

## **There Will Be No Miracles Here**

Nathan Coley

*Negotiating the Invisible. Nathan Coley at Mount Stuart.*

*'The heart which has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.'*

Blaise Pascal, Pensees Section IV, No 277

A recent film by Nathan Coley portrays the city of Jerusalem, undisputed centre of three world religions, by taking us on a journey from the Dome of the Rock to the Wailing Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We see worshippers fervently engaged in the minutiae of their diverse and distinctive rituals, compelled by the unique and ancient sanctity of each site. Jerusalem's Church (of the Holy Sepulchre), Mosque (of Al-Aqsa), and Temple (the Western Wall, believed to be the remnant of the second Temple) - amongst the holiest constructed shrines of Christianity, Islam and Judaism - are here found in closest proximity. Thousands of pilgrims from all over the world are daily brought together by the magnetism and significance of this singular place, yet remain divided by their faiths, each proclaiming its own as the universal truth. This unique matrix of sacred edifices in Jerusalem, and the ardent veneration they elicit, serves as a most formidable articulation of Coley's continuing fascination with visible and material manifestations of the invisible and the elusive nature of faith.

I.

A preoccupation with architecture – especially as a physical expression of religious and political ideas and ideologies – is a leitmotif in Nathan Coley's work<sup>1</sup>. The three world religions and the particular architectural forms they have each engendered are the catalyst for Coley's latest work, displayed in Mount Stuart's Visitor Centre on Bute: '*Camouflage Church*', '*Camouflage Synagogue*', '*Camouflage Mosque*'. But instead of grand and elaborate structures we encounter humble, handmade cardboard models of these places of worship, presented on low plinths. The models, with their "boys' bedroom aesthetic"<sup>2</sup>, have been stripped of defining symbols and characteristics (such as crescent, cross, or star of David). They are rendered as generic rather than specific buildings for each faith, thereby becoming signs for rather than portraits of mosque, church and synagogue. Yet they are removed even further from any sense of a realistic portrayal by the bold horizontal stripe-pattern, which covers each model and also by different colour codings - black, gold and purple respectively. The pattern has a curious optical effect, it seems to make the reading of the architectural model harder, almost denying its form. The specific colours used might have been chosen for their associative value – especially the gold

---

<sup>1</sup> "I'm very interested in the evolution of Christianity, or any religion for that matter, from being a notional concept between scholars to being manifest in buildings and dwellings." Nathan Coley in '*Urban Sanctuary*', a public artwork by Nathan Coley', (Glasgow: Armpit Press, Glasgow, 1997), p 4. Other works in which Coley dealt specifically with churches/ places of worship include '*Urban Sanctuary*', publication, 1997; '*Minster*' tape/slide, 1998; '*Fourteen Churches of Münster*', video, 2000; '*Black Tent*' installation Portsmouth Cathedral, 2003; '*The Lamp of Sacrifice, 161 Places of Worship, Birmingham 2000*', and '*The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh 2004*'.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes by Nathan Coley, unless otherwise indicated, are from conversations with the author.

triggers memories of the glittering golden domes of famous mosques, and the purple is reminiscent of ecclesiastical vestments, like the purple cassock of bishops. The stripe-effect seems to be a deliberate nod to Op Art and design, to Bridget Riley and Daniel Buren, as well as perhaps to the great Renaissance churches such as Orvieto or Siena, with their remarkable façades of black and white stripes.

However, Coley has appropriated the stripe pattern from an altogether non-art and non-religious source: it refers to the so-called 'dazzle' camouflage applied to ships during both World Wars as protection from attack. Devised by Norman Wilkinson, Inspector of Airfield Camouflage, the 'dazzle' scheme was inspired by the effect of sunlight on water<sup>3</sup>. Camouflage, derived from the French '*camoufler*', meaning 'to disguise', is a form of concealment adapted from mimetic strategies in the natural world for use in military action. Artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Alighiero Boetti and Hans Haacke have all used camouflage in their work, attracted no doubt by its inherent dual signifier of aesthetics and politics. For Coley it was important here not to "make invisible, but to disguise" these objects "that are trying to deny their existence". At first, the flamboyance and graphic rigour of the works seem at odds with this intent, and it is only when we have identified the pattern as wartime camouflage that this withdrawal into deliberate effacement becomes evident.

