Fraser - who herself later "shrieked" at length about her misfortunes - and how her story has been variously "deconstructed" and remembered.

In short, the panel sets forth a ribald and unsympathetic joke relating to Eliza Fraser concerning what happened to her in her time on the Island, the punch line being: nothing more nor less it would seem than "a black cockatoo". (This is the less explicit version.)

6. Meaning Summarized

Ultimately, then, what is represented in panel two is a creation story and a post-burial spirit sequence, both of which invoke the “black cockatoo”. Building on that, there is the “*atoo*”/ “*or two*” play on words and the visual presentation of that word play. This is all presented in a visual context of Fraser Island, the joke being – for those in the know – that the play on words refers specifically to what happened to Eliza on Fraser Island.

7. How Well Does This Stack Up ?

As set out above, the “black cockatoo” theme works on several levels, a few too many it seems for the meaning to have been simply unintended. Bear in mind also, we are dealing here with a work whose full meaning has not previously been revealed, despite calls for a full disclosure.

Also, as indicated earlier, other works by the same artist play on similar themes. Finally, what art critics have had to say also appears to correlate with the interpretation.

8. Further References

The book “*In The Wake Of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*”, by Kay Schaffer, provides further contextual information on relevant unsympathetic readings of the Eliza Fraser story. Among other things, the book contains a critique of some of the artist’s works, including her various “*Eliza Heads For Trouble*” works. Also, the 1991 version of “*Eliza Fraser Heads For Trouble*” has been described by the Nigerian artist and critic Olu Oguibe as “Foley’s fist-in-the-face piece”, (“*Medium and Memory in the Art of Fiona Foley*”, Third Text, Winter 1995-96).

Olu Oguibe’s web site, “www.arts.usf.edu/~oguibe”, is also of interest for its analyses of this particular style of art and the “racial disregard” which it expresses. The writings and utterances of other critics and of the artist herself also provide interesting indications of her outlook and attitudes.

9. Reconciliation ?

It would seem difficult to dispute that the “Black Cockatoo” panel sets forth themes of

sexual violence, racial disregard and mockery and, not to put too fine a point on it, notions of racial pay-back. This is not the art of reconciliation. If anything, it is the opposite, an other than friendly celebration of sexual pay-back, and racially charged. Further, it is to be noted that the display of art which is offensive on racial grounds in a place to which the public have access, may be unlawful in terms of Section 18C of the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act*.

More to the point, one must query how art of this nature found a place in a Catholic Cathedral. What has gone wrong?

• Mystery Disappearance

Last month’s NFTP asked whether the St Stephen’s Cathedral shrine “*The Human Search For God*” bore marks indicative of ritualized processes of preparation and installation and recommended the seeking of independent expert opinion on the matter.

On Friday 14 August, two copies of NFTP No.5 had been hand delivered, one to the office of the archbishop and one to the Cathedral administration office. No other copies were given out until Sunday 16 August. In that time, it seems, one of the marks referred to disappeared from the shrine - a small, finely woven coil of what appeared to NFTP to be human hair.

The coil was about the size of a one-cent coin, flat and oval in shape. It was discreetly but firmly attached against a dark background near the top right-hand corner of the highest panel, at a height of around seven feet above the floor.

It is possible perhaps that the timing of the disappearance was purely coincidental. In any case, NFTP had previously taken steps to ensure that the coil was photographed.

What was the significance - ritual or otherwise - of the coil? Whatever the answer, additional questions for this month include, who removed the coil, and why?

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“News From The Pews”

ISSUE No.7, 9 OCTOBER 1998, ST STEPHEN'S CATHEDRAL



As Things Stand ...

For some months now, “News From The Pews” [NFTP] has been asking questions about art work which was installed in St Stephen’s Cathedral in 1989. The precise meaning of the art work had not been disclosed by church authorities. NFTP has advanced claims that:

1. the installation of the art represents an apparent breach of the first commandment;
2. the presence of the art in St Stephen’s is in apparent breach of Church law; and
3. the art work, rather than being “sacred art” (as the church understands that term), is in fact offensive on a number of levels.

Church authorities have remained largely silent.

“The Human Search For God”

The ‘HSFG’ shrine is said to be a tribute to Aboriginal people and to acknowledge their search for God. The shrine is an example of “installation” art, comprising seven panels and their surrounds. The surrounds include stonework comprising subtly outlined figures of a kind readily recognizable to those familiar with Aboriginal rock art. The shrine is the work of well known Koori “urban” artist and sculptor Ms Fiona Foley. The work appears genuinely and authentically Aboriginal, with every indication that it is as fully and authentically Aboriginal as it is possible to be. The art also speaks to a white audience familiar with “conceptual” or “idea” art and the technique of “bricolage”. In both its Aboriginal and its western dimensions, this is art which is *meant to be read*. The key to ‘reading’ the art is an understanding of the **symbols** and **representations** contained in the shrine.

Disclosure Bases

What NFTP has revealed to date has not involved the disclosure of Aboriginal “secret/sacred” information. Further, much of what NFTP has disclosed has been drawn from information put on the public record elsewhere, directly or indirectly, by the artist herself.

Continuing From The Last Issue ...

Readers will recall that the last issue of NFTP set out how the multi-referential, phonetic “**Black Cock / a_too**” (or **two**) word play had been

encoded in the second panel of the St Stephen’s Cathedral shrine “*The Human Search For God*”. Readers will also recall that Ms Foley’s 1991 version of “*Eliza Fraser Heads For Trouble*” had been described by the Nigerian artist and critic Olu Oguibe as her “fist-in-the-face piece”. Further, the point was made that Mr Oguibe’s web site was of interest for its analyses of this particular style of art and the “racial disregard” it expresses. This seventh issue of NFTP explores how the seven panels in the “shrine” can be read in the form of a sentence from left to right as, “*Eliza Fraser Heads For Trouble*”.

“Eliza Fraser..”

In this particular reading, the first (i.e., the “lone dingo”) panel represents “Eliza Fraser”. While this panel also bears other - in fact multiple other meanings - this first, un-named panel itself bears a high degree of similarity to another work by Ms Foley, “A Three Legged Dog Day”. In the book “In The Wake Of First Contact”, Kay Schaffer discusses how, like Fiona Foley, the artist Sydney Nolan had done a series of paintings on “Eliza Fraser”. Ms Schaffer also shows how Ms Foley in her “Eliza Fraser” works had drawn from Sydney Nolan’s earlier works. It is readily apparent that the work “Mrs Fraser” from Nolan’s 1947-48 series provides key artistic inspiration for both “A Three Legged Dog Day” and its close equivalent, the un-named first panel in St Stephen’s.

Per Schaffer, in Nolan’s painting, “a vulnerable Mrs Fraser is portrayed as a naked animal blending in to the alien bush.” Ms Schaffer quotes Robert Melville in his introduction to Sydney Nolan’s “Paradise Garden”: “her plight arouses not pity but the sense of her openness to sexual assault. She is a woman liable to being taken ... She would spit and snap like a female dingo, without offering resistance.”

The Nolan version of “Eliza Fraser” – “this disturbing image”, per Schaffer - is presented by Nolan as a three limbed or three legged figure. In “A Three Legged Dog Day”, Ms Foley presents the dingo figure exactly as it is found in the Cathedral, with two hind legs and the front legs as one in silhouette from the ankles up.

