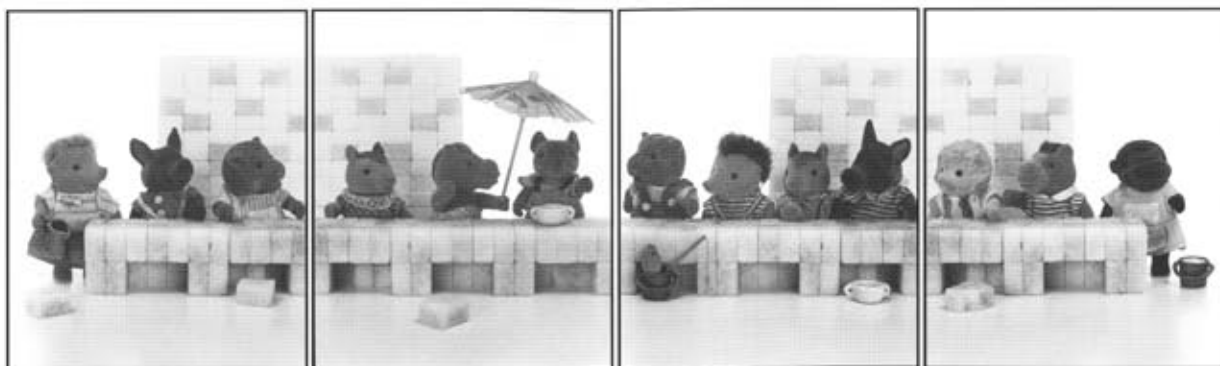


## Species: Joachim Froese

Jan Manton Art Gallery, South Brisbane | 28 October—3 December 2005

Victoria Bladen



Joachim Froese *The Last Supper* 2005 Silver gelatin print  
Courtesy the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane

This photographic exhibition by Joachim Froese presents the viewer with an intriguing series of images. Peering through these mysterious windows is like looking down a well of multiple layers of temporality and intertextual referencing, the surface of which also reflects back some version of our own image. Nine works present visual narratives of commonly depicted scenes from the Bible. The episodes map key markers of the Christian ideology of sin (the temptation and fall) and reparation, through the sacrifice of Christ. There are also sub-themes of betrayal (Adam and Eve, Judas and Pilate) and loyalty (Mary Magdalene).

Froese's photography captures evidence of a theatrical performance that has happened sometime in the past, and which itself references various other pasts. The actors' faces are inscrutable; we cannot read the pain of the tortured Christ, the sadism of his persecutors or any joy in his resurrection. There is good reason for this: the actors are toy animals. Yet, we find we already have the mental and visual apparatus to read these images. The first of many paradoxes in these works is that they comprise, after the initial unfamiliarity, deeply familiar visual and intellectual structures.

While the works' titles and subjects refer to textual sources, namely biblical episodes, the compositional familiarity of the works parallel prominent Renaissance religious artworks by Masaccio, da Vinci and Piero della Francesca. Such artists were heralded for achieving new types of 'realism', and experimented with three-dimensionality. This was seen as an innovation and a break with the two-dimensionality and stylisation of medieval art. This referencing provides an interesting background to Froese's interplay between the two-dimensionality of the photographic

surface and the three-dimensionality of his animated / 'animal-ated' scenes.

Intellectually, the Renaissance was a unique syncretism of Classical (pagan) aesthetic forms and Christian ideology. There is an inherent classicism in Froese's scenes that he cleverly distils and conveys: in the delicate marble effect of the sets' sugar-cube architecture, in the stance of the figures and in the cold sparseness of the space in which the episodes occur. This emotional sterility counters the significance of the subject matter and psychological drama of the episodes.

The theatrical appearance of the scenes references the relationship between Renaissance religious art and religious drama. Froese places us in a position analogous with an audience of an early European religious performance. Far from being a passive observer for whom meaning was provided, the spectator was an active participant in the creation of meaning, bringing their own knowledge of narrative, typology (the symbolic linking of Old and New Testament figures and episodes) and iconography to these performances. Likewise, we bring meanings to these images. At the same time, the theatricality emphasises the fictional mode of purported sacred history. This counters the journalistic and documentary atmosphere we often associate with black and white photography. Cropping reminds us that images are constructed, not captured.

The Renaissance artworks that Froese references were situated in religious physical and mental spaces with meditative, spiritual, didactic and pedagogical functions. What does it mean for an artist to resituate these narratives and transpose these compositions into ostensibly non-religious spaces and contexts? Why does it work here?

Perhaps it is because of the archetypal nature of the narratives that they are transportable in some form. It may also be our experiences of the pseudo-sacred atmosphere of the contemporary gallery space where objects are presented for metaphysical contemplation at some level. There is in fact a distinct 'miniature gallery' feel to the sets of these scenes.

As with Froese's previous work there is much in little. Images from the microcosmic world link with meanings in the macrocosm. There are subtle and deeply resonant layers of meaning in small objects. The fish in a bucket is a subtle reference to Christ. The umbrella held by the Magdalene above Christ's head in *The Last Supper* (2005) is emblematic of Christ's halo. However an umbrella is also shelter from the sun. The 'sun/son of God' pun was commonplace in Renaissance literature and iconography. Such historical symbolism shares space with contemporary references. The prominence given to Mary Magdalene references the current popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* with its theory of Mary as the secret spouse of Christ.

Another intriguing detail can be found in *The Resurrection of Christ* (2005) with the inclusion of a leafless tree to one side and leafy tree to the other. These details represent the artist's extraordinarily perceptive comprehension of the significant arboreal iconography in Renaissance art. Christ was commonly identified as the tree of life, a symbol of immortality, so leafless trees (signifying sin, death and the crucifixion) were commonly juxtaposed with verdant trees (signifying Christ's resurrection and the regeneration of the tree of life) in the backgrounds of religious scenes. If we read these details in Froese's work as mere trinkets we would miss the subtle nuances of the scenes.

What meanings might be derived from the use of toy animals as protagonists? Toy animals are usually designed with the proportions of small children (large head, small body, large forehead etc). Children instinctively respond to these versions of themselves in cartoons and toys since they can watch or re-enact their own negotiation with the unfamiliar world about which they are learning. To transpose these biblical scenes onto toys is to implicitly place us in the position of children watching, as if for the first time, scenes of transgression and violence. The effect is to defamiliarise us with otherwise known stories and force us to re-interpret them. What might a child make of these stories:

- If that's the goodest man in the world, why are they killing him?
- If his Daddy wants him to die anyway, why is Judas a bad guy?

If a subject traditionally at the pinnacle of subject matter hierarchies is now presented as child's play, does this suggest such beliefs are infantile and part of our historical childhood? Or that we remain entrenched in our traditional mythologies? Alternatively, are we situated as children and thus rendered innocent as if enabled to approach deity; 'suffer the little children to come to me'? Do the images remind us of the Christian rhetoric, which is structured on a language of parental relations: 'Our Father'; 'my Son'; 'God's children'? Potential readings ripple out from these enigmatic images.

The title of the exhibition, 'Species', is a word we generally apply to other living things, excluding ourselves from 'Nature'. However these works present us with some kind of mirror and imply that the questions they raise are for us to address as a species. Do we delude ourselves if we think of humans as cute and cuddly instead of violent and predatory? Why do we purport to condemn violence and see it as an aberration, while in most religions, including Christianity, violence as reparation, requisite cleansing sacrifice or necessary path to ideological domination has been justified and sanctified? At the core of these well-known images is a narrative of collective transgression and guilt and the killing of a man as reparation for our inherited sin and as the promise of eternal life. What strange manner of beast are we that have these enduring trans-historical narratives, archetypes and myths? Do we read contemporary international violence as clashes of such narratives or as the raw and savage battles of different species of beast over resources and territory?

We could imagine the past as a machine in which we are always partially enmeshed and yet paradoxically free to escape from, redefine or re-engage with. This exhibition is a significant, intelligent and articulate engagement with art and ideas of the past. It is also relevant to our present and the contemporary political and social climate of justified or sanctified violence. The exhibition deserves a wide audience and ideally for the series to be held and maintained as a whole.

Victoria Bladen is a PhD student in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland.