

Salvation Rainbow

Some Notes on Benjamin Bannan's Work

*As an activist strategy, what I call 'serious parody' simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups.*¹
Melissa M. Wilcox

The young and promising Benjamin Bannan (Perth, 1997) belongs to a generation of artists emerging in a post-pandemic scenario, where globalised attitudes towards queer topics are being investigated to confront broader struggles against the superstructures of race, gender, and sexuality.² A preoccupation with the past is an integral part of Bannan's practice. The *translation* of which, raises the system of classification of information from taxonomy of knowledge to an aesthetic principle aimed at addressing cultural, social, or political criticism related to the present. It is what Hal Foster poignantly defined as *an archival impulse*, an attitude to 'share a notion of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events in modern art, philosophy, and history'.³

Emblematic of Bannan's *modus operandi* is *Salvation Rainbow* (2020), a monumental etching in aluminium and enamel that recalls an altar triptych, intertwining a complex and nuanced web of references. Somewhat sacrilegiously, Bannan borrows simultaneously from European art history and queer subculture while revealing his audacious methodology, which is based in archival research. *Salvation Rainbow* was inspired by the transnational phenomenon of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an unlikely order of 'twenty-first century queer nuns'.⁴ More specifically, the work is informed by the vernacular of Perth's Order and their affiliations with the Australian Sisters in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney.

Bannan focuses on a case of microhistory, investigating the significant contributions of this small activist group over their 33 years in the capital of Western Australia.⁵ These actions include bringing the AIDS Memorial Quilt to the city; supporting the fundraising of the WA AIDS Memorial (2001); and the more joyful homage to the Sydney Order, the *Rainbow Habit*, a set of six satin habits, each in one colour of the traditional rainbow flag, worn by the Sisters on momentous occasions like Pride.⁶

In *Salvation Rainbow*, Bannan reframes the *Rainbow Habit* in the context of the Sisters' unrivaled political activism and camp occupation of public space, isolating a series of patterns for each of the garments that make up one habit (like gown, scapular, veil, and train). The artist has retraced the garment patterns to their most basic form and layered them to become a drawing that is suggestive of holy Catholic iconography, such as an angel or a crucifix. The gold enamel treatment of the work is evocative of luminously adorned altarpieces from the Western tradition, for example Giotto di Bondone's *Ognissanti Madonna* (c. 1310, Uffizi Museum, Florence), or the enigmatic *Deposition* by Masaccio (c. 1426, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples), masterpieces reliant on symmetry and gleaming with gold leaf, which encourage a transcendental experience.

The glossy surface quality of *Salvation Rainbow* nods to the satin of the habits, but also the water of the WA AIDS Memorial, and reflects the viewer within the work in a similar way that the Sisters act as a reflection of their community. The gaze has been a central concern in much of Bannan's recent work and several of Lacan's key concepts come to mind. Thinking about his seminal articulation of the Mirror Stage in relation to the formal qualities of *Salvation Rainbow* could provide a useful framework for the viewer to contemplate their own shifting misrecognitions, obfuscations, deflections, projections, and self-reflections. Conceptually, we see these notions mirrored in the Sisters' use of *serious parody* in their own constructions of identity, gender, and religion.⁷

Salvation Rainbow, with its multiple points of access both formally and conceptually, holds



space for different reflections or readings depending on the viewer's perspective, and the questions asked. If an artwork offers different answers to different questions, are perhaps all equally valid? If we ask ourselves as W.J.T. Mitchell provocatively did: *What do pictures want?*, then in return, could we ask a work not only to be queer but also religious, social, ethical, or even political?⁸ *Salvation Rainbow*, like all interesting artworks, raises more questions than answers.

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- 1 M. M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns. Religion, Activism and Serious Parody*, New York University Press, New York, 2018, p. 2.
- 2 The description of the historical present as the 'post-pandemic' scenario must be defined explicitly as the next phase of development of discourse: within and not outside the historical development of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3 H. Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, in 'October', no. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3
- 4 M. M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*.
- 5 Microhistory places emphasis on small units of observation such as individuals or communities. By reducing the scale of observation, it aims to reveal larger, complicated functions within individual relationships and specific social settings. See Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg's contributions in journals such as *Quaderni Storici*, *Historische Anthropologie* and *Critical Inquiry*.
- 6 The AIDS Memorial Quilt is composed of fabric panels, each in memory of an individual who has died of AIDS, designed and completed by their loved ones. The quilt gradually grew as it travelled around Australia and has been displayed alongside visiting panels from the American Names Project. The Perth Sisters are responsible for bringing the AIDS Memorial Quilt to Western Australia on two separate occasions. Firstly, in 1993 when the quilt was displayed at the Fremantle Passenger Terminal, and again in 2005 at the Perth Concert Hall. The Sisters became the custodians of Western Australia's portion of the quilt when it was divided between the States and have recently donated it to the Western Australian Museum.
- 7 M. M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*.
- 8 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, October, Vol. 77 (Summer, 1996), pp. 71-82.



Images:
Pages 18, 20-21: Benjamin Bannan, *Salvation Rainbow*, 2020,
etched aluminium and two-pack enamel, 320 x 180 x 5 cm.