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DEATH'S BROKEN DOMINION

Ghislaine Howard's *The Empty Tomb*, the culminating work in her 'Stations of the Cross' series, is unveiled in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral on Easter Day

One of the treasures of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, is a late-fifteenth-century Pietà by the Ferrarese artist Ercole de' Roberti, showing the Virgin seated on a stone sarcophagus with the body of the dead Christ draped across her lap. The distant view takes us back in time to Golgotha with its three misty crosses; the near view, immediately behind Christ's head, points to the future with its glimpse of rumpled linen gleaming white in the dim interior of a rocky tomb.

De' Roberti was an unconventional artist who died prematurely of drink, the Renaissance historian Vasari tells us, in 1496, the year after he painted this picture. His narrative approach to time may have been medieval, but his sneak preview of the Resurrection was revolutionary. There are many entombments in art history, but no empty tombs. Like St John, who describes in his gospel how "stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in", sacred artists have hovered on this threshold, nervous of trying to put a positive construction on emptiness, a concept almost always associated with loss.

Now the contemporary artist Ghislaine Howard has followed de' Roberti's lead and boldly ventured where earlier artists feared to tread. Her 4 x 8ft painting *The Empty Tomb*, encased in a steel reliquary by the sculptor Brian Fell, will be unveiled on Easter Day at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, where it will remain for the duration of the city's European Capital of Culture celebrations.

The Empty Tomb marks the culmination of Howard's millennial series of Stations of the Cross, "The Captive Figure", inaugurated in the cathedral in 2000 and reinstalled this year (until 30 March). Like "The Captive Figure", which portrays the bound and beaten Christ as the universal prisoner of conscience, *The Empty Tomb* has secular resonance for another type of contemporary outcast: the rough sleeper.

In preparation for the painting, which followed the death of her father, Howard roamed the streets of Liverpool with her sketchbook, drawing the discarded blankets, broken cardboard boxes and rolled up newspapers left in doorways by the previous night's occupants. Some of the resulting studies, worked up in the studio, are on show in



'A message of hope': Ghislaine Howard's *Empty Tomb*, going on display at Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral

a small exhibition, "Towards the Empty Tomb", at Derby Cathedral Centre through March. One particularly evocative series was inspired by a visit early last Easter Day morning to the old graveyard, now a park, beside Liverpool Cathedral, where the gnarled trees, tombs and arched apertures in the sunken walls reminded Howard of the Garden of Gethsemane. On the way there, she had seen people sleeping in doorways; on the way back the people had gone, leaving their bedding behind them. The coincidence impressed itself on her mind.

Is the image of *The Empty Tomb* intended to offer spiritual comfort to the homeless? "I wanted it to have all sorts of resonances," says Howard. "Obviously on the Christian reading it's resurrection, hope, triumph over death. Unlike the Stations, which are monochrome, I wanted this painting to have a sense of golden light. I wanted it to be a place of rest, a resolution, a place of safety, I suppose - I definitely wