

JUDITH MASON

Installation: Dante's La Divina Commedia

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Art historian Karin Skawran talks to Judith Mason about her commission, Walking with and away from Dante: an installation created by the artist in response to Dante's Divine Comedy. The work consists of three large painted panels and a series of three-dimensional mobile totems, carved by the collector who commissioned the work, and painted by Judith Mason.

The title of the complete work is Walking with and away from Dante. Artist Judith Mason on her installation: "It's as if we start off together like Dante and Virgil, and then I go off into a twenty-first century lack of faith. It creates a tension between Dante's extremely intact world view and my extremely disintegrated world view. I wanted to provide people with a kind of narrative kick that I got from reading Dante and also use him as a sort of pin-board, onto which our hell and the creatures of hell, and Purgatory which is on the cusp of hell, and the Earthly Paradise are positioned."

K: How did the commission for these paintings and totems, illustrating Dante's Divine Comedy, come about?

J: I illustrated selected texts from the La Divina Commedia, for a hand-bound book entitled, A Dante Bestiary, which was published in 1989 in New York by Ombondi Editions. The collector who commissioned this installation bought a copy of that artist's book. This work is, without doubt, the most demanding work I have ever done.

K: Where does one have to look for your response to Dante?

J: Inferno has my contemporary additions to Hell, as a place where the damned rejoice and the victims of their malice do the suffering. This is very contra-Dante, but seems reasonable. In my experience, evil people enjoy the practice of evil.

With Purgatory I departed from the Commedia to a greater degree. We are all caught up in a struggle to create the Earthly Paradise while generally destroying it. I made use of sacrificial rites; there's a pun on the rosary; Christ deposes himself; and the artist's hand wipes out mistakes. For me the Earthly Paradise is caught between the rubble of religious/ideological wars and the nuclear holocaust, the 'fire at the end of time'. Scarecrows warn of the interconnectedness of all life. Apes are seen freeing human souls of their shackles. A chain offers a possible escape. From it hangs, on a separate thread, my favourite allegorical figure, the Hanging Man, hovering between earth and air. I have no concept of Paradise, but I do understand our longing for it. So I've put a resurrecting angel on one side of an elongated mobile, and a figure on the other side which twists from its chrysalis-like shroud and disintegrates into a form of particle-life.

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K : Why reinterpret Dante at this time and age and on the African continent, torn by crime, violence and dissent? You have said yourself that Dante, is ‘...a long dead Italian whose cosmology has been outdated for centuries...’ (reference) (2) Appendix to A Dante Bestiary.

J : The Divine Comedy seemed very off-putting when I first glanced at it. I had to trick myself into reading it. Even now, forty years later, my Sayers translation of the text brings to mind the sand drifts and the arid slopes of the Richtersveld where I first read the text . Nowhere could be further from the crowded torments of Dante’s Gothic Hell or more removed from the sweet decorum of his Paradise . There is a passing resemblance between the lower slopes of Purgatory and the landscape in which I became both enchanted and exasperated by the poem.

I have remained enchanted and exasperated, the images creeping uninvited into my work from time to time. I no longer share Dante’s faith, and I have neither his urbanity nor his love for the grotesque. His political anger is familiar to me, as it is to most people reared in as absurd a society as South Africa ’s was. I share too, his delight in the discourse of Statius and the logical arguments of Aquinas, finding that, as a metaphor, much of what they say is not as incongruous with the notions of modern biology and physics as may first appear. Reading the Commedia is like coming across a wonderfully wrought artifact from an ancient and alien civilization, which on inspection proves to be not only beautiful but also useful – a tool with which one can craft one’s own moral philosophy.

So why am I attempting to illustrate aspects of one of the great imaginary voyages of all time? An affection for quattrocento art, informed as it was, by Dante and his Gothic contemporaries, is part of the lure. So, too, is my Teutonic enjoyment of any philosophical structure. I love words. Most of all I enjoy the power of the artist at the centre of his universe.

K : How did the work evolve?

J: What we planned originally was a straight-forward translation of Dante’s three books of the Divine Comedy into three separate big images. Then the collector wanted to extract certain drawings from my Bestiary and put them on separate double- sided panels which ran on little trolleys. These images would be like a continuously changing mobile. As you walked in front of the painting you’d push them around, and each time you turned them you would catch a different aspect of the work. The large painting of Inferno would be in the background. We decided, however, that flat panels of drawings in front of the canvas wouldn’t integrate well. Instead we decided that we would cut out silhouettes from the Bestiary and paint different versions on each side. In some instances one would be a contemporary version of hell, the other taken from Dante. The central image of Satan was taken from Dante. We got a lot of the text of the Inferno in tattoo form on the body of the devil. It is like a stage set where you have a very large painting and have, in the case of the Inferno, eight separate totems in front of it. These can be turned around and moved right out of the way if one wants to look at the painting alone. I did not just want to do a translation of Dante onto canvas, because Dante used to be like an alternate reality to me and I accepted the whole Catholic theology on which it was based. I don’t now. I’m now much more of an agnostic humanist and I wanted to read Dante through the filter of contemporary agnosticism. I wanted to bring contemporary elements into hell and redefine hell in terms of how I understood it rather than his medieval construct. Paradise we turned into an aspiration towards Paradise rather than Paradise itself. I’ve got no concept of Paradise . I do, however, have a very clear idea of why people aspire to it.

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K: So it's not simply an illustration of Dante's Divine Comedy, but a re-interpretation or a response to it?

J: That's right. It sounds ridiculously presumptuous to try to re-interpret Dante, but I think one does this with anything that one loves or is indebted to. It is a response really.

Dante was highly political - scored all sorts of cheap shots in the Divine Comedy against his political enemies. A lot of his raving against Florence and other city states was politically based. He was, in fact, a town official who suffered exile. He seethes with political indignation. He also has this great longing for translated physical love in terms of Beatrice, the ideal of romantic love, and also a longing for God. These are all things that are quite easy for twentieth century people to pick up on, especially people who are fascinated by the idea of transfigured love not sublimated love without necessarily being religious.

I was brought up by austere atheist parents. Then, as a young woman, I fell in love with Catholicism and was a devout Catholic for about ten years. It provided me with a moral and aesthetic education. I loved the rules, but came to feel that so much of it was too exclusive, and I found myself walking away from it. I have always been grateful for the intervention of Catholicism in my life. I needed to be in love with God for a while. I get quite angry when people say one is 'a lapsed Catholic', because I don't feel that people who embrace a faith and then move away from it have necessarily fallen away from something. I think they are walking towards something else. I am very seriously invested in my humanist beliefs and my humanist philosophy, but I also get very angry with people who trash faith.

I think it is possible for somebody who loves Dante's world view, to come along and say, 'Hang on, let's take his text and let's add to it and let's provide a whole lot of open questions, because this is where I am, and this might help people where they are.' With this painting I had the time and the space and the collector's critical input to refine my arguments. I wanted to make a painting that would be an experience of hell, something we all understand and recognize as some sort of reality, the purgation of our own guilt and the acceptance of forgiveness, which is very much a South African need. And then there is a desire for something much more beautiful, much better, much more interesting and complete than ourselves, Paradise .

K: It reminds me of the Byzantine church in which there is this absolutely perfect harmony between architectural framework , the liturgy, the decorative scheme of the church and the worshipper. You only understand this interaction within the physical space of the church.

J: That's very important! My favourite artwork have been works in which I have literally been integrated into the text of the work – like the Sacristy Chapel in Florence. Standing in the middle of that room one feels part of an elemental expression of energy.

K: There is a sensual element in your work. It has the two components of intellect and sensuality. This I find incredibly intriguing. You seem to bring the two together in an integrated art work.

J: Paint is a sensual thing for me - I love paint and love the way it can work. I am tender and adventurous with paint. I think my sensuality is directed towards image making. My sensual life exists around touching paint and manipulating paint and the paint telling me what to do - which it does do very forcefully. Yet I like ideas - I live in my head - I'm very introverted in that sense. But I'm physically engaged with the world and the things of it. I've fallen in love and out of love with ideas since I was little. I pursue ideas as I pursue people I love. I think one's probably a better academic for not being an academic at heart, because there's something astringent about analyzing images away. One's got to love them first. Anyway, one paints because words can't do the work.

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K: Let's look at Inferno. Give me a brief survey of each of the three large panels and tell me how they are structured.

J: Three two - meter square canvases make up a single horizontal image. I kept very close to Dante here. I tried to give a sense of Satan with his three heads. My use of spirals, often very joyful, is translated here into a crushing downward pressing drill. I saw Satan as a sort of flayed image. Dante describes his huge leather wings - like bat wings. I made the wings into a scroll which is flung outwards, with a little Calvary right at the top on the left-hand side. I put Satan into an extremely dark, infinite background, of a very dense cobalt violet. The idea was to have him dragging a cloud or wing or curtain across a wasteland towards the viewer, to embrace the viewer in ultimate darkness.

I wanted Satan to be both male and female and to paint his sexuality seductively, although it's quite repulsive. I tried to say that sexuality is as often detestable as it is good. I turned the vagina into a sort of flame-like groove at the root of the penis. Around the pelvis I put a metal belt, which resembles a gin trap, with teeth on the inside and studs on the outside.

I have given Satan his own little cohort of sneering and sniggering beings, all of whom look at you from beneath his wings. I've always thought of hell not as a place where the wicked suffer, but hell as we know it on earth, where the wicked have a fine time. I'm easily humiliated, cowed by people who laugh or snigger at me, so I painted this group like a gang who abuse you by simply jeering at you. It was great fun painting these heads. They are drawn from nobody in particular, although some of them have 'skin-head' insignia. I tried to make each one as individual as possible, and also to change the perspective in an arbitrary way so that you get the feeling that these figures go on forever and ever. This crowd of Satan's lackeys push up against you - Satan's very confrontational. His cronies snigger at you, as you, the viewer, become part of the experience. Hell as experienced by the socially phobic, as I am!

We tattooed onto Satan's body images of Dante's text - each tattoo in cruciform sequence. When, midway through his life, Dante goes into the forest he meets the Leopard of Delight, the Lion of Anger and the She-Wolf of Avarice. With Virgil he goes through the portals of hell where they meet Amazons, Paolo and Francesca, and many others. We took drawings that were in the Bestiary and others made later from further readings of the text. One can 'read' the Inferno story by looking at the tattoos in sequence.

Satan or Dis, continuously chews Judas, Cassius and Brutus, the three traitors, whom Dante regarded as irredeemably evil. I wanted this to be like a big lipstick ad - something very succulent and juicy, or like people sitting in a restaurant eating spare ribs - that moist, chopping thing, I wanted the teeth grinding and relishing their eternal meal.

My Inferno has various images that I put in for my own enjoyment, like Shiva's Apismara, the dwarf of ignorance and malice, tearing apart a dragonfly. He becomes a spiteful little pet of Satan's. I wanted to bring in a non-Christian element as well. The Minotaur I've depicted as a sort of Pied Piper recruiting young boys from Sierra Leone and leading these child soldiers over the hill - seducing young people into this desert. The foreground is strewn with landmines and hand grenades through which he tiptoes. And then there are adult mercenaries - the 'dogs of war'. Their heads refer to shields and badges. Their camouflage is made of machine guns, bullets and AK47s.

The pumpkin is an image I developed when Rashid Staggie, the Cape Town gangster, was killed. I bought a pumpkin and took a four pound hammer to it. I then did a still life of it and called it 'Impact Study', because I just had to find an image to help me cope with the obscenity of his death. It worked well. There's something cranial about it, something hopelessly protective but vulnerable, against the 'over-kill' of the weapon.

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There is destruction of fields and destruction of food with swarms of armies coming over the horizon, recalling random places that were very much on my mind, like Darfur, Somalia, etc. The great burning fields are spewing fire and smoke, reminiscent of the oil fields of the first Gulf War.

I painted wild dogs in the foreground, running away from the fire, right across the canvas, finally dissipating into nothing – evoking destruction of life, of wildlife, of innocent life. We used copper leaf behind many of these images to imply that the land is rich, ripe for exploitation. Blood diamonds in bloody earth.

Down below is an image of the Holy Family – a tiny child, a woman and a man. This is a quote from the conventional Holy Family but rendered sacrilegious by death.

Satan is the source of the three rivers - the river of lead above the soldiers, the river of blood above the bleeding woman, and a black river which runs down on the right. Blood from the river spatters down onto an image of a woman. She's covered in a fabric of AIDS tokens. She refers to, amongst others, Gugu Dlamini, who was stoned to death because she was an AIDS activist. I cast blurred coals in front of her and she's warding them off. They are slightly out of focus. The idea is that you are part of the crowd stoning her and these shapes intervene between her and you. You may be as responsible for stoning her as anybody else.

Next to her are the racists, mirror images, pulling each other's faces off. The heads become hands and the hands become heads. The faces become distortions of the skin, the skin dragging over the fingers, almost like pulling a balloon apart. They have claws instead of genitalia. The bodies are shouting abuse at each other with visceral anger. I realised the chest as a locus of anger within myself – I often create images by finding where the tension is in my own body.

Between these two figures I used the edges of the canvasses to accent their divisiveness. A violated baby with a chicken claw instead of an arm, tears the fabric of society. It becomes a lightning bolt in the landscape down below. Raped and abused babies are treated like commodities with no more value than the plucked chickens they resemble.

More infant heads, recalling the excesses of Cambodia and Vietnam are tossed in an orange bag - commonplace slaughter.

Black rain turns into video-photographic images on the right – I used images of Saddam Hussein's execution, electric chairs, etc. and put them into a black rain of information, the repetitive rain of violent news images.

On the extreme right is a portrait of the collector's partner, as Dante. I drew him in a characteristic pose, as a wary but engaged observer. Because he loves beautiful cars, I gave him a motor racer's wreath as a pun on the poet's wreath.

K: The drawings on the wings - are they actually drawings or are they also painted?

J: They are painted – using very fine brushes. I used grays and carbon colours and whites in order to integrate them with the form underneath. The tattoos had to look as if they had been cut into the skin or worked with a needle.

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K: There's this frontality which is almost iconic. It's not the actual thing you are looking at, but at something beyond?

J: If it works like that I'd be delighted, because seeing the idea behind the image, is my intention.

K: Let's move on to Purgatory. Tell me about this panel.

J: Its iconography is complex. Purgatory climaxes with a fire through which the penitents go. It's a purgative fire and it's like a defining layer of earthly experience – the annealing fire of the alchemists. I used vague references to a hydrogen bomb casting its light and shadow across the plains and acid rain falling here and there. I made up a landscape with water fields and orchards, big trees and hedges. In the foreground I referred to metal rubble from 9/11. You've got to make an effort to climb over it to get to Paradise. At the end of the Earthly Paradise you get to the fire, so you have to stumble from an unsafe place into a relatively safe place and then to an unsafe place again. 'The toy-like happy danger of human life on earth', to quote Paul Scott in "The Towers of Silence Part 3" of the Raj Quartet.

I used an old metal chain-ladder as an image of salvation. It goes up into the stratosphere above the nuclear fire. I've used historical forms of purgation and suffering, like the Druid basket man of winter sacrifices, which served to cleanse the community. On the right is the tiny figure of Christ taking himself down from the cross, his redemptive work done. I used a rosary of lucky beads, as representative of all the things one clings to in order to placate the unknown and to assuage one's anxiety.

I did a painting of two scarecrows a long time ago and then destroyed it because it lacked context. I have now reformulated these into Purgatory-like warnings – 'don't do this, do that'. They are blindfolded and have the hair of kwashiorkor sufferers. They hold the eye of a human, a mammal, a reptile and a bird as posters, warning against species destruction. They do a non-Christian thing, saying all species are equally of value on earth.

The crumpled note in one scarecrow fist refers to the passage in Genesis where man is called to master all life, something which I believe has encouraged us to be disrespectful and abusive of life rather than protecting it. The little figure dangling is the Hanging Man from the Tarot pack – a figure caught between earth and sky, the carnal and the spiritual.

I also painted a wiping hand, because artists engage in purgatorial movements all the time. I wanted the action of wiping marks off the canvas as a process of purging one's life and one's universe. The hand of the artist is wiping away mistakes in the same way as the people in purgatory live away their mistakes by undergoing some sort of penitence and suffering.

I allow the paint to drip sometimes as a form of acid rain. The earth needs healing. One experiments on it and makes mistakes on it, whilst hell is immutable. Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise are places of experimentation and risk-taking, making messes, and compensating for them.

I decided to use monkeys in a little flotilla on the extreme right-hand side, unshackling souls in various ways - sexually, politically, and so on. Liberating oneself, giving in to one's animal spirits is a sort of game I play with these souls. We are all basically animals after all, and our ecological salvation may lie in accepting that fact.

The first line of Purgatory is 'for better waters my ship of soul turns into the wind'. Simon, my grandson, made boats from paper onto which I typed the Italian text from the first stanza. The little boat becomes one's entry into the work. A small, optimistic, vulnerable little craft.

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K: What is the last panel called?

J: Reaching for Paradise . In this one I wanted some conventional eschatological images, and a denial of them.

Reaching for Paradise, like the totems, is painted on supawood. The sides of the board are planed to create a dimensionless quality. One side is leafed with copper, the other with silver, to create a different light on each side.

On the silver surface is an elegiac figure, its spine splitting to form the structure of wings, the head a light-bearing skull, the pelvis a nest with eggs; the legs become floating chains which slip the bonds of earth. The heart is a scroll bearing pages, for, as Dante says in the last canto of Paradise , ‘in that abyss I saw how love held bound all the pages of the universe’. The gilded toes on the feet are a nod to ancient Egyptian practice, encasing the body and preparing it with dignity for the next stage on its journey. I wanted this side to be a tender, almost passive image, the body gliding upwards without its own volition. It describes our childlike longing to fly, and to have ‘dem bones’ rise again – the body as a humble servant of the Resurrected Lord at the Last Day.

The copper side shows a figure unfurling from a chrysalis-like shroud into a spiral dance during which it disintegrates. ‘Thus, my beloved, having danced with us, the Lord went forth’. (Apocryphal Acts of John). There is a reference to touching the stigmata, St. Thomas ’s experience of the resurrected Christ, but the image is really an abstract spiral, moving upwards , where Satan’s spiral bears downwards. The hands propel the figure, it spins and dissolves, playing with the universe like scattered atoms. Shiva’s dance, if you like.

Painting on metal gives a patina as you correct the marks you make. Wiping metal gives a rich backlight and, as the panel is held by a single steel rope, the slight oscillation turns it into a mobile of glancing surfaces.

K: Let’s select three of the 13 totems we consider as important for discussion.

The Suicide Bomber (with Medusa on the reverse side); The Whore of Babylon (both sides); and The Opportunists (with the abused baby on the reverse side) .

J: The image of Medusa, is based on a classical image, Fury with a head and neck draped with snakes, like the Gorgon Medusa. I painted her face white, like some Greek masks, giving her an almost ‘primitive’ look. She has glass eyes and her teeth look as if they reflect shadow. Her breasts are bleeding and she is propped up on an oil drum, signifying the decay of classical work, the ‘drum’ of the Greek column becoming everyday detritus.

The back of this totem is The Suicide Bomber, with clock, paper-wrapped dynamite and electric wiring above his head. I burned into his torso which is in a body bag that goes all the way down. He is straight-jacketed - limited in his choices. It has always worried me how ‘voluntary’ these people are – some of them set themselves on a path they just cannot escape. They are infinitely pathetic, terribly dangerous, victims as much as everybody else.

The bomber’s head is from a drawing I did after a line in a Patrick Cullinan poem, ‘...men at battle grinning...’ . This inspired the head which looks as if it’s been struck on the skull by a blow. The skull becomes another mouth. He’s hunched up and bound up with an oil can. It’s a very cadaverous image.

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The large Whore of Babylon has variations on the ten-horned Whore sporting with the Kings of Earth on each side.

This deals with sex as a metaphor for congress with and exploitation of power, abuse rather than respect for power and people. The notion, in contemporary pejorative terms, of 'fucking with'.

On one side the Whore's seven heads, through youth to age, are in the throes of orgasm. On the other side of the image is a sort of vaginal scream rather than a face. She is suckled and clawed at by the three self-absorbed kings who range from the bestial to the Apollonian, the ejaculatory to the sated.

K: Let's end off with one other totem, The Unclassified Opportunist.

J: The Unclassified Opportunist is a horrible image, derived from Dante's detestation of people who evade responsibility and are too cowardly to stick to their principles. 'This scum, who'd never lived' are stung by wasps and their faces stream blood and pus which is feasted upon by maggots.

On the reverse side a baby is flung into a latrine, a commentary on negation of responsibility, and the work of maggots, in a contemporary setting. Since we begun working on this totem we noted several instances of such abuse in the press. An infant was retrieved alive from a pit toilet in the Western Cape a few weeks ago, after Paramedics dug sideways into the trench to save her – a parable about Hell and Deliverance made flesh .

K: Finally, how would you like the viewer to respond to this work?

J: I would like the work to suspend the viewer's disbelief and sense of the mundane for a while, as a literary narrative does. I'd like it to become the viewer's reality, a metaphysical game in which good and evil, joy and expiation can be pondered without world-weariness, as a means, not as end in itself. And I'd like the shade of the Poet to forgive my impertinence!