

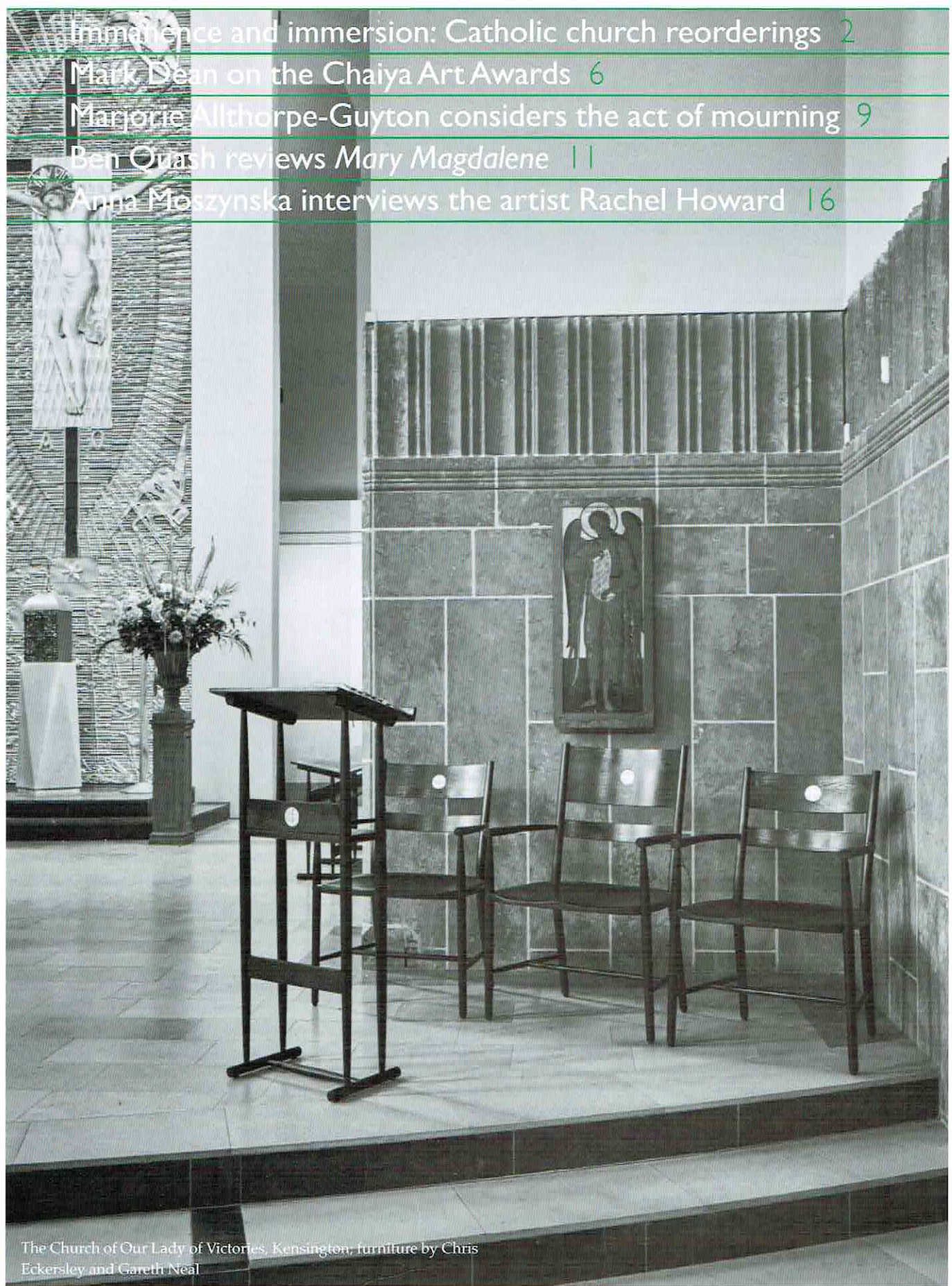
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The Church of Our Lady of Victories, Kensington; furniture by Chris Eckersley and Gareth Neal

## Chaiya Art Awards

gallery@oxo, London  
29 March – 8 April 2018

'Where is God in our 21st Century World?' This was the question posed by the Chaiya Art Awards, 'the UK's newest theme-based biennial art award' in an open call to artists of all descriptions, making work in any medium, provided it could be exhibited within the confines of a group exhibition in the gallery space of the Oxo Tower building on London's South Bank over Easter 2018.

Nearly 500 artists submitted works in response to this call, 43 of which were selected for exhibition. Of these, three were awarded prizes totalling £15,000 by a chaired panel of judges (of whom the present writer was one, necessarily making this more of a report than a review, apart from discussion of the winning works, for which collective responsibility is taken).

The recipient of the £10,000 Chaiya Award (plus a Bible Society award) was Deborah Tompsett, for *A Thousand Bottles of Tears*, a quietly compelling installation of hand-thrown vessels each formed from clay the size of a human heart. Previously installed in Chichester Cathedral, the work is a model example of a kind of contemporary religious art characterised by the use of traditional material processes to address broadly spiritual themes hinged on scripture (in this case, Psalm 56).

The £3000 Addison Award went to David Theobald's immaculately conceived *Modern Wonder*, a 3D modelled video animation simulating the 3D printing of a model of Rio's *Christ the Redeemer* in fluorescent green plastic, set to a jaunty Worker's Playtime-style soundtrack. It didn't 'force the viewer to consider' anything, but in its deceptive simplicity it reflected deeper contradictions around faith in our technological culture.

The winner of the £1000 award (and another from the Bible Society) was Peter Codling's large charcoal drawing *Naivety*, one of an ambitious series of works recently exhibited in Oxford, which imagined a humanely dystopian updating of the traditional Nativity narrative, and also picked up on the theme of technology as a challenge to spirituality.

The exhibition was sensitively curated by Sophie Hacker, making



Peter Codling, *Naivety*, 2016

what could potentially have been an unholy mess of disparate works into a show that did justice to the many artists involved, as well as the vision of the organisers. The founder and funder of the awards, Katrina Moss, speaks of the inspiration for her project being an experience of profound loss, followed by a desire to encourage others to grapple with difficult questions of suffering and hope.

The show was accompanied by an eponymously titled book which functions in part as a catalogue, illustrating all exhibited works (with the unfortunate oversight of most of the video - amended below) but also includes many pieces not selected for exhibition. The main text of the book is a series of personal reflections on wider issues of art and faith, written by Ann Clifford, another prime mover behind the Chaiya project.

In this text, as with many faith-based accounts of art, beauty abounds, as a concept at least:

*There was a prophet named Isaiah who talked of a priceless crown ... available to all - 'a crown of beauty instead of ashes'. The writer means that all lives can be infused with loveliness through*

*faith. But there is also a custodian of such a crown. Someone who can make beauty manifest. The artist.*

It is interesting to see Isaiah cited in this context, rather than the more usual Bezalel (in whose name incidentally the Bible Society made their awards). With their use of multivalent metaphors, in a context of cultural critique, there is a case to be made that the Hebrew prophets provide a closer model for contemporary artists than Bezalel and his fellow artisans with their 'skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft'.

However, I'm not sure whether it so easily works the other way round; that is, to suggest that when Isaiah goes on to say 'you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God', the prophet was speaking of what we might today understand as 'the artist'. The notion of artist as priest has a complicated history in modern and contemporary art, and perhaps raises more questions than it answers in this context.

But to return to the question at hand, 'God in the 21st Century' is presumably where God has always been, in every age: 'God Don't Never Change', as



Deborah Tompsett, *A Thousand Bottles of Tears*, 2007-14

Blind Willie Johnson (an artist not actually featured in this show) proclaimed. So perhaps the question can be reversed: Where is contemporary art in God's world? This is a less profound query, but tricky nonetheless, as readers of this journal will be all too aware; but whatever answers are to be found, they will only be discovered through praxis. And so an initiative like Chaiya is to be welcomed, especially by those of us who have a tendency to get mired in theoretical concerns.

Certainly the selected artists were pleased – many of them came to the opening, which had an air of communal celebration, matching the generous

spirit underpinning the awards. BBC TV coverage, and the very public setting of the gallery, on the busy riverside walkway between the South Bank Centre and Tate Modern, promised a broad audience, who were invited to vote for their favourite work, the most popular to be awarded a further prize of £1000.

The video works inadvertently omitted from the book included James Bingham's *El Evangelista, Romel*, a complex portrait of Mexico City shot over a decade; Anusheh Zia's *Celestial Adhaan*, which layered Islamic calls to prayer with satellite imagery; Clara Aparicio Yoldi's *Fragment edMemory*, a digital animation of a disappearing

library; Susie David's *Studies for the Shipwrecked*, a poetic search for submerged signs of meaning; and Jade Chorkularb's *One Day I Will Stop Crying*, a meditation on the Buddhist concept of impermanence, incorporating a refugee's keening lament.

It is to be hoped that this inaugural exhibition will encourage a diverse range of artists to enter for the 2020 Chaiya Art Awards, the theme for which will be announced at the end of this year.

Mark Dean is an artist and Chaplain to the University of the Arts London

## Antony Gormley in conversation with Rowan Williams chaired by Tim Marlow

Royal Academy of Arts, Thursday 5 July 2018, 6–7.30pm

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/events/category/talk>

