

Giovanni Intra – Jesus Saves

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must
 flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate
 men.
And dost with poyson, warre, and sickness dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stoake, why swell'st thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

– John Donne, Holy Sonnet X, 1618

I wanted to talk about the approach utilised by some artists to ponder cosmology and its effect in producing works that ruminate around ideas of mortality, and the desire to map this mortality in some way. This imperative to map which influences the breaking of the picture plane into a grid of intersecting lines, not only informs the perceived view but also acts as a 90 degree projection of the landscape realised as a grid, or in plan. This breaking of reality into a grid pervades contemporary arts practice, in the form of the pixel, but it is also informed by its use through painting's history, as a way of organising the picture plane.

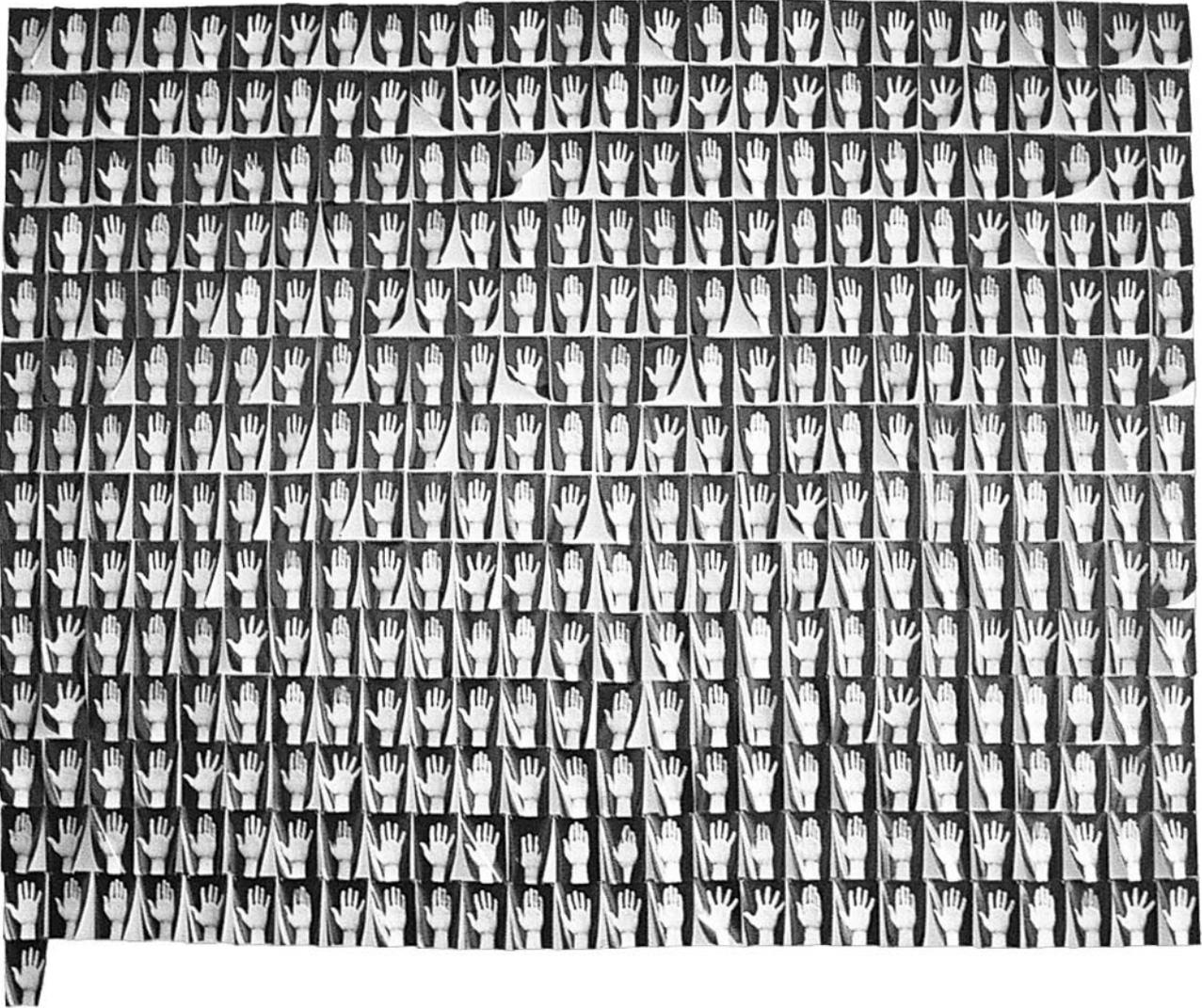
It has always seemed that there is a desire by artists to understand existence and interpret this into a system of signs or signals which can then be recognised by others as having some meaning relevant to existence. The grid offers up a meaningful understanding of the landscape and our position within it. It refers to reality explicitly, and as a simulacrum. The introduction of the Global Positioning System enables one to now locate one's-self so completely within the world so as to become a target under certain conditions found in modern warfare or search and rescue. This ability to "light-up" or to stand out, or to be seen against a generalised background noise also appears as a function of the artist across the landscape of history. The problem here is that it requires that an audience must of course understand what is being perceived, understand the context within which an artist operates, and have the ability to decipher these relationships

I now want to refer to a photographic series by Giovanni Intra entitled *Harsh Seventies Reality*. Giovanni started work on this series in 1993. The title refers to a double album of the same name released by The Dead C in 1992. Giovanni's use of the title was interesting, for it not only referred to sentiments expressed within the album, but curiously critiqued a period in music that for the both of us exemplified

ideas of excess, danger, and discovery. Giovanni is dressed in the photographs as a skinhead. His clothing is a trademark of the period which has mutated into a quasi-goth style still observable in cities and small towns throughout the western world. It appears that he is situated within a graffiti-walled enclosure, a public toilet, or bathroom. Perhaps even a squat in a large city. Images of 1970s London, redolent with hippies, rastafarians, and punks, living in derelict Victorian mansions, indulging in the pleasures of the mind and body seem to permeate this rendition. In all images Giovanni is imitating the crucifixion of Christ. Arms are outstretched and generating a belief that he alone is paying for the sins of the world, the sins of the human. Located and inserted in one arm is a hypodermic syringe. Most, if not all of these images have had a grid scored into them with a razorblade. The razorblade is a quintessential punk artefact, alongside the safety pin, Doc Marten boots, and tartan bondage trousers. The scoring has revealed in the work that Giovanni is attempting a mapping, an explanation for the images.

Giovanni Intra did exhibit widely in New Zealand during the short time he was here. There were some interesting objects, shown at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland during the late 1980s. One can easily recall the shock of the glittery platform shoes inscribed with the legend "Debaser", and then he managed to produce some of the most evocative articles in contemporary New Zealand art history throughout the 1990s. His "Golden Evenings" played with ideas of the NZ landscape as idyll, romantic and shimmering enveloped in a golden baroque splendour, and then there are his photographic works which will remain scary, chilling and spooky. In "365 Days", the hands, ghost-like, are repeated day after day for a year, as though the idea of it can present us with an idea of being saved, at least for once in one's life. Or perhaps it is an attempt at documentary evidence of an anti-stigmata, a non-miraculous incident, the quotidian moment, the ever longing and the forever supporting, the endlessly waiting event.

My fondest memory of Giovanni was an exhibition he gave at Galerie Dessford Vogel in Dunedin in 1995. This being at a point when he had been developing Teststrip, with others, in Auckland. Most of the works were white text on black backgrounds, rendered in acrylic on paper. A few of the sheets were pages ripped from the magazine "The New Zealand Listener", Telecom advertisements in particular were targeted, these were played with by eliminating text and generally poking fun at the subject of the advertisement. The paintings were then attached to the polished wooden panel walls of the gallery. They looked for all the world like piles of coffins stacked across horizontal space, named and sequenced. Catalogued and arranged in some cosmic order. It was like having a bunch of clues appearing which gave some hint to an understanding of how the artist perhaps viewed mortality. This was further compounded by the flicker of recognition



Giovanni Intra, *365 Days* (1991) black and white photographs, collection of Jim and Mary Barr

concerning the paintings themselves. There is a McCahon-esque treatment of the text, and in the very implications of the text in its religious overtones and general demeanour. The works themselves were small, authoritative, dark, brooding, and didactic. The hardest thing to reconcile now is that it was all so fleeting, so impermanent. Giovanni's excursions into painting were not at all extensive, he preferred the traffic of ideas as opposed to the traffic of the painted image. I can only remember the "Text Paintings". There were no other paintings.

I was so wasted.
I was a hippy, I was burnout, I was a drop-out,
I was out of my head.
I was a surfer, I had a skateboard, I was so heavy, man I lived on
the Strand.
I was so wasted.
I was so fucked up, I was so smacked up, I was so screwed up,
I was outta my head,
I was so jacked up, I was so drugged up, I was so nebbled out,
I was outta my head.
I was so wasted,
I was wasted.

– Black Flag "Wasted" (K. Morris/G. Ginn) 1978