

# Paul preaches without using words

## BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND THE FLAME

an exhibition of sculpture and painting by Paul Hobbs

*humour, pathos, and a multi-media approach to questions of human value and dignity*

St Martin's Gallery, St Martin-in-the-Fields

"Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words".

When St Francis of Assisi first said this he was advocating 'loving actions' in a culture mainly dependent on words. Preaching is more than words alone, as James' epistle says, and doubtless the saint would have included the created order and the creative work of an artist in this broader definition of preaching.

Paul Hobbs is such a preacher. He developed his skill studying Social and Political Science in Cambridge, gaining his sermon illustrations from the Byam Shaw School of Art in London.

During the exhibition he preached 'wordlessly' to those en route to the toilet in the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields, in London's Trafalgar Square. Paul watched as almost all the passers-by stopped to look and take time to listen to the silent messages of his provocative art. "Only two middle-age ladies didn't stop", said Paul.

Not all of Paul's congregation had earthly pursuits in mind. Up to 300 guests squeezed into St Martin's Gallery on the opening night to see this artist's work. *Between the Image and the Flame* is an exhibition of sculpture and painting, some showing simply the exuberance of life, but most full of the deep questions of life and intimations of death.

The exhibition is one of 29 year-old Paul Hobbs' first major showings outside his home town of Bath. Yet many people have already seen and heard of his work and have made a point of coming back.

"People return to art when "it engages their own experience", he says. "These images are of questions and issues which I have wrestled with, and people recognise the struggle".

Hobbs' art has both humour and horror and sometimes a mixture of both. One piece, *Help*



Paul Hobbs, *Nil by Mouth* (detail)

*teddy find his dinner*, is the familiar childhood 'follow the line' challenge. This time however, teddy is superimposed on the image of a starving child who is walking towards you.

Games and human tragedy are a recurring theme, demonstrating perhaps the reality of modern life that while some play, others die. You too can play by throwing the dice in *Refugee snakes and ladders*, or take a holiday brochure from the country of your choice cataloguing its human rights abuses.

His art reflects our modern culture and its obsessions, including page three girls, absentee fathers and individual pleasure. These 'new gods' are framed in the form of medieval Church icons, images of Jesus and the saints, used originally as visual reminders for Christians to follow.

Our culture's equivalent icons, here shrouded in candles and hung in a crypt, repulse and seduce the viewer. You wrestle with the hold these new gods have on you. Such art engages you, tearing at the heart of your humanity and spiritual values.

Hobbs wants the viewers to ask questions of themselves, and like every good preacher, his art is suggesting answers. He challenges the new iconodules (those who promote icons) and their modern gods. His art mocks the pornography of 'sexual liberation' by locating a condom machine among the images. Death

of dignity, death of human spirit and death of the body are the by-products of the new gods.

It derides the selfishness of self-indulgence and presents an alternative lifestyle of service. On closer inspection words from the Bible and newspapers are scattered erratically and barely noticeably amidst the images and sculpture.

Most of Paul Hobbs' art is three dimensional, provoking the involvement of the viewer beyond a spectatorial role. It invites you to take a closer look, to get involved, to engage the spirit, to hear the truth about yourself and your world. This is the best kind of preaching - when one doesn't feel 'preached at', but voluntarily submits oneself to a personal journey of faith.

The artist is unwilling to acknowledge specific influences in his work beyond his own personal struggles. However, Hobbs is clearly influenced greatly by his understanding of God, his view of human dignity and his Protestant faith. Bible stories and themes pervade the work.

A table set for five people each with their own loaf of bread surrounds a built-in fish tank with two fish. A meal fit for a king? Looking closer the napkins are made from the Financial Times and a map of former Yugoslavia.

Paul Hobbs, although an artist, has also got something to say with words. He enthusiastically engages you in conversation about his work. He explains images and ways of looking at them as he provokes and encourages you to see for yourself.

He doesn't easily understand his fellow artists who don't exhibit their work. Communicating to others is central to the enormous effort and poorly-paid creativity of this young artist.

He says "getting people thinking is part of the reward". However it is also a rewarding experience for the viewer. Many people who view this work will leave with a sense of being cleansed. Through it, one can identify the creeping gods of modern culture and it inspires the viewer to topple them from their strongholds in their lives. Take an opportunity to view the work of Paul Hobbs, it may be one of the best sermons you'll ever see.

GRAHAM DALE