To trace the meaning of these camouflaged places of worship it is helpful to consider the nexus of religion and power that Coley repeatedly invokes in his work. For example, we find wartime references in combination with the sacral motif in '*Fourteen Churches of Münster*' (2000), a video in which Coley had taken his cue from an order to target the churches of Münster, issued to allied bomber pilots in the Second World War. His book project '*Urban Sanctuary*'<sup>4</sup> probes further into this relationship. His investigation (through a number of interviews) of the concept of sanctuary reveals the church's failure to uphold its position as guarantor of refuge and immunity from state legislation in today's secular society. It highlights social, political and ideological questions about the boundaries of state power, and asks whether any spaces still exist that are beyond the reach of law<sup>5</sup>. As an extension to this enquiry, it can be argued that Coley's 'Camouflage' works could be read as subtle metaphors for the increasing loss of authority that religious institutions have suffered in our (Western) secular culture, while their wartime associations also bring to mind geo-political conflicts triggered by clashing religious beliefs.

## II.

Strolling through the 18<sup>th</sup> century landscaped parkland of Mount Stuart, visitors are unexpectedly confronted by a large illuminated text that proclaims: '*There Will Be No Miracles Here*'. Attached to a free-standing scaffolding, six metres high and six metres wide, the words are divided into three lines, giving it the formal appearance of a haiku: 'There will be/ No Miracles/ Here'. The use of white electric light bulbs,

---

<sup>3</sup> See Tate etc, issue 4, summer 2005, editor's note.

<sup>4</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> It is a strange travesty indeed, that today's place maintained outside state legislation is not a sanctuary but a prison like Guantanamo Bay.

together with the unusual typeface<sup>6</sup> evokes 1970's disco glamour as well as fairground aesthetics, at once elegant and tacky, and strangely at variance with the message of the text. This gentle sense of irony is again echoed in the link created between the artificial illumination of text and the prodigious illumination referred to by the text.

Miracles are customarily defined as supernatural events or revelations, which in most religions provide evidence for the divine. To decree that 'there will be no miracles here' is to deny, and forbid even, the possibility of divine intervention in this particular site. As declaration of a 'miracle-free zone', it asserts God's power to be subordinate to that of the speaker.

Coley's text is in fact appropriated from an historical anecdote, related to the artist by the architectural sociologist Mark Cousins: "There is a famous case of an entire village in Haute Savoie called Modseine, which had regularly been the site of miracles and magical practices ... in the seventeenth century a large notice was put up saying 'There will be no miracles here, by order of the King', just to show that modern legal space considers itself actually superior even to the idea of God having any space."<sup>7</sup>

The notion that public space is always controlled by law and authority rather than left unrestricted, open and free is a concern Coley has addressed in a number of works. The most remarkable of these is 'A Public Announcement' (1998), which is a direct precursor to the illuminated work at Mount Stuart. On eight sites throughout the Scottish town of Stirling, large screen-prints displayed short historical quotes, each proclaiming power or issuing orders over space considered communal.<sup>8</sup> Lacking context and in the absence of stated sources for each, the texts remain ambiguous, but together engender a sense of unease about our understanding of the public realm.

'*There Will Be No Miracles Here*' is firmly anchored in the ancient power struggle between state and church, politics and religion, between the rational and spiritual, the visible and invisible. The decree announces ownership not only of physical space, but also – in an act of flagrant hubris and arrogance - invisible, metaphysical space. The text's command is further highlighted by its setting - in a natural environment, but one cultivated and controlled by man.

The urge of a state to make all subjects conform to a single system of interlocking disciplinary regimes requires, as Michel Foucault put it, 'power of mind over mind'<sup>9</sup>, and recalls his compelling analysis of the mechanisms of coercion, particularly of

---

<sup>6</sup> The typeface was specially designed for this work by the designer James Goggin, in collaboration with Nathan Coley.

<sup>7</sup> *Urban Sanctuary*, op. cit. p. 44

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Coley – A public Announcement, *The Changing Room* (Stirling 1998)

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995), p 206  
Foucault of course argued about the establishment of power via architecture and geometry.

total surveillance and control, typical of the panoptic society<sup>10</sup>. Yet at the same time, the work's refutation of the miraculous is reminiscent of Richard Dawkins' categorical secularism and his persistent attacks against organised religion as affront to reason and science<sup>11</sup>. Framed that way, *'There Will Be No Miracles Here'* reads no longer as polite notification but exposes the determination of an absolute authority to demand complete obedience, even in matters of personal belief, and the intolerance, fanaticism and absurdity of such autocratic diktats.

But the text is more ambiguous. If we interpret *'There Will Be No Miracles Here'* as an example of rationalism versus irrationalism and superstition, then it recalls the bipolarity of the Enlightenment, a period characterised by Voltaire's ideal of a rational society set against the spirituality of the time. The Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, argued in his essay 'Of Miracles' (1748) that miracles are contrary to our consistent experience of the laws of nature, and that there is therefore a logical obstacle to humans ever proving that events are miracles<sup>12</sup>. *'There Will Be No Miracles Here'* can consequently also be understood as imperative to depart from superstition and the irrational, to empower individuals to take responsibility for their own action without recourse to or reliance on, so-called higher powers.

### III.

Coley's incandescent sign is in full view of the Burges Chapel, a private basilica commissioned from the acclaimed Victorian architect William Burges by the third Marquess of Bute in 1873. The Marquess had converted to Catholicism in 1868 – a bold and unusual step so few years after the Catholic Emancipation Act.<sup>13</sup> Three years before his conversion, the Marquess had travelled to Jerusalem, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was to become the inspiration for his own chapel.<sup>14</sup> After his death in 1900, and in accordance with his final wish, the Marquess's heart was taken from his body and transported in a specially commissioned silver casket to Jerusalem, where it was buried on the Mount of Olives<sup>15</sup>.

This extraordinary story of earnest faith inspired Nathan Coley to explore a third, though significantly more understated intervention at Mount Stuart. Together with Mount Stuart's archivist, Andrew McLean, Coley devised a way to display to the public the very silver casket used for this remarkable journey which had been locked away since its return from Jerusalem. Now it can be seen within the Gothic

---

<sup>10</sup> See Foucault, op.cit, especially Chapter III Discipline, 3. Panopticism, pp 195-228

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Dawkins (Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University), *The Devil's Chaplain* (Phoenix 2003) as well as his TV documentary 'The Root of All Evil?' Channel 4, January 2006

<sup>12</sup> In: 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding' (1772), (Hackett Publ.Co. 1993): "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature (...). There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event." Section X, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Following 300 years of persecution and marginalisation Catholics were eventually granted civil and political rights, including the right to vote, in 1829. It is interesting to note that to this day, the 1701 Act of Settlement excludes any Catholic or anyone who marries a Catholic, from the Throne.

<sup>14</sup> See also Charlotte Edwards' and Tim Knox's essays, 'Re awakening' in: *Re Awakening*, Langlands and Bell (Mount Stuart 2004)

<sup>15</sup> The Mount of Olives is identified in the bible as the place from which God will redeem the dead at the Last Judgement.

splendour of the Marble Chapel. Coley did not want to impose an object of his own making on an interior so full of its own grandeur and magnificence, but instead made a more conceptual proposition.

The simple and modest act of rendering visible an object that had lain invisible for over 100 years, reveals a kind of story that resonates powerfully through history, politics and religion, and forms a perfect thematic foil and extension to Coley's other works on show at Mount Stuart. The symbolism of the heart has played a powerful part in legends, myths and fairytales as well as in cults and religions. In the centre of the body, the heart, rather than the brain, is generally used as a metaphor for the emotional centre of the self. For the Egyptians, the heart was the core of the individual; Aristotle maintained it was the seat of the soul, and since the Middle Ages it has been associated with love and emotion.<sup>16</sup> The devotional cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with its own heart iconography, became widespread in the 17<sup>th</sup> century but reached especial popularity in Catholic countries in the 19<sup>th</sup>. The heart is the individual attribute of several saints, including St Augustine and St Catherine of Siena.

We find instances of a separate burial or preservation of a person's heart throughout the centuries and this practice is often associated with the notion of the reliquary. Boyadijan reports the preservation of the heart of St Teresa of Avila in a crystal urn in 1582. To this day, her heart, which she claimed had been pierced by an angel, can be venerated in the convent founded by her in the Spanish town of Alba.<sup>17</sup> There is also the famous, though perhaps apocryphal, story of Shelley's heart which refused to burn during the cremation of his body on a beach near Pisa (following his drowning), and which Byron had sent to Mary Shelley, who kept it until her own death.<sup>18</sup>

The devout, romantic and scholarly Marquess of Bute would have been familiar with the iconography and significance of this heart symbolism. More important, perhaps, especially as the Marquess was of royal descent himself, he must have been aware of the tradition of preserving royal hearts separately from their bodies<sup>19</sup>. His desire to have his heart buried in the Holy Land can therefore be seen as an expression of the depth of his faith, a continuation of an ancient tradition, as well as evidence of his romanticism.

---

<sup>16</sup> See Noubar Boyadijan: *The Heart: Its History, Its Symbolism, Its Iconography and Its Diseases*. (Antwerp: Esco Books 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Boyadijan, p 29-30

<sup>18</sup> See Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron. Life and Legend*. (London: John Murray 2002), pp 429-31

<sup>19</sup> King Edward I had requested that his heart be buried in the Holy Land, following his crusade there. The heart of Louis the XVII, France's ten-year old heir to the throne who died in Temple prison, Paris, in 1795, was removed by his physician and displayed in a crystal urn in the Parisian cathedral of St Denis, burial place of French kings, until genetic testing more than 200 years later certified his identity for burial there in June 2004. See Joelle Diderich, Reuters, June 8, 2004 and Philippe Délorme, *Louis XVII: La Vérite*. (Pygmalion 2000). For Lord Bute's interest in the story of the heart of King Robert I ('the Bruce') see pages xx – xx.

In placing *'There Will Be No Miracles Here'* outside at Mount Stuart, and revealing the story of the Marquess's heart inside, Coley has orchestrated a powerful dichotomy between – or perhaps hidden unity of - interiority and exteriority, faith and law, heart and reason, the spiritual and the rational, Romanticism and Enlightenment – the apparent binaries that seem to have governed much of our history. At the same time, the story of the silver casket reconnects with Coley's ongoing fascination with Jerusalem as centre of gravity for Christianity and other faiths, and as emotional site for pilgrimage and devotion<sup>20</sup>. Even though the casket is firmly closed, and we have no means of looking inside, the knowledge of what it once contained makes us envision the presence of that elusive heart. Thereby the imagined content of the casket is a poignant final gesture in Coley's elegant essay about visibility and invisibility, and the poetics and politics of the invisible.

© Andrea Schlieker  
Mount Stuart 2006

---

<sup>20</sup> In Coley's work *'Jerusalem Syndrome'* (2005), a large projection inside a white cube shows the three sacred sites, without comment, as described at the beginning of this essay. On the outside wall of the same white cube, a plasma screen shows the second part of this work: an interview with Dr Moshe Kalian, district psychiatrist of Jerusalem, who describes the medical symptoms of *'Jerusalem Syndrome'*. This involves obsessive or psychosis-like experiences and behaviour - in the form of exaggerated or hysterical identification with biblical events or figures - triggered by a visit to the city of Jerusalem. Again we encounter the duality between inside and outside, faith and reason.