

botanica
the earthly *divine*

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attestation of authorship

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October 2009

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introduction

Botanica investigates new perspectives on the established tradition in the arts of employing botany as a metaphor (Bosch [c.1503–1504], Schwabe [1899], Rossetti [1973], Böcklin [1880]).

Using digital photography taken in Auckland cemeteries, the project applies an oxymetaphorical interpretation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In doing so, it interprets descriptions of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory in relation to elements of landscape, life, death, punishment and the divine.

The project does not seek literal or illustrative perspectives on Dante's poem, but drives towards an interpretation of the ethos of each divine space. In this regard the paper will briefly discuss relevant critical and methodological aspects of the research and examine, with examples of experimental work, determining influences on the project.

theological space and dante's divine comedy

In order to develop a body of work that photographically interprets the ethos for Heaven, Hell and Purgatory, the project required a considered framework upon which to base artistic decisions. Therefore, for each of the three divisions of Dante's Divine Comedy¹, I devised individual artistic considerations based on different interpretations of his work, on comparisons between these interpretations and on conceptualisations made by other commentators. In elucidating these positions the following considerations are of interest.

¹ *The Divine Comedy* was originally written in Italian. Its first title was 'The Vision' and it was recited as a sacred poem. Dante later changed the title to 'comedy', (which traditionally meant a story, that begins as a tragedy but moves to a happy ending). Boccaccio added 'Divine' to the title in the 14th century.

The work may be considered an epic, allegorical poem that depicts three regions of the dead: Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. It takes the reader on a journey through these spaces.

The poem, although a product of its time, used many sources, including the Bible, Greek mythology, Roman history, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Livy, legends, miracle and medieval morality plays and incidents from the writer's life. It begins at the gates to the underworld and Dante, the narrator, is guided by Virgil through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise, (where he eventually meets his beloved Beatrice). In this work Dante followed the Ptolemaic system of the Cosmos in which Earth is the centre of the universe. He placed Hell at the centre of the Earth, underneath Jerusalem, reached through nine different circles, containing sinners suffering punishments and torture. Purgatory was physically somewhere in the southern hemisphere, ascending up to Paradise located in Heaven above the Earth.

h e a v e n

For this project I have primarily considered Western Christian² discourse surrounding Heaven. This is because Dante's work was essentially Western Christian in nature and did not seek in its interpretation of theological space significant influence from other religions. However, because interpretations of Heaven as a theological space are so varied (due to the large number of different religions and interpretations), I wished to consider the potentials of harmony, light, growth and space as possible approaches that might imbue the interpretations with higher levels of originality. These concepts surface through a number of existing considerations and definitions of Heaven.

The Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines Heaven as "A place regarded in various religions as the abode of God (or the gods) and the angels, and of the good after death, often traditionally depicted as being above the sky." Heavens is described as "the sky" (p. 849). Freke (1996) suggests "Many people think of Heaven as somewhere 'up in the sky' and a starry night can be referred to as the Heavens" (p. 14). He further suggests that Heaven is believed to be located here on earth: "The Garden of Eden was believed by some Christians to be north of Babylon in the Armenian Mountains" (p. 14). Ashton & Whyte (2001) explain how Eden has "become a paradise, a beautiful garden of delights" (p. 54).

² The term *Western Christian* is used as separate from *Eastern Christian* in that it refers to Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, while *Eastern Christian* refers to all Christian traditions that did not develop in Western Europe. In using this distinction I align this distinction with Thurston (1908), Maas (1909), and Harrent (1911) who all define *Western Christian* thought in relation to Western theological framings.

In Meister Oberrheinischer's *Paradise Garden* (c. 1410) we are shown paradise as a garden surrounded by a crenellated wall, and in Lucas Cranach's *Paradise* (1530) he depicts the Garden of Eden as a lush landscape.

In comparison, other descriptions of Heaven portray it as a rich landscape of precious gems and jewels. Freke (1996) explains that some ancient civilisations pictured paradise "as an idealised version of their earthly existence; a bountiful harvest; luxury and sensual delights; freedom from want and responsibility" (p. 11). He also suggests that most visions of Heaven "reflect the aspirations and achievements of the cultures from which they come" (p. 20). In the Book of Revelation, the holy city of Jerusalem is described as the glory of God's light being compared to a valuable gem, as clear as crystal. It describes twelve types of foundations decorated with twelve types of gem, as well as the city being made of "pure gold, as pure as glass" (21:18-21)³.

In Jacopi Tintoretto's *Paradise* (c.1588) he shows us a Heaven set in the skies with residents seated on clouds. The Apostle Paul describes an environment that is positioned as air, or in the air (1 Thes. 4:17–18)⁴. Thus we have theological descriptions that suggest the association of the nebulous nature of air with the metaphysics of divine space. Therefore when generating images I considered how I might make manifest the luminosity and translucence of air. Dante's Heaven develops aspects of this vision.

³ Retrieved May 20, 2008, from <http://niv.scripturetext.com/revelation/21.htm>

⁴ "meet the Lord in the air." Retrieved May 20, 2008, from http://niv.scripturetext.com/1_thessalonians/4.htm

Dinsmore (1915) suggests that in Heaven “one moves upward by beholding the beauty of truth enkindled along the stairway for the eternal place”. The empyrean he describes as “pure light, light intellectual, full of love” (p. 281). Hatzfeld (1951) describes Dante’s Paradise “with its brilliant and refulgent spirits reveals itself in the most subtle theological speculations as an intellectual vision for Dante’s raptured contemplation” (p. 292). Giffin (1956) describes the canto as “full of light and impulsive joy” [Paradiso XXVI] (p. 30).

Dante describes Heaven as a series of metaphorical, luminous visions. In the Empyrean – the White Rose of Paradise he says,

And as advances bright exceedingly
The handmaid of the sun, the heaven is closed
Light after light to the most beautiful;
Paradiso, XXX:7–9

There is the Rose in which the Word Divine
Became incarnate; there the lilies are
By whose perfume the good way was discovered.
Paradiso, XXIII:73–75

He makes further references to the luminosity of Heaven in *Paradiso*, II:31–33 and *Paradiso*, XXXIII:115–116.

It seemed to me a cloud encompassed us,
Luminous, dense, consolidate and bright
As adamant on which the sun is striking.
Paradiso, II:31–33

Within the deep and luminous subsistence
Of the High Light appeared to me three circles
Paradiso, XXXIII:115–116

Although Dante's Heaven is not described as richly as his landscapes of Hell, there is a strong sense of luminance and the nebulous due to its positioning among the physicality of the stars and among certain ideals of harmony and brotherhood. In this regard, his framework for visualising Heaven as a divine space may be contrasted against more 'physical' manifestations.

hell

As with Heaven, I considered existing Western Christian interpretations of Hell. The Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines Hell as, “A place regarded in various religions as a spiritual realm of evil and suffering, often traditionally depicted as a place of perpetual fire beneath the earth where the wicked are punished after death” (p. 853). The Apostle Matthew refers to Hell as “inextinguishable fire” (Matthew 3:12) and a “blazing furnace” (13:42,50). The Book of Revelation recognized Hell as having a lake of fire and sulphur, where sinners will be tortured “day and night forever and ever” (20:10-15).

The right-hand section of Fra Angelico's *The Last Judgement* (c. 1431) depicts Hell as sinners residing side-by-side, some almost on top of each other, with demons torturing them. Satan is depicted engorging himself on the unrepentant. Similarly, Taddeo di Bartolo's *Scenes of Hell* (c. 1394), and Giotto di Bondone's *The Last Judgement* (c. 1305) depict Satan eating and excreting sinners, giving the impression of Hell as an active space, associated with physical pain, congestion, gluttony, sexuality and pain.

Hell is also often discussed as a pit or chasm. According to Hale (1890), the Hebrew word Sheôl, which signified the abode of the departed spirits, and corresponds to the Greek Hades, or the underworld, is variously rendered as “grave, pit” and “hell” (p. 188).

However, Shedd (1886) explains that “Sheôl has in the Old Testament no narrow, fixed meaning, further than the place of the dead.” Interestingly, Hell he notes, “is not a reliable translation of this idea because in the Old Testament the sense of Sheôl is not that of a place of endless punishment” (p. 413).

Conversely, Dante’s *Inferno* places Satan in the deepest depths of Hell, trapped waist-deep in ice, isolated from the rest of Hell’s inhabitants. Watts (1995) explains how Dante reveals in the final two circles of Hell, “the consequences of fraudulence: man’s alienation from himself, from his fellow man and society, and the ultimate isolation – separation from God” (p. 194). This notion of isolation appears in other interpretations of Hell. Ma’súmián (1995) explains how within Zoroastrianism, the Gathas⁵ describe life in the House of Lie (Hell), as “the worst existence”. It is a place where “evil souls will forever suffer alone” (p. 19). Kallad (2008) suggests “Hell is estrangement, isolation, despair.”

In creatively investigating Hell, I sought unusual synergies between traditional metaphors of fire, decay and degradation and Dante’s contrasting notions of ice and isolation. Compared with his conception of Heaven, Dante’s Hell is far more complex in terms of levels, landscape and description. It is a multi-layered, multi-textured Hell, and these ideas were influential in my creative investigations.

⁵ The seventeen “Hymns” or “Songs” of Zoroaster.

In Dante's poem there are many different descriptions of Hell due to the large number of different landscapes and types of sinner. Watts (1995) suggests, "Dante's Hell is a world enveloped in darkness that clouds both physical and spiritual sight" (p. 195).

Obscure, profound it was, and nebulous,
So that by fixing on its depths my sight
Nothing whatever I discerned therein.
Inferno, I:10–12

Not foliage green, but of a dusky colour,
Not branches smooth, but gnarled and intertangled,
Not apple-trees were there, but thorns with poison
Inferno, XIII:4–6

Watts (1995) explains how in the last two circles where fraud and treachery are punished, Dante reveals the consequences of fraudulence: "man's alienation from himself, from his fellow man and society, and the ultimate isolation – separation from God" (p. 194). In the final circle of Hell, Satan is found trapped mid-waist in the ice:

The Emperor of the kingdom dolorous
From his mid-breast forth issued from the ice
Inferno, XXXIV:28–29

There are also several references to fire and decay within the text:

All the diseases in one moat were gathered,
Such was it here, and such a stench came from it
As from putrescent limbs is wont to issue
Inferno, XXIV:49–51

This side the summit, when I saw a fire
That overcame a hemisphere of darkness.
Inferno, IV:68–69

