



# Stars in our eyes?

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# Heaven: An Exhibition that Will Break Your Heart

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Art galleries are where we might expect to find things that reflect on, as well as reflect, human existence. The work of art gives a material form to the ideas of women and men. It has no 'use' other than the decoration of that which is otherwise functional - a home, a boardroom. In the gallery it becomes a distraction, diverting our attention away from the routine demands of the material world. Little is required of us but to drift from piece to piece, contemplating the object, allowing it to act on us, reversing the work of its manufacture, letting the shape of the thing give rise to ideas in us. Not necessarily the same ideas as those of the artist, but ideas at least connected to theirs through the manifest material form between us. Now the concept of 'heaven' somewhat cuts across this process of idea into object into idea. Heaven is precisely that which does not have a material form; it is the abode of God and the angels, a place not made of the stuff of the earth, but from the fantastical stuff of spirits, of auras, of emanations, of essences. Rays of light that have forms but no substance, clouds that have shape but no resistance are the earthly materials that suggest the immaterial constitution of heaven. But any attempt to give material form to heaven is to make concrete that which is abstract, to give the continuity of material things to that which is timeless, to bring down to earth that which has no place. Sometimes with the bump of a thing which is not an idea.

The exhibition called **Heaven**, first shown in Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in Germany between July and October 1999 and now at the Liverpool Tate, presents, a rather prosaic set of things. Some do have the magic touch of the art world (Jeff Koons's life-size gold and white ceramic *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1998) others the grace and opulence of the fashion world (feathers and semi-precious stones on Thierry Mugler's dresses) and many others the transience of flickering light (video installations, computer animations). In the gallery however, these objects reveal the form of their making and by and large don't fool their viewers into mistaking them for something out of this world. The clicking and snow of the videos when the loop is finished, the glossed or matted surface of the photographs, the contrived enclosing of space in the installations, the waxy recreations of bodily forms, the carefully

positioned or encased artefacts, all remind us that these are things in an art gallery. The materiality of the objects intrudes on their capacity to evoke the idea of the immateriality of heaven.

Kirsten Geisler's computer generated woman potentially explores the boundaries between the material and the immaterial (*Dream of Beauty 2.0*, 1999). The two-dimensional disembodied head, six times life-size and projected onto a screen, has facial features reminiscent of the image of womanhood made for TV movies with the skill of plastic surgeons and make-up artists. She responds to simple questions and commands spoken into a microphone with a smile, laugh, blink, wink and a few words. Weirdly, she has no hair and no wrinkles and the eyes look as if they look but they have no depth. She can incline her head to indicate concentration, interest, surprise and so on. The idea is to simulate communication - an art-room Turing test. After a few minutes trying to talk to her one visitor concluded that it was a loop tape; a double cheat, just the illusion of an illusion. From time to time as you moved around the gallery, you could hear the *Dream of Beauty* saying "Talk to me" in a cool ethereal voice. But the glitch that produced "I am a virtual - " confirmed that it was no more than a computer that couldn't bring itself to claim to being even a virtual woman.

Some of the objects left lying around the gallery were difficult to construe as the least bit heavenly; a large grey plastic flying saucer inflated like a bouncy castle but having no fun value, a series of giant plastic bead necklaces dangling from ceiling to floor, a line of 'breast mugs' and a guitar with an image of Marilyn Monroe on it. Ron Mueck's *Big Baby 3* (this one has a nappy) suffers from over-exposure; what was once magically enlarged has now become monstrously gross as we have become used to seeing his work photographed and described. An Orlan video did cause an intake of breath as the soft material of her body was sucked out of some fleshy places and injected into her face where it would be supported by bones. The screechy music of the soundtrack and the perfunctory way that the surgeon, his attendants and the camera treated her body as a piece of meat, dispelled any illusion. The breeze block setting for the operation looked like a hastily converted garage; the forceful confrontation with the material stuff was clearly intended to prevent any indulgence of the body as a temple and so compelled the viewer to deal with the idea of its earthly transubstantiation. Heavenly it wasn't.

One piece that got visitors talking and successfully created the illusion of immateriality was Jeffrey Shaw's *Heaven's Gate* (1997). The kaleidoscopic illusion of pieces continually falling at random into a beautiful symmetry was achieved by video

overlay and break-up effects. These were projected onto a ceiling and then reflected in a mirrored floor that appeared to be seven feet or so lower than it actually was. Some hesitated while others bravely walked on the mirrored glass and appeared to be walking into space above the constantly changing image of nothingness.

The curator, Dorit Le Vitte Harten, was clearly impressed with the idea that human bodies can be cast in heavenly roles and that earthly 'stars' have celestial potential. There were photographs of body builders, glamour poseurs, 'perfect' faces, models of angelic children in bed, and children's torsos dressed to playact. Elvis and Michael Jackson appeared a number of times, along with Madonna, Leonardo di Caprio, Naomi Campbell, Twiggy and Kate Moss. As the website puts it: "They are the saints of our time. In **Heaven** the famous are graced and the glamorous are blessed" (<http://heaven.komed.de/>). Princess Di appears once in an oil painting by Karen Kiliminik that looks down her cleavage and once in a limewood sculpture as Madonna (that's the mother of Jesus, not the self-transforming media star). This three-quarter sized iconic carving anticipates Di's beatification, her body clothed in seemly robes, her eyes gazing heavenwards rather than peeking querulously from under that fringe. The slender neck that gave the woman a semblance of glamour has given way to the solid and confident neck of a plaster saint doing earthly business. The piece is attributed to a studio (Art Studio Demetz - slogan; "Real Factory in the world of art") that promotes its PR man (Luigi Baggi - slogan; "Representative of *daily life's* art") rather than an artist. It's not difficult to imagine casts of this piece appearing in shopping malls around the world.

Clothes were another theme that the curator had curiously linked with heaven. Rock star stage clothes, enormous yellow satin angels' gowns, paint-spattered robes, dresses in the form of twinkly chandeliers which could not have been worn by even the most unusually shaped woman. All of these looked home-made compared to Thierry Mugler's clothes. His 1995-6 piece *Robot Couture* is an articulated metal suit of armour that leaves key pieces of flesh exposed; thighs, inner arms, belly, breasts, buttocks. The lines of the overlapping pieces of metal at shoulders, hips and chest emphasise the suit's female form. A picture in the catalogue showed Jerry Hall wearing one of Mugler's feather and precious stone creations on display and confounded the impression that none of these sublime, if not exactly heavenly, garments could ever have been worn by human flesh.

Of course the exhibition is not heart-breaking any more than there are only three steps to heaven. Everyone knows the out-of-this-world aspirations of the two-dimensional stars of stage and screen sparkle and shimmer while moving in the

distance but when static and viewed close-up, are as tawdry and plastic as the sequins on Michael Jackson's glove. Andy Warhol's factory covered the bases back in the sixties and now the disenchanted originals have begun to self-destruct (Elvis's drug-taking and obesity; Jackson's paedophilia and bestiality; Di's bulimia and infidelity). The rather passé view presented by *Heaven* was summed up in Baudrillard's eighties critique of art in late modernity: "The work of art - a new and triumphant fetish and not an alienated one - should work to deconstruct its own traditional aura, its authority and power of illusion in order to shine resplendent in the obscenity of the commodity".<sup>1</sup>

We might hope for something more optimistic at the turn of the millennium. The irreverence of confusing spiritual tradition with fashion exemplified by 'Madonna' trades in a shock value that no longer shocks. The banality of excess in size, complexity, technology, gold, satin and jewels merely shows up once again the sham of glamour's claim to be heavenly. The 'stars' and the exotic forms of culture (video, computers, fashion) have more than enough media exposure and it is difficult to see this as an auspicious or timely use of gallery space. The work of art can be an opportunity to give material form to ideas that transcend the routine vision of our everyday world. The values of beauty, honour, grace, the good and the true can emerge from a dialectic with those of ugliness, wickedness, meanness, evil and lies. Art objects that evoke such a dialectic are what we should hope to find in our galleries as we reflect on the last thousand years and prepare for the next. *Heaven* is a heart-breaking exhibition only if this really is the most profound version of heaven that contemporary material culture has to offer.

Rather out of pace with the rest of the collection was work by the Chapman brothers. Their *Model of Hell* (1999) uses realistic modelling to create a tableau at about '00' size in a glass case. As you circle around the case with a god's eye-view, taking in the careful detail of the scene - an ancient caravan with a bicycle leaning against it, an outside workshop, bits of discarded junk - a calamitous event emerges. A man is squatting beside a tree trunk that is still upright and supported by its roots but with the top lopped off. It has been carved into a woman's torso. Beside him lies an axe covered in blood and running off with what must be the bloody stump of his right hand is a wolf with a sheep's head. This very traditional form of material representation, reminiscent of models of battles in museums and model railways, creates the illusion of an unfolding scene, one that, far more effectively than all the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1990 [1983]) *Fatal Strategies*, London: Semiotext(e)/Pluto.

pop cultural references and technical means of representation, evokes the frailty of our material existence. Models of hell are far easier to make than models of heaven.

Tim Dant, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1999