

Modern Stations of the Cross in Manchester

A Lenten pilgrimage through a modern metropolis brings the sacred together with the ordinary



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The Stations of the Cross are given a modern twist in Manchester and London this Lent with a trail taking visitors to different city-centre venues to view art works that reflect grief, loss and transformation

Pity the poor pedestrian in central London or Manchester at the moment. Thanks to the construction of London's Crossrail and Manchester's Metrolink extension, anyone on foot is obliged to negotiate a maze of safety barriers, construction hoardings, metal fencing and "Footway closed" signs. Worse, since the nature of capitalism abhors a vacuum, holes opened up by public transport works are instantly filled by private developments, adding more hazard-taped scaffolding poles, hi-vis-jacketed builders and manoeuvring lorries to the obstacle course.

While the FTSE index falls, the city rises, nowhere more presumptuously than in the Square Mile which, every time I visit it, looks more like Fritz Lang's Metropolis. It is an unlikely setting for a Via Dolorosa but, in the weeks leading up to Easter, Lenten pilgrims will be rubbing shoulders with city workers in its pedestrian-unfriendly construction-site rat runs.

The idea of a Lenten pilgrimage through a modern metropolis was pioneered in Manchester two years ago by the artist Lesley Sutton, who curated a PassionArt Trail with stops for meditation in front of works of art in different city-centre venues, sacred and secular. Exploring themes of grief, loss and transformation, it attracted 7,000 visitors and, after a year's rest, she is repeating it.

The theme of this year's trail, "Be Still", is inspired by Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God!" Concerned that we have "lost our capacity for stillness", Sutton hopes it will offer city dwellers of all faiths and none "a space to pause, reflect mindfully and learn to live more simply and compassionately within the stresses of everyday city life". Mindfulness, she tells me, is big in Manchester, but she feels it could do with a bit more focus. To this end, she has selected works of art that "uncover moments where the sacred inhabits the ordinary".

Some, like Gwen John's Interior – a sacramental vision of a tea table in the artist's Paris studio transfigured by light pouring through a cross-barred window – are on permanent display in Manchester Art Gallery. Others, like Julian Stair's life-sized clay funerary jars and sarcophagi distributed through Manchester Cathedral, have been specially installed for the duration of Lent. Stair's sombre and majestic exhibition, titled "Quietus Revisited: The vessel, death and the human body", is a meditation on a subject that Sutton feels "we have forgotten how to live with" amid the sensory overload of modern life.

Sutton's own installation of 20,000 host-like discs of illuminated paper, titled Manna, in the nave of the city-centre church of St Ann, is a call to simple day-to-day living, while in the Lady Chapel of the same church, Adam Buick's video projection Veneration Bell – filmed in a sea cave on the Pembrokeshire coast – creates a contemplative space off Manchester's main shopping street where a still small voice could conceivably make itself heard.

In London, meanwhile, the recently formed interfaith charity, Coexist House, has organised its own "pilgrimage for art lovers" on the more traditional model of The Stations of the Cross. "Mapping the geography of the Holy Land on to the streets of a 'new Jerusalem'," co-curators Aaron Rosen and Terry Duffy have plotted a switchback course through the heart of the city beginning at King's College Chapel with Duffy's painting Victim, No Resurrection and ending at The Temple Church with Leni Diner Dothan's video installation Crude Ashes.

In between, the route takes in Eric Gill's Fourth Station in Westminster Cathedral, Jacopo Bassano's The Way to Calvary in the National Gallery and Bill Viola's Martyrs altarpiece in St Paul's Cathedral.

Half of the works are on temporary exhibition. Until Easter, James Balmforth's spare Intersection Point, a diagonal cross made of bolted white construction bars with blow-torched ends, will rest behind the altar of the Methodist Central Hall Chapel in Westminster and Guy Reid's stripped-down Crucifixion, with its exposed Christ deprived of garments and even of a cross, will hang in St Peter-ad-Vincula at the Tower of London – the historic burial place of John Fisher, Thomas More and other prisoners executed on London's very own Golgotha, Tower Hill.

Modern-day parallels for the Via Dolorosa are never far to seek, and many of the works have clear contemporary resonances. In the richly harmonious interior of Christopher Wren's St Stephen's Walbrook, Michael Takeo Magruder's Lamentation for the Forsaken is inspired by a passage from Lamentations (5:1-2) whose contemporary relevance is achingly obvious: "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look and see our disgrace! Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens."

On the tomb-shaped installation's four modular screens an image of the Turin Shroud comes in and out of focus as parts of Christ's body merge with news photographs of Syrian refugees. In the place of Christ's feet we see migrants in transit, littering railway lines and piled on to overloaded boats; in the place of Christ's hands we find refugees caring for loved ones, alive, injured and dead; in the place of Christ's body we witness asylum seekers caught up in conflict, clashing with police with riot shields. Christ's face, meanwhile, yields place to a hollow-eyed young woman and a wide-eyed child dangling a limp doll. Underlying the shifting images is a mesh of Roman capitals recording the names of the dead as a roll of honour.

At the nearby Salvation Army international headquarters, Güler Ates has given more tangible expression to the refugee crisis. Her Tenth Station: Jesus is Stripped of his Garments, is interpreted as a massive tapestry of cast-off infant clothes that spills down through the building's glass atrium to collect in a pool on the basement floor. Some garments are inscribed with simple handwritten messages: "I am a child refugee, I am scared of the sea," says one, beneath a squiggle of waves and a line of fish.

Before its installation, the tapestry was dragged across the nearby Millennium Bridge over the River Thames in a public ceremony witnessed by Rosen, who was impressed with how casual bystanders were caught up in the symbolic drama of the event. It persuaded him that "watching people care passionately is inspiring", regardless of faith.

"In our global era, it is just not viable to 'not do God'," Michael Binyon wrote two years ago in a Times article about the launch of Coexist House. So is it viable to run a Via Crucis through the heart of a modern multicultural metropolis?

When Rosen asked Cardinal Vincent Nichols a similar question, Nichols reaffirmed the crucial relevance of this Christian ritual: "It's tackling what always lies at the heart of so much of our living: how do we cope with tragedy, how do we cope with suffering, how do we cope with brokenness, and what in the end do we hope for, what meaning do we ever find in those things?"

On an upbeat note, one positive image from my urban pilgrimage will stay with me. Arriving at the Barbican on Ash Wednesday to see G. Roland Biermann's Ninth Station outside the church of St Giles Cripplegate, I found the work, simply titled Stations, still under construction.

Storm Imogen had delayed the assembly of its 14 columns of blood red oil barrels mounted with a cross of motorway crash barriers. The site was blocked off by traffic cones, and the arrival of a builder's lorry with an amber flashing light completed the picture: here, on the edge of the City, was a bit of construction being done in the name of God, not Mammon.

Laura Gascoigne is The Tablet's art critic. For more details see www.passionart.guide and www.coexisthouse.org.uk/stations2016.html