And the Leader, who beheld me so atttent
Exclaimed: Within the fires the spirits are;
Each swathes himself with that wherewith he burns.
Inferno, XXV1:46–48

Thus, in my creative investigations rusted reds and browns make subtle references to fire and decay, while Dante's conception of ice and isolation serves as a counterpoint. In this regard the botanical speaks oxymetaphorically in that what is vibrant and living (botany), depicts the unhealthy and decayed (Hell).

purgatory

Purgatory as a divine space is an unstable concept that while influenced in contemporary thought by Dante's work, is also shaped by a number of other sources. The Oxford Dictionary (1998) defines Purgatory in Catholic doctrine as "A place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are expiating their sins before going to Heaven" (p. 1505). Proctor (2003) describes Purgatory as a place where "one sheds the sins of our time on earth, purifies, purges oneself". According to the Vatican "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of Heaven"⁶.

Duffy (2005) suggests that in the late Middle Ages, the nature of Purgatory (according to a Western perspective) was "less coherent or at least less carefully nuanced, and altogether grimmer". He claims it was understood as "an out-patient department of Hell, rather than the antechamber of Heaven" (p. 344).

Conversely, Peri (1955) suggests the Mount of Purgatory is "bathed in light and gradually rising towards purity and understanding and love and Heaven" (p. 208). However, he agrees that "Purgatory was in that early stage of composition considered as subterranean and contiguous to Hell" (p. 203).

⁶ Retrieved September 10, 2008, from http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P2N.HTM

Physically Dante's Purgatory is quite clearly defined. It is depicted as a mountain situated on Earth, surrounded by water. The rocky environment echoes the harsh punishments delivered to sinners on the mount. Dante describes it as a flat, desert environment.

About our way, we stopped upon a plain
More desolate than roads across the deserts.
Purgatorio, X:20–21

He also describes how souls are purified so that they may enter Heaven cleansed of their sins:

So purified, that it may rise, or move
For rising, and such loud acclaim ensues.
Purification by the will alone
Purgatorio, XXI:58–60

Now, as thou seest, I here am punished for it
What avarice does is here made manifest
In the purgation of these souls converted,
And no more bitter pain the Mountain has.
Purgatorio, XIX:114–117

Although Dante's Mount of Purgatory may be seen on one level as physical, Le Goff, in Wheeler (1947) refers to Purgatory as an "intermediate state". He explains how the inhabitants of Purgatory are not as happy or sad as the inhabitants in Heaven and Hell. "All that remained he suggests, to make it truly intermediary was to assign it a location between Paradise and Hell" (p. 74).

According to much Christian doctrine, life in Purgatory is not permanent, as once purged of one's sins the soul will be ready to enter Heaven. Sinners are sent to Hell for eternity and those who enter Heaven, also remain forever. Time spent in these realms is fixed and it is only in Purgatory that one's time is transitional. Thus, Lewis (2001) and Trexler (1986) consider Purgatory as a middle place where "there must be some space between absolute beatitude and damnation" (Trexler 1986, p. 161).

Dante writes of a Purgatory that was formed by the impact of Satan falling to Earth and creating the crater of Hell. The force of this impact produced an uplift that created a mountain on the opposite side of the Earth. This mountain exists on Earth positioned between the descent into Hell and the ascent into Heaven.

Conceptually, there are commonalities between Hell and Purgatory. In both, sinners are punished for similar crimes (i.e. gluttony, lust, and avarice). Dante places limbo in the first circle of Hell, but limbo has also been conceived as a kind of Purgatory.

Lewis (2001) describes how in Western religious traditions, “Purgatory originated as an afterlife limbo (borderland; from the Latin limbus, border) where the spirits of the dead await the final judgment and their subsequent assignment to a realm of damnation or beatitude” (p. 218). He goes on to explain how “the pre-Zoroastrian conception of Sheol from which the dead could communicate with the living could be interpreted as indication a kind of limbo realm for the departed” (p. 219).

The instability and leakage between conceptual borders of Purgatory extend also into notions of the Earthly Paradise (or Garden of Eden). Dante suggests that this is situated at the summit of Purgatory, from where Heaven can be accessed.

From the most holy water I returned
Regenerate, in the manner of new trees
That are renewed with a new foliage
Pure and disposed to mount unto the stars.
Purgatorio, XXXIII:142–145

Thus, Purgatory traditionally acts as a link between Heaven and Hell. Its intermediate state suggests notions of waiting, punishment and impermanence. However, its peripheries, because they are prone to conceptual leakage, are unstable. Conceptually, this poses a number of challenges to creative visualisations of space.

Conclusion

Although Heaven, Hell and Purgatory have distinct characteristics in my exhibited images, there are commonalities between the three divisions that unify them as a whole. Cavendish (1977) notes how “in traditional Christian belief there are different layers or divisions of heaven and hell” (p. 30). Within *The Divine Comedy*, Dante assigns to each of these divine spaces multiple layers: Hell’s circles, Purgatory’s terraces and Heaven’s array of spheres.

My interpretations of these spaces are not literal. They do not illustrate the physicality of Dante’s described environments but seek more abstract considerations of some of his conceptual framings.

At this point it is therefore useful to briefly discuss elements outside of his descriptions that were imported into the research as a means of heightening the chances of synergetic discovery. One of these is the relationship between the botanical and the cemetery/garden.

garden, cemetery and the botanical

All of the final images in this research were sourced from shoots I undertook in the Albany Village Cemetery, Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery, Mount Victoria Cemetery, North Shore Memorial Park, and the Waiharaka Public Cemetery.

Although a cemetery may be broadly understood as a place where the dead are buried, it can also be framed as a form of garden or place of domicile where something is held in a state of suspension. Firth (2005) suggests that ‘cemetery’ does not refer to the dead at all, and in classical Greece the equivalent word simply meant dormitory. The word can also imply a resting or sleeping place and Firth suggests that in some Christian communities the expression ‘God’s acre’ connotes a belief that the bodies of the dead are at the discretion of God, being sown to produce a harvest of souls, or perhaps even of resurrected creatures, in due time (p. xvii).

Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou (2005) explain that dictionaries indicate an analogy between tomb and home as “one’s abode after death and the last home” and many bereaved align these meanings when speaking about the grave plot and its marker (p. 7).

Thus, there is a strong connection between the cemetery and the 'place of abode'. Therefore the cemetery may be seen as the earthly portal where one either resides or passes through on the way to occupying another space. It is in this idea that Firth (2005) explains the origins of the concept of a cemetery as a form of garden. The result he suggests is a paradox: corruption below ground matched by new life above ground [Heaven] (p. xvii).

Francis, et, al. suggest that the notion of the grave as a garden helped mourners make sense of the incomprehensibility of death and the experience of loss. In their studies, the bereaved chose to call upon the image of the garden when speaking about death and burial. It was the spiritual and regenerative aspect of the garden that seemed to inform this association between cemeteries and gardens, drawing upon deep religious and historic roots (p. 4). They note that the imagery of Paradise and the Garden of Eden in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions often suggest a beautiful, secluded park, or ornaments with water, trees and flowers. They argue that, "as Adam was required to 'dress and keep' the sacred space of Eden before the Fall, so, too the cultivation of the soil (and possibly the tending of a grave) became work ordained by God, and horticulture and burial in a garden offered a promise of paradise regained" (p. 4).

In much Western Christian tradition the enclosed garden has been seen as the epitome of rest, beauty and order and it is perhaps these attributes that suggested the concept of the garden as a palliative resource in relation to death. Francis, et, al. suggest, that through the creation of the cemetery in the form of a landscaped garden, a harmony with nature was sought in death, and through this, a return to the lost Garden of Eden (p. 4). While these writers suggest a cemetery as a garden relating to a return to Eden, other theorists like Wheeler (1947) discuss the idea of the grave as a place of sleep “within the church’s shade”. This they suggest “combines a sense of place... and a sense of membership (in the Catholic and Apostolic Church). Both literally and metaphorically, the emphasis is upon peace” (p. 61).

Thus the relationship between the garden, domicile and journeys to other theological or divine spaces is not definitive. In this research project it is the sense of contradiction existing between the cemetery as a manifestation of waiting, permanence and decay, and its associations with temporality and transition that prompt unusual synergies in conceptualizing my work. The cemetery is a contradiction. It is a beginning and an end, a place of closure and a place of transition, a verdant place of growth and a place of decay. It is conceptually an oxymoron, its signifiers often at odds to each other in their positioned meanings. It is a space that can be read in many (often contradictory) ways.

Because of this, it is useful at this point to examine the notions of metaphor and oxymetaphor as phenomena.

the oxymetaphor

In this project I used the notion of the oxymetaphor as a method of stimulating access to non-literal interpretations in my work. By this I mean that I sought to break away from literal illustration by considering the relationships between opposing ideas (just as certain historical understandings of these spaces have been contested).

The botanical as metaphor

The term *metaphor* is derived from the Greek language, *meta* meaning 'over'; and pherein, 'to carry.' It may be understood as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it does not literally correspond, in order to imply a resemblance. Thus, the metaphor may be conceptualised as a comparison of two seemingly unrelated subjects. Mulcahy (2005) discusses a metaphor as something that links two separate semantic domains to create new meaning.

Using botany metaphorically is a well-established tradition in the arts. Prettejohn (2000) suggests that the use of the lily as a symbol of virginity is well known in European culture: "Its rediscovery in Romanticism for German, French and British painters was a sign of the rediscovery and renovation of pre-Enlightenment culture, a 'tradition' of symbolic iconography" (p. 172).

During the Victorian era a new floral vocabulary called the language of flowers or 'florigraphy' was developed and used in small decorative books that listed the sentiments represented by specific flowers. Connelly (2004) observes that each flower could be represented positively, negatively, sacredly or profoundly (p. 6). Thus the iris because of its association with the Greek goddess Iris was understood as a metaphor for death as was the arum lily. However, both flowers could simultaneously, denote purity.

Francis, et. al., argue that "flowers have symbolic meaning in practices surrounding death and mourning because they symbolize the human life course". They suggest "Metaphorically, the grave, by being planted as a garden, aligns human death with the natural, vegetative world of growth, decay and renewal" (p. 23).

According to Kirkpatrick (1987) Dante's visionary journey is a "privilege granted by God to show how the universe is divided" (p. 1). In the final sphere of Empyrean (located in Paradiso) Dante sees God as a pure white rose⁷. However, in Scwabe's *Virgin of the Lilies*, (1899) Paradise is not a rose garden but an avenue of white lilies among the clouds.

Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1504–1504) presents a world in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in which the sins of the flesh are portrayed through a complex orchestration of metaphors. Although the closed panels of his triptych show the earth during its creation on the third day, after the addition of plant life, inside the painting Bosch presents a garden with recognisable species (for example the Dracaena behind Adam on the left hand panel).

⁷ *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri; Paradiso, Canto XXXI.

However, contained in the work are also botanical metaphors with clear theological references including in the centre, a human male who rides a chthonic solar eagle-lion, carrying the triple-branched *Tree of Life*. In addition to these botanic forms the left and central panels also contain a number of fantastic botanical constructions that reference seedpods, fruit and ornamental growth. These constructions tend to suggest more nebulous meanings, yet by their orchestration they can operate as metaphors for innocence, pleasure, and sensuality.

The Oxymetaphor

As an extension to the metaphor Gozzi (1999) describes an oxymetaphor as a combination of metaphor and oxymoron. “The oxymetaphor is a shifting trope, with two poles and (at least) two levels”⁸ (p. 33). Butler (1993) explains that “Within the codes of visual arts it is possible to construct a paradox, an oxymoron – multiple layers of meanings simultaneously available” (p. 196). In this situation transparent signifiers are used to present contradictory aspects as part of an artwork’s system of discourse.

LaFollette’s (1982) writings on Clarin’s *La Rosa de Oro* (*The Golden Rose*), note that “the title itself, in addition to connoting ideal perfection, purification, and resurrection, can be viewed as an oxymoron that combines the most fragile of flowers with the most stable and incorruptible of metals” (p. 104). *La Rosa de Oro* is a story that concerns opposing forces (the earthly and the Divine) that are set against each other.

⁸ An oxymoron links together two domains that are normally thought of as being opposite.



Figure 1: Image of a rose with layers of decaying tombstones, taken in the Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (May, 2009).

Within the text the Pope worships an earthly matter (the golden rose) that contradicts his churchly virtue. The story explains that the Pope views the golden objects as reflections of God's creative powers and ultimately or purity itself.

By means of contradiction as a system of discourse, I use oxymoronic metaphors throughout *Botanica*. For example, in a number of experiments I used a rose to consider the ethos of Hell. This use of the flower is generally at odds with the traditional application as a symbol of love and beauty⁹. This created tensions within the work as the flower in relation to layering of images from decaying tombstones called into question its original references to clarity, sanctity and purity (figure 1).

Thus the oxymoron pushes considerations of Dante's theological spaces beyond literal translations. Unlike the work of artists like Botticelli (1482), Delacroix (1822), Blake (1826), and Doré (1867), who considered aspects of Dante's journey as illustrated events, my purpose is to employ the antithetical as a means of exposing the ethos of divine spaces. I employ the botanical as an 'earthly' device and a contradiction. The cemetery is reconceptualised through its own portal into divine realms. It speaks with the same physical properties one encounters when one walks past its headstones and gardens, but these temporal forms are translated into descriptions of the eternal, metaphysical and divine.

⁹ See Connelly (2004, p. 6) for a description of the rose's use in Victorian floriography.

methodology

Essentially this thesis may be framed as research by ‘creative practice’ (Scrivener, 2000). In this kind of project, reviews of knowledge and the gathering and processing of data, lead to a sustained, self-reflexive engagement with my own work. In articulating the research methodology designed for this project it is useful initially to consider the relationship between its research paradigm, methodology and methods.

While Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004) define a paradigm as “a theory or hypothesis”, in research, a paradigm may be understood as a framework within which theories and approaches to research are constructed. Research paradigms “define for the researcher what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate [research]” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994 p. 108). Thus *Botanica* may be seen paradigmatically as a qualitative, subjective inquiry into the creative potentials of synergies between certain theological/literary spaces and photographic construction. Its concerns are not with finding truth or establishing transferable outcomes, but with creating unique coherences between ideas and visualisations.

Methodologically the research project may be framed as a self-reflexive inquiry that employs a multi-method¹⁰ approach, in a spiral structure of production, reflection, evaluation and refinement. The methods employed in this process include a photographer's journal, 'indwelling' inside emerging work (Douglass and Moustakas 1985), and informed feedback from external agents. These methods not only assist in generating lines of inquiry but also enable me to evaluate the communicative nature of my work.

I will now discuss in more detail the implementation of this approach.

¹⁰ In creative practice research a multi-method approach generally surfaces from a need to employ a variety of discrete, although sometimes connecting research procedures within a project. While these methods may be applied to separate parts of an inquiry, their parameters of employment may be intentionally unstable.

self-reflexive *production, reflection, evaluation* and *refinement*

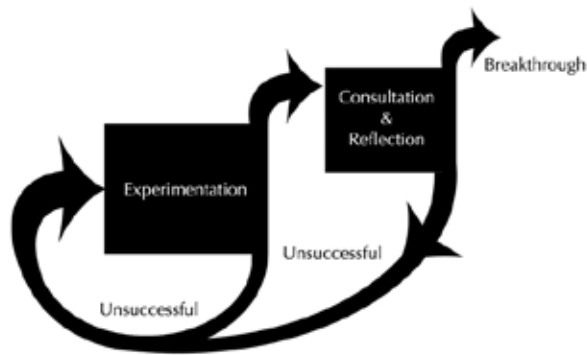


Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the experiment-based model designed as a means of generating high levels of discovery in this project.



Figure 3: An example of an early experiment that sought to illustrate Heaven, Hell and Purgatory metaphorically within white space (May 2009).

Essentially the experiment-based process through which I developed work in this project may be illustrated diagrammatically (figure 2). In this a process of experimentation leads to reflection on emerging visual hypotheses. Where potential resolutions prove problematic I move back to experimentation (normally changing the nature of the question I am asking). When breakthroughs occur, my process moves on to new spirals of more interrogative and focused experimentation. What is significant about this model is its heavy reliance on experimenting. This was important to my project as I was seeking with this thesis to move my creative questioning away from professionally successful approaches to ideation that had been prevalent in my practice as a professional wedding photographer.

This self-reflexive, experiment-based approach to research may be understood in relation to Schön's (1983) reflective practice paradigm in which the practitioner acts as the researcher. In other words, the art-making I undertook (in this instance, the production of a series of photographs) became the site or focal point of the research. Schön (1983) regards experimentation as a pathway for discovery, that in its beginning stages may be understood as "action[s] undertaken only to see what follows" (p. 145).

An example of this may be illustrated by a series of early experiments where I took photographs of body parts then added a botanical aspect to ascertain what might happen when the corporal and the botanical were synergised (figure 3).

However, in their consideration of the botanical and corporal I found these works too literal and conceptions of space as a divine phenomenon were poorly resolved. In setting myself a relatively metaphysical problem with this thesis I was challenging myself to push the conventions of my practice. These initial experiments in retrospect, demonstrate how tentative and self-conscious my initial engagement with the challenges of the project were.

Although these early experiments were disappointing, I realised that they were only a starting point. I needed not only to reflect upon the shortcomings of these results but also to enter into a dialogue with these images so, rather than just being dismissed out of hand, they might begin to speak back to me. Schön (1983) views 'unsuccessful' experimentation as important because it can truncate unproductive avenues of research and propel interrogation in a new direction. "The practitioner", he says, "moves also to produce unintended changes which give the situation new meanings. The situation talks back, the practitioner listens, and as he appreciates what he hears, he reframes the situation once again" (p. 131).

The reframing of my inquiry became a primary vehicle for change. Sometimes failed experiments proved fruitful because as Schön suggests, they can give "rise to new experiments and to new phenomena, troublesome or desirable, which [lead] to further reflection and experiment" (p. 175). A resulting reframing of my approach, that had a significant impact on the progress of the thesis, involved consciously (physically) changing my ways of 'seeing'. Experiments begun in May 2009 using different photographic lenses proved highly productive (figures 4, 5 & 6).



Figures 4, 5 & 6: Examples of images taken with a fish-eye and wide-angle lens: The fish-eye lens, with its 100-degree field of vision, forced me to take longer to compose and frame my shots. Images taken in the Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (May, 2009).

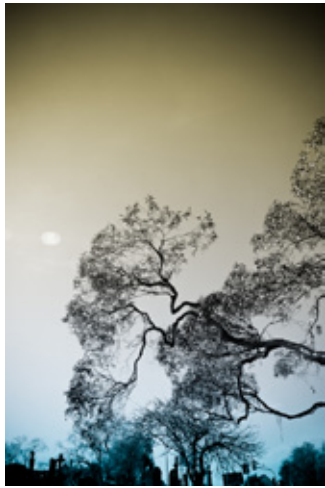


Figure 7: An exploratory image, taken in the Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (June, 2009).

I borrowed a colleague's fish-eye lens and photographed a number of subjects. The result was literally a 'new perspective' that significantly changed the way I conceived both space and object in my considerations. Following a critical reflection on these experiments I began utilising a variety of wide-angle lenses and incorporated other subject matter into my photographs. During this phase of exploration, I visited a number of urban cemeteries (figure 7), because the environment provided an alternative to the vibrant healthy flowers in the Auckland Botanical Gardens (where many of the botanical images for my 2008 Honours project had been taken).

At this point I reframed my question as a means of increasing the chances of discovery in my work. I asked *'What would Heaven, Hell and Purgatory look like if they were located in a cemetery?'* Although I entered these environments without having pre-conceived ideas of what the resulting images might look like, I was aware that the cemetery can be a cliché when discussing death so I sought to approach the space in unusual ways. In doing this I was seeking to consciously transcend conventions of the gothic and 'ritualistic'. I was contemplating the cemetery as a transitional garden where the oxymetaphor might be a visualising 'voice'.

When these early images were processed I reflected on them and later discussed their potentials with my supervisor. What was significant about these experiments was that they coincided with critical reading I was doing at the time concerning the concept of the cemetery as Sheôl and 'the last abode'.

Ideas of the portal as site of transition and the notion of the garden as a metaphor for divinity acted as catalysts for further experimentation.

Asking myself *'What would Heaven, Hell and Purgatory look like if they were located in a cemetery?'* enabled me to create a number of influential images. Figure 8 is indicative of these. While seemingly literal, Heaven as conceived in these works, is composed of earthly elements. However, Heaven as conceived in these works, also integrated elements of the earthly. This approach to creating photographic divine spaces, (although not indicative of where I would eventually take the work), was a significant breakthrough because it located the botanical and the impact of time and conditions on the physical, as central considerations in my investigations. This became evident in a number of other photographs taken at this time that looked at the decay caused by time and environment on ceramic and fabric flowers. These suggested rich and enigmatic metaphors for both the purgatorial and the heavenly.

Considering the potential of an earthly site of transition (the cemetery) in relation to Dante's divine spaces produced increasingly interesting bodies of work. Notions of the botanical were moved beyond the floral into considerations of lichen, discarded tree roots, weeds and the marks of growth on built structures. This broader conceptual framework meant that considerations of Hell and Purgatory became more interesting and nuanced (figures 9 & 10).

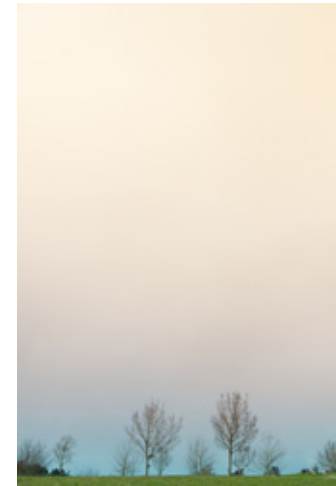


Figure 8: Image taken in a cemetery inspired by asking myself the question 'What would Heaven look like if it was in a cemetery.' Taken in the North Shore Memorial Park (July, 2009).



Figures 9 & 10: Images taken in a cemetery that extended considerations of the environment of Heaven to those of Hell and Purgatory. Images taken in the North Shore Memorial Park (July, 2009).

indwelling

In developing and ‘thinking through’ images after they have been shot I employed a state of indwelling. This may be seen as part of the process of reflection illustrated in the experiment-based model, (figure 2). This indwelling involved a form of self-dialogue and self-exploration which Douglass & Moustakas (1985) discuss as part of the ‘internal pathway of the self’. This may involve “vague and formless wanderings” (p. 47) that begin to take on meaning and direction as the researcher’s understandings of the inquiry grow.

With this project, images captured with my camera were brought back to my studio and processed digitally. In this essentially private world I dwelt inside the image, seeking potentials through distortion, layering and constant re-questioning. It is in this state that physical images move into metaphysical visualisations. While indwelling, I fuse ideas to assess the potential of their synergies. I also combine and separate elements so, as Douglass & Moustakas (1985) suggest,

“Through persistent self-search and reflection, the researcher inquires as to where and how the theme is relevant and in what ways it might be shifted to reveal its components most effectively. In the process, a more definite awareness is formed” (p. 47).

In this awareness I ask myself about the nature of divine spaces and I create responses accordingly. I consider colour, light, texture and form, but I also ask emerging visualisations about the nature of constraint, isolation and relationships between antitheses and concords.

In this process of indwelling I engage the intuitive and the considered in a dynamic that Douglass & Moustakas (1985) suggest helps one gain “a clear sense of the direction in which the theme or question is moving and [I] know (tacitly) what is required to illuminate it” (p. 48).



Figures 11 & 12: These layered and distorted considerations of an idea are examples of contemplations on divine space realised through relationships created in a digital environment. The process of indwelling in these worlds enables me to move beyond conceptual constraints of the physical. An image becomes more than a fixed artefact. Instead it is something processed in an environment of potential. Taken in the North Shore Memorial Park (July, 2009).

photographer's journal



Figure 13: An extract from the photographer's journal showing considerations of the 'artificial' flora (June, 2009).

The final device employed in actualising my process of production, reflection, evaluation and refinement is a photographer's journal. Keeping a physical record of images I create enables me to organise ideas and reflect on similar bodies of experimental work. Next to my images I make notes that activate or record internal conversations that are part of an "ongoing developmental dialogue" (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p. 94). My journal also allows me to revisit work that is removed from my current state of indwelling. While this revisiting cannot be said to be objective, it can provide fresh stimulation.

An example of this occurred towards the end of this project. Time away from certain considerations of the 'artificial' floral enabled me to come back to earlier flower images and see them with fresh eyes. Reflecting back on photographs of these flowers highlighted certain compositional issues and undiscovered details that might be made disproportionately more explicit, (figure 13). Thus towards the end of this project considerations explored months earlier resurfaced (albeit in different contexts) as part of increasingly metaphysical conceptualizations of divine space.

conclusion

In *Botanica*, I have revisited the tradition in the visual arts of employing botany as a metaphor. Incorporating the oxymetaphor, digital photography and photo manipulation into my considerations of Dante's Heaven (Paradiso), Hell (Inferno) and Purgatory (Purgatorio), and I have sought creative synergies between diverse ideas including landscape, botany, transition and the divine.

By considering the potential of an earthly site of transition (the cemetery) in relation to Dante's divine spaces, this research project has also considered certain contradictions existing between the cemetery as a manifestation of waiting, permanence, decay and its associations with temporality and transition. This is because the cemetery itself is a contradiction and conceptually an oxymoron. It suggests both a beginning and an end; growth and decay; a place of closure and a place of transition.

Although *The Divine Comedy* may be described as an allegory, cantos and the episodes within it contain alternative meanings. The narrative is complex and includes historical, moral, literal and anagogical intrusions.

Similarly, my reflections upon Dante's divine spaces are neither didactic nor literal. They are reflections based on his ideas and those of other commentators. As a discourse of ideas make up his work, so do a multiple of reflections contribute to mine.

In realising the created works in this thesis I have engaged a spiral structure of production, reflection, evaluation and refinement. This has been designed to push my work beyond established systems of ideation and resolution. This is because I sought in this thesis to reach beyond formula and to extend my visual thinking beyond the documentary. The project has been a significant challenge because I have not allowed myself to reconstitute what I know I can do well.

Throughout his journey, Dante takes himself through uncomfortable and foreign spaces; he deals with the unknown and seeks to make meaning of it. My journey has similarities. It has involved innumerable hours, frustrations and moments of enlightenment. It has been fraught with despondency, frustration and doubt. However, it has also been a journey beyond the ethos of 'professional concerns' into other realms of possibility. It has opened both my ways of thinking and my insight into how this occurs.

In Paradiso, XXIII:73–75 Dante wrote

There is the Rose in which the Word Divine
Became incarnate; there the lilies are
By whose perfume the good way was discovered.

If a thesis is an idea, and an idea can flower, then this project has become the essence of
the botanical.

Eleanor Gannon

October 2009

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appendix

The spiral structure of production, reflection, evaluation and refinement was designed to push my work beyond established systems of ideation and resolution. Its emphasis on returning to experimentation and new forms of questioning assisted me not only in creating ideas, but also in creating synergies between certain theological/literary spaces and photographic construction.

Generally discussion of applied method only provides the framework of an inquiry. Because of this, I have appended on the following pages a selection of additional experiments conducted in the research. While these account for only a small proportion of visual inquiries (hitherto undiscussed in the exegesis), they are useful in illustrating the breadth and diversity of the journey taken in the resolution of the project.

a journey of experimentation



Figure 14: Images showing considerations of the 'artificial' flora: These included details of ceramic wreathes and decaying fibres of fabric flowers. I was asking with these works "What is the potential for the intimate floral to communicate the texture, colour and tone of a divine space?" Images taken in Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (March, 2009).



Figure 15: Images taken with a Nikon 105 mm macro lens showing details of decay on botany in a cemetery: In these experiments I was exploring the potential of the botanical oxymetaphor for expressing the divine. Images taken in Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (March, 2009).



Figure 16: Plant forms photographed in water as a means of exploring the translucence and nebulous nature of the celestial (March, 2009).



Figure 17: Monochromatic investigations into distortions of space and borders in the North Shore Memorial Park, Albany Village, Mount Victoria Cemetery and Waiharaka Public Cemeteries. I was asking here, "What is the potential of the demarcation in depicting the divine?" These shots included both architectural elements and border areas of refuse, tree roots and plants stripped of seasonal foliage (June–July 2009).



Figure 18: A development of this inquiry that considered colour. These works were shot on location in North Shore Memorial Park, Mount Victoria and Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemeteries and also processed through a time of indwelling (June–July 2009).



Figure 19: Series of layered and distorted considerations of divine spaces realised through relationships created in a digital environment. Original images taken in North Shore Memorial Park (August, 2009).



Figure 20: One of a number of experiments considering literal space (the cemetery) surrounded by divine space. Original images taken in Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery (September, 2009).



Figure 21: Indicative image from a series of works that explored “How might a transition from the root of a tree [base] to a single petal of its flowers [apex] serve to describe the journey from Hell, through Purgatory to Heaven, when borders between these spaces are not fixed?” Original images taken in North Shore Memorial Park (September, 2009).



Figure 22: An experiment that considered literal space (the cemetery) surrounded by divine space. Original images taken in North Shore Memorial Park (September, 2009).

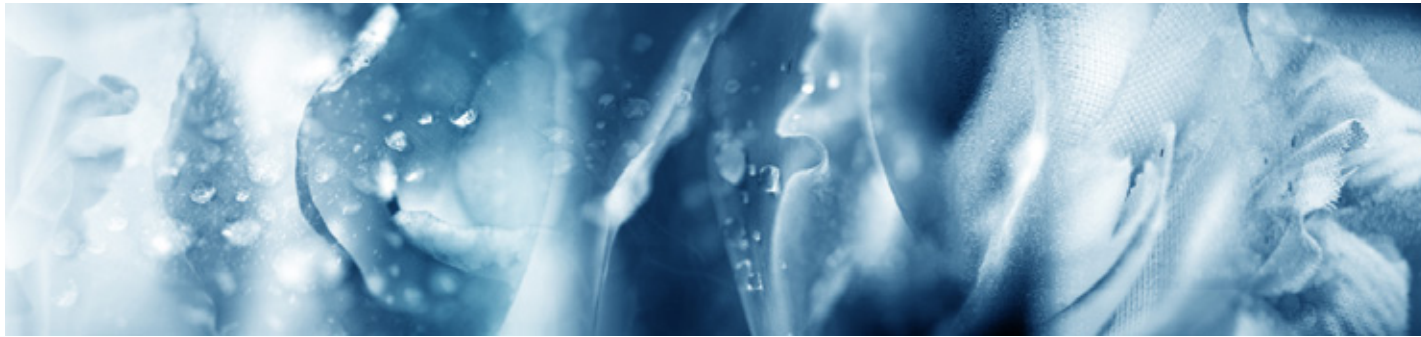


Figure 23: Final images for Heaven (top), Purgatory (middle) and Hell (bottom). Each final image is comprised of multiple images taken from shoots undertaken in the Albany Village Cemetery, Birkenhead-Glenfield Cemetery, Mount Victoria Cemetery, North Shore Memorial Park and the Waiharaka Public Cemetery (March–October 2009).