

The following essay by Edmund Barry Gaither appears in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Minus 2000: A Collection of recent works by Bryan McFarlane". Edmund Barry Gaither is Adjunct Curator at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, and Director of the Museum of the National Centre of African American Artists.

# Art and Mystery

## Bryan McFarlane exhibits at the Mutual Life Gallery

Art and mystery are inseparable. Art is born of mystery — the child of infinite imagination forced to express itself through finite, physical materials using only light, that perpetual mate to and opponent of darkness. The human spirit, a factor with unknown boundaries, ponders mystery in the effort to know itself in relationship to the living forces which surround it, and which seem to demand propitiation. Ritualised acts of propitiation constitute religion, the sites of propitiation become shrines or sacred spaces, and the medium of negotiation is light. This mediation is epitomised in the votive candle which, while bathing space around it in light, makes darkness articulate. Thus artists, who are priests to the visual soul, minister in light and darkness as they probe mysteries that confound and satisfy spiritual longing. Bryan McFarlane joins them.

The spiritualised drama of light and dark is as old as day and night, and the liturgical articulation of it surely dates to the discovery of fire. Centuries have gone into moulding expression through light and its transformative agency. Ancient peoples aligned their pyramids or megaliths to capture the sun's light on calendric shrines. Medieval churches rendered walls in coloured glass to spiritualise interior spaces. Mosques lined their walls with gold leaf and reflective tiles multiplying and fracturing sacred light in shimmering effects. Rembrandt's portraits and religious subjects gained extraordinary emotional power as their forms emerged from deep darkness accented and revealed by carefully placed highlights. Gustave Dore and many other artists have depicted sacred themes using the spare but powerful tools of black and white, of light and dark. McFarlane has located himself within this tradition in "Minus Two Thousand".

For nearly two decades, McFarlane has been profoundly interested in how light and darkness conspire to spiritualise space. His explorations have taken him to the old cathedrals and churches of Bahia where Catholic and Candomble (Yoruba) traditions intersect in dark interiors speared by beams of coloured light breaking through stained glass windows, or where altars are lighted by scores of low burning votive candles in small coloured glass containers. These spaces, like *Interior for Yansa*, 1993, synthesise multiple and overlapping iconographies within a greater etherality. Space itself becomes ambiguous as solid tracery and mullions are transfused with coloured light, and the altar, which seems to be flanked by Yansa's bird staff and a saint, opens to reveal several passageways into lighted corridors beyond. A flatness denied by shifting surfaces is affirmed by lines of text which fall randomly throughout the middle panel of the painting.

The mystery here is both spatial and spiritual. Its intrigue derives from both its formal complications, and its spiritual conflation of initially antagonistic religious traditions. It



Bryan McFarlane

succeeds because its point of reference is embedded in the often painful transformation of Africans and Europeans into Bahlans — a transformation wrought by five hundred years of experiences in the old cities of Brazil.

In *Hands of Water and Spirit*, a truly mystifying environment prevails. Spatial relationships are more evoked than constructed, more a function of an equivocal layering than of an architecture of linear perspective. The pictorial surface, sometimes scratched in ways suggestive of printmaking, presents grey and brown forms which seem to partially enclose a primordial space pierced at two points by liquefied light above an indistinct pool of water. Within this interior are several ambiguous forms or icons suggesting a dream place where forms metamorph and images merge. Such an interior is an imagined, spiritual realm.

These highly spiritualised realms recur in *Interior of Mystery*, *II* and *Shrine* where the environments are equally dematerialised. In the former, the shallow space of the inner sanctum is filled with curvilinear forms of great transparency, forms which read as lines of light to weave the interior together. Using translucent blues and greens set against deep ochre accented with gold and red, the composition suggests a dense but flickering interior. By contrast, *Shrine* is a world of fire, or candles, of transformation by the purifying action of the flame. Its palette emphasises warm colours, and at its centre, supported by a series of repeated hot spots, light burns through

a shaft of yellow-white pigment. These works may be regarded as abstract in that they deny concrete representation, however, they clearly recall essential iconographic elements derived from the memory of actual altars, shrines and interiors of hallowed buildings.

Memories of hallowed spaces permeate *Ritual Passage* in which a light-filled corridor winds its way to a distant luminous pillar. Entrance to the hall of light is flanked by the ghosts of columns surmounted by capitals. Between them is the suggestion of a transparent arch. This suggested arch finds its counterbalance in a carpet of transparent forms — a few in the shape of bowls or vessels — which line the entrance and introduce a note of fragility to the passageway. Here the whole painting seems alive with light and reflectivity.

Every part of it is washed in white, yellow and golden tones reminiscent of an incorporeal world where things are chimera, and the physical is suspended in favour of the spiritual.

McFarlane has been particularly struck by the spiritual qualities of ancient places where long and layered human exchanges have transpired. Istanbul was such a place for him. An aged city sitting on the sea at the crossroads of the East and West, Istanbul, like the now famous Orient Express, conjures up Byzantine mystery, Centre of the Eastern Roman Empire when it was Constantinople (City of Constantine), and later capital of the Empire of the Ottoman Turks, its worn streets lead to magnificent Islamic and Christian edifices. In the huddle of its magnificent old buildings, markets and bazaars are recalled centuries of human enterprise, intrigue and exchange. Its space is made mysterious not just by its mosques and churches, but by the weight of its constant human habitation for two millennia.

All of this history informs McFarlane's *Lights of Istanbul* where, as if seen on a rainy day at nightfall, light flickers back in our eyes softened only by the view of an occasional spire, minaret or hint of a dome. Arches, a



Shrine

much favoured form for Christian and Moslem builders, emerge from the dark and then fade back into it. A distant wall marks the meeting of night sky and city, but spots of light, like torches, relieve and brighten the intervening space as they create a carpet of colour in the centre of the painting. Even this manifestation recalls the rich carpet tradition of the Orient and its relationship to mercantile traditions of ancient and contemporary Turkey.

Bryan McFarlane's paintings continue to fascinate us with their ever deepening exploration of light and darkness as these qualities are encountered in spaces made significant by human history, spirituality, and the passage of time. He recalls these spaces and their character by evocation, rather than by literal description. Sometimes highly imagined and abstracted, his paintings are infused with properties of contemplation, reflection, and appreciation for the residuals of life and spirit which inhabit the dark corners of spaces which have witnessed life in its joy and pain. He has striven to give an image to these memories by articulating them in light and giving affirmation to their transformative power.



Interior of Mysteries



Light of Istanbul



Ritual Passage