

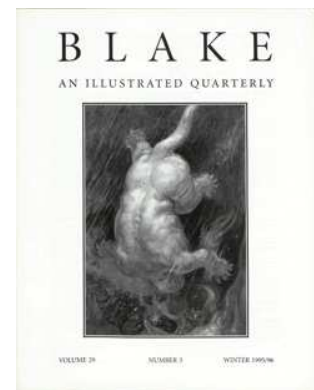
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R E V I E W

The Genitals are Beauty, An Exhibition

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A universal ethics of obligation may actually promote fair play for "alterity" by insisting that everyone, no matter how "other," is on the same moral footing. Blake's contemporary, the novelist Elizabeth Hamilton, made this point when she had one of her characters remark that Jesus was the first philosopher who taught respect for women, because he preached a truly universal ethic, one that decreed no special moral rules for women:

Women, we learn from the gospels, frequently composed a great part of his audience: but to them no particular precepts were addressed, no sexual virtues recommended. . . . His morality was addressed to the judgment without distinction of sex. His laws went not to fix the boundaries of prerogative, and to prescribe the minutiae of behaviour, but to fix purity and humility in the heart.⁴

Blake's Christianity may not have prompted him to worry very much about other people's "unabsorbable, indigestible residue"; but neither did it prompt him to prescribe the minutiae of their behavior. He thought that the commandment to love and forgive other people implied a commandment to let them be free: "Jerusalem is called Liberty among the Children of Albion" (*Jerusalem* 54.5, E 203). Liberty was grounded on moral principles that could be recommended to everyone.

The complexities of this kind of Christianity are not quite captured by Moskal's reference to Blake's Jesus as "an alternative way of looking at the moral life from the grid of obligations and duties used by promulgators of universal laws" (32). Still less helpful is Moskal's characterization, derived from Stanley Hauerwas, of ethics as it is ordinarily understood: "in its emphasis on duty and obligation as they pertain to all individuals interchangeably, the standard account [of ethics] alienates each individual from his plans, metaphors, and stories" (2).

Moskal tends to measure Blake's success as an ethicist by his (imperfect) success in forming ethical conceptions that escape the terms of the "standard account." But her idea of the "standard account" is needlessly reductive. The notion that people are morally obligated, for instance, to love their neighbors as themselves doesn't imply that they have to alienate themselves from their own plans, metaphors, and stories; it doesn't even imply that they have to *like* their neighbors. (Indeed, one's sense of the neighbors' otherness will probably be sharpened considerably by one's sense of an obligation to forgive them.) Every great system of belief associates its ethic of obligation with a rich variety of metaphors, stories, and plans of life. This richness is surely one of the reasons for Blake's attraction to Christianity and for

his ability to adapt its ethical narratives and metaphors to his own literary and intellectual plans.

It is regrettable that Moskal brings current intellectual assumptions to bear on Blake without subjecting them to the kind of criticism to which she subjects his own ideas. In this respect, however, she is by no means unusual; few contemporary critics interrogate their framework assumptions as skeptically as they interrogate their primary texts. Moskal's subject, however, is of unusual interest, and what she says about it is also of unusual interest, both for its own sake and for its ability to provoke debate.

"The Genitals are Beauty." Exhibition of "An Interior of William Blake." House of William Blake, London. July-August, 1994.

Reviewed by KERI DAVIES

"The Genitals are Beauty" is the second exhibition organized by Tim Heath at the House of William Blake. In July and August 1994, three floors of 17 South Molton Street were taken over by "An Interior for William Blake," a mixed show of artworks and craft pieces, some on a substantial scale, exploring the themes of Innocence and Experience in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the *Songs*. Monday-Friday, 6-17 February 1995, the House of William Blake staged a second show, on a more intimate scale and confined to one room of the former Blake residence (and the only survivor of his London homes). Tim Heath had invited a number of artists and craftspeople to respond to the line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion" (E 37).

The genitals, in art as in life, can still be a source of consternation and anxiety. Not all the artists who took part in the first show were willing to work to the new brief. In the event, 41 artists and craftspeople provided paintings, drawings, ceramics, jewelry, photographs and sculptures on the theme of the human sexual organs.

The history of genital display in English art is a history of concealment and suppression. Blake's erotic drawings in the Vala manuscript were mutilated (perhaps by John Linnell), while Turner's were burned with the agreement of the National Gallery.¹ There are, however, two notable early examples of upfront sexuality in the history of English art: the Cerne Giant (an ithyphallic figure, possibly of Hercules, cut

⁴ Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800; rpt. New York: Garland, 1974) I:199-200.

¹ Not by John Ruskin, as is sometimes claimed. Turner's erotic drawings were left to the nation. Ruskin couldn't possibly have been allowed to destroy state property—it was a government employee, the National Gallery curator Ralph Nicholson Wornum, that struck the match. See Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 250.

into the chalk hillside in Roman or pre-Roman times above the Dorset village of Cerne Abbas and the sheela-na-gig (c. 1135) that boldly confronts the visitor to the church of St. Mary and St. David at Kilpeck (Herefordshire) with her *ostensio vulvae*.

Some of the artists displaying work in "The Genitals are Beauty" were clearly working in the tradition of the Cerne Giant and the sheela-na-gig, a tradition that is always confrontational and sometimes comic. Thus the self-portrait "Do I make myself clear?" from Sheila Brannigan was a photographic print which asked us to consider if portraiture can be genital. Equally confrontational were drawings of the female pudenda by Bryan Smith ("A Dangers Delight") and Sheena Vallely; while Frances Vallaydon-Pillay contributed a lovely painting ("He's so beautiful") of an erect penis surrounded by flowers.

Daniel Lehan's papier maché "Hermaphrodite holding Serpent Aloft," with a gold phallus and red breasts, had just the right tender clumsiness. I enjoyed Juliet Gatto's "Aliens took my Genitalia"—a flying merkin made of papier maché and wire. And Anne Hardy's fabric sculptures of wobbly-floppy penises were irresistibly joyful and comic. The spirit of punk (always sexually confrontational) lived on in James Anderson's lurid T-shirt "Nudity Costume," as it did in jewellers Spencer Smargiassi's silver and garnet "Giving Head Tiara." Jo Saunders's "Snatch & Sports Bag" offered one of the most imaginative interpretations of the brief: PVC and fake-fur mini rucksacks representing the vagina, and all-purpose denim sportsbags denoting the penis.

Blake's contemporary Richard Payne Knight, in his study of phallic worship, wrote that, in antiquity, "The Female Organs of Generation were revered as symbols of the generative powers of Nature, or matter, as the male were of the generative powers of God."² This "sex-as-mysticism" line has had its twentieth-century adherents, most notably Eric Gill. Throughout his life Gill obsessively drew his own and his friends's genitals. Similarly, the wood-sculptor David Gilbert carves each year a "Spring Phallus." They are beautifully crafted, but too self-consciously heroic for my taste.

But it's the makers of pots, vessels, and containers that find it all too easy to go for alchemical imagery—to turn every cunt into an alembic, as it were. Alison Wolfe-Patrick contributed some beautiful ceramics that nevertheless seemed to me to fall into that trap. But I very much admired Adaesi Ukairo's copper vessel entitled "Oriaku." Here the alchemical imagery didn't seem at all forced.

In the search for ever more recondite sources for Blake's art, it can be forgotten that sometimes he speaks directly

and simply from the heart, saying what he thinks and meaning what he says. Amongst those works which seemed to me to achieve just that directness and simplicity were water colours by Claudia Böse ("A Touch of Sweetness in my Heart") and Alan Young ("Joys Impregnate, Sorrows Bring Forth"), a suite of woodcuts ("The Genitals are Beauty") by Paul Peter Piech, and the delightful wooden toys of Peter Markey.

"The Genitals are Beauty" thus tied together a roomful of genitals with some of the kitschy inheritance of St. Valentine's Day. Instead of a catalogue, the exhibiting artists also contributed self-portraits of their genitals for an accompanying book.

The exhibition is part of a project to secure all five floors of 17 South Molton Street as a memorial to William Blake. With a foothold on the first floor, the House of William Blake is working toward a property buyout as an advertising and design consultancy. "The House," says Tim Heath, "wants to grow up to be a centre for the dissenting imagination in honour of Blake's enquiring yet awkward spirit."

² Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the remains of the worship of Priapus, lately existing at Isernia in the kingdom of Naples, in two letters, one from Sir William Hamilton ... to Sir Joseph Banks... and the others from a person residing at Isernia; to which is added, A Discourse on the worship of Priapus, and its connexion with the mystic theology of the Ancients*, by R. P. Knight (London: T. Spilsbury, 1786) 47.