

The medium and the message



Three in One, acrylic on paper

Art speaks where words fail in the work of Gloucestershire artist Paul Hobbs, writes **Derek Walker**

WORDS can be dangerous. The church often creates uncomfortable headlines by what it says on topical issues, and people can read into the words of ordinary Christians political or theological assumptions that they do not intend. Gloucester artist Paul Hobbs bypasses words in favour of pictures. His bold colours and vibrant images sidestep these potholes as they draw questions from viewers, rather than preaching at them.

It is not that he has nothing to say. Whether graduating from Cambridge with an honours degree in social and political science, teaching teenagers or exhibiting paintings and sculptures, he has wrestled with issues that impact people and communicated what he finds.



Icon (Famine), collage, acrylic and gold leaf

The more puritanical end of the church might elevate the message above the aesthetic, but Hobbs tries to balance the two intuitively.

'You're very conscious of both when you're making stuff. You make sure things are composed extremely well; you make sure that there's enough colour and interest in the form and quality of what's being put together; and

you try to load the image with lots of ideas – but also bury them a few layers deep within the work.

'So at a glance, you're drawn to it; you maybe get the general idea. But it's the subplots and the hidden things that give richness and excitement,' he explains, adding, 'Ironic or oblique references give the thing texture, power and punch.'

He has in mind some of his own works, where newspaper clippings – yes, he does use some words – are half-buried in the paint, or where a machete sits in a glass box, captioned, 'In emergency break glass' alongside puns on what to do in case of fear/ fire.

Hobbs' portfolio covers a range of topics, so that it reaches different people in different ways. Those exploring social issues will find work addressing old age, absent fathers, homelessness and our capacity for violence. But there is also much in his work that directly expresses the faith that motivates him.

For example, he depicts themes such as the Trinity in ways that are as fresh for Christians as for those without any faith. The left panel of his acrylic *Three in One* features images of creation: a day and night counterpoint of stars and a flock of birds; mountains behind plants, a kangaroo and a human couple. In the centre stands a stylised fragmented body in vivid blocks of blood red; while to the right a fluid, tree-like figure of flags and doves represents the Holy Spirit and flows into the other parts of the work.

Such an approach lets people from various backgrounds explore ideas together. This bridge-building makes him popular with the churches that put on his exhibitions, making them open to their communities, often linking with schools.

After a show in Essex, he says, 'Several church members told me that they had had their most meaningful conversations about life and faith with their friends in front of one of the pictures. Nearly everything exhibited in

the show had been most significant for someone.

'One lady spoke with sign language at great length to her deaf Asian friend about the Body of Christ crucifixion image. Her friend was particularly interested to learn all about it, and wanted to ask me many questions.

'Three people admitted to being moved to tears by the artwork. One was a black man about my age, brought by his partner. He was especially drawn to the Icon of the starving Sudanese woman and child. As we talked he began to cry (unusual, he said, for him) because of the dignity accorded the Africans in the image. This was something he rarely saw in portrayals of Africans, even by black artists.'

Viewers can only draw emotion out of the work if it was put there in the first place, he says. 'The first emotion is that you really care about the subject, so if it's absent fathers or people struggling in family, you need to have a strong empathy, even if it's not your own experience. Then you're doing the thing out of respect for people and their circumstances.'

What comes next is the creative work, finding the device that gives a piece momentum and power, which is when the piece can start to give emotion back. 'When you get that moment, it's very exciting. It can be very moving. Sometimes that's intellectual and sometimes it's in the guts.'

He believes in his medium as well as his message. It does not bother him that other media, such as music and film, are 'sexier' and more respected in mainstream culture. He proudly describes the immediacy and accessibility of art as 'more democratic'.

'It is not time based: you don't start at the beginning and an hour and a half later the event has happened, whether you understood it or not. The great thing about art is that you can enter the room, look at any of the pictures in any order you like; wander round a sculpture and see it from three or four angles. You

can come back tomorrow; you can come with a friend; you can stand in front of it and discuss it.

‘You can go and ask someone about it, whereas you can’t stop the film and say, “Excuse me, there’s a really interesting point there. Can we discuss it and then we’ll get onto reel number three?” Whereas with visual art you get all of that engagement and I think that’s the vitality and the power of it – especially when, as I often am, the artist is available and managing the exhibition, to talk with people. Where you’ve got an artist who’s articulate, you can have a fantastic engagement, which is particular to the person who needs to ask the questions.’

In his largest work, *Holy Ground*, which has been displayed in cathedrals, schools and churches, Christians from around the world have donated shoes to be placed around a ‘burning bush’, their stories laid out nearby.

There is something meaningful about such different people all sharing one faith and the physical presence of their shoes strangely powers the installation.

His aim for *Holy Ground* was to show that God’s people are involved in all walks of life. ‘We’ve got somebody from Cambodia, a fashion model in New York, several African people – a white farmer from South Africa, for example, who set up projects at the end of apartheid and faced quite a lot of criticism from the Boer folk.’ Contributors also include a murderer who has come to faith, and someone who gave help to those clearing up after 9/11.

Hobbs recalls how he approached one university contact. ‘She and her husband had been quite able athletes – one of them had run for Britain a number of times. When I contacted them, thinking they were doing a health project in Ethiopia, I said, “It would be great if you



Holy Ground, shoes and stories, stones and steel

could get some shoes, maybe from an athlete who does a marathon.” I didn’t realise that they were friends with Haile Gebreselassie. They turned round and said, “Yes, we’ve got these shoes from Haile and a statement from an interview that he’d done already, which would be suitable.” I was slightly flattered: the shoes come with a little signature on as well.’

The idea is as simple as it is effective and could almost become an arts franchise. Hobbs agrees that it has potential. ‘The exhibit could be expanded with more shoes and stories. I am still collecting to broaden the range, but the real issue is having the time and funding to exhibit it. I need a marketing manager!’

He’s not all about the message, though. As any true artist should, he loves the abstract side of his art, revelling in playful patterns that suggest reflections, flora or gothic architecture. He

often places these pieces between works with a message, using them to offer visitors to his exhibitions ‘sorbet courses between the meat, freshening people up to then go and look at something more serious’.

But he finds them just as refreshing as an artist. ‘For me it’s the same: I need that liberation, that fluidity, that sense of celebration, just as I need to understand and engage with complex, painful issues in the world and know that God has a concern for those issues, rather than just trivialising everything.’

‘The abstract ones also have a sense of worship about them. I think they are praise songs to some degree. I do pray over them and try to make them with reference for God as much as I do with the others.’

Derek Walker is a freelance writer