

27 June to 31 July 2008

Philip Eglin

Good artists develop slowly but logically, moving in response to their creative needs but taking their audience with them, even if they sometimes disconcert their less nimble devotees. Bad ones either never develop or go in for total makeovers that leave one wondering what was wrong with what they were doing before.

Philip Eglin's new exhibition is a classic example of the first approach. Anyone who knows his work will immediately feel on familiar ground. Here once again are the free-standing figures, the great 'buckets' and some of his smaller dishes. Here is the usual cast of characters: the Madonnas, Men of Sorrows, popes, footballers and harlots, in other words the same wilful mingling of transcendental and everyday. Technically, too, these pieces are at once recognisable. The fluid and sometimes wayward modelling, the details press-moulded from consumer packaging, the combination of vigorous drawing, prim transfer patterns, and bold expressionistic sweeps, dribbles and blobs of colour to create decorative ensembles of astonishing sophistication – all these are characteristic.

But an acute observer will notice certain changes, not so much in formal terms as in mood and temper. Humour has always been central to Eglin's work; no-one has a firmer grasp of the paradox that its very subversiveness has the power to deepen meaning, and the profoundest things are often said tongue-in-cheek. In this new work, however, the jokes are a shade less impish, a touch more barbed and corrosive, while the closely-related bawdiness has a scabrous, explicit edge that makes previous references to the 'oldest profession', whether inspired by Cranach's knowing nudes or E.J. Bellocq's grainy photographs of life in the red-light district of New Orleans, seem positively innocent by comparison. Nor are the Rabelaisian images alone in having this higher relief; the sacred dimension to the iconography undergoes a similar development. It is true that a group of white porcelain Madonnas sit side by side as demurely as *The Mikado's* 'little maids from school', but they are joined by some tragic figures of Christ at various stages of his Passion and Resurrection: arms outstretched on the cross, body slumped in a 'deposition', displaying his wounds as he harrows Hell or perhaps to doubting Thomas. The figures often echo accounts of these subjects in early Flemish painting, some of the most spiritually intense in Western art.

All the antitheses that Eglin's work seeks to reconcile – the ancient and the modern, the portentous and the trivial, the universal and the private – are subsumed in the integration of the sacred and the profane. This is the equation that haunts him most insistently, clamouring for urgent resolution with high stakes on either side. I am almost surprised that he has not yet depicted the hapless St Anthony Abbot, the desert hermit who was tempted by obscene devils, or touched on the medieval liturgical practice of *risus paschalis*, the inducement of laughter in church to celebrate the Resurrection, the priest if necessary resorting to smutty jokes. But we need hardly trawl myth and history for illustrations. Eglin speaks for any man who has found himself assailed by lascivious thoughts as he approached the altar to receive the bread and wine.

When I last wrote of Eglin's work I described it as 'redemptive', as if the intention was somehow to 'save' or 'justify' one set of images by association with another. I am sure he himself would never put it in these terms, but he does seem to be increasingly aware of how complex the relationship between the images is. Hence, perhaps, his current devotion to texts incorporating puns, word-play and *doubles entendres*. And what are we to make of his preoccupation with the Pope? Although I must confess this is not my favourite aspect of the iconography, I can see the symbolic value of the Holy Father if he represents a sort of Janus-figure, facing morally both ways: heading an institution of supreme spiritual significance even if its authority has recently been vitiated by the iniquities of some priests.

Eglin's great theme finds its readiest and most fertile metaphor in the concept of football as a 'new religion'. Despite the obvious appeal this has for a secular society desperately seeking heroes, and the ingenuity with which it has been expounded by certain pundits, it does not in itself bear too much scrutiny. 'What do you mean by religion?' is only the most obvious of many questions begged, as I am sure that Eglin, fan of the game though he is, would agree. One can but marvel, however, at what a gift the idea is to his project, especially when it comes freighted with such resonant and brilliantly pictorial images: players with arms flung wide, praying for heavenly intervention, offering hugs of comfort, pleading with implacable referees, and so on.

Needless to say, all this has its critics. A 'Christian artist' recently declared himself 'shocked' by one of Eglin's Madonnas in an exhibition, and demanded its removal. This seems particularly sad at a time when some of our more far-seeing churchmen, alarmed at the intolerance of Christian fundamentalists, are looking to the arts for a lead in holding together those very complexities and contradictions that Eglin celebrates. The 'inclusive consciousness' from which poetry, according to Seamus Heaney, springs, is needed, these clerics argue, in theological thinking too.

Then there are the aficionados, often of a Leach persuasion, who quarrel with the very notion of ceramics being put at the service of an external programme. Pots, they believe, should be purely self-referential, concerned only with their own form and related surface decoration. But this is to betray a poor knowledge of ceramic history. Pots have always told stories and promoted agendas; think only of Italian maiolica, delftware bowls wishing success to trade and shipping, or all those Staffordshire pieces with mottoes and pious texts exhorting us to godly living and good works. As for Leach, what could carry more moral baggage than his own so-called 'ethical pots'?

In fact Eglin is not an isolated phenomenon. A number of contemporary ceramicists use their work to make statements about the world they live in, and future historians may well see them as a school, comparable in general intention if different in the philosophical or political colour of their message. For centuries art theorists were obsessed with the Horatian maxim *ut pictura poesis*; perhaps now is the time to draw parallels not only between poetry and painting but between poetry and ceramics too.

Eglin is a deeply committed artist, but I know he would be horrified if anything I have said led to misconceptions. No-one could be less of an Ancient Mariner, imposing himself on his audience, nor could anyone do more either to deny earnestness on his own part or to discourage it on ours. I have already mentioned his subversive humour, his almost schoolboy larkiness, and he is quite capable of deliberate obfuscation, of laying false trails designed, in D.G. Rossetti's immortal phrase, 'to puzzle fools'.

Above all, there is the sheer artistry of the work itself, the exquisitely subtle modelling and the dazzlingly inventive decoration, informed by the keenest sense of composition, colour and line. This again is a distraction of sorts, although paradoxically it acts as an incentive too. We are offered, in effect, a choice: either we can simply enjoy the work for its glamour and technical prowess, or we can let these beguile us into pondering the ideas they cloak about the weird, unfathomable business of God and creation. As George Herbert put it,

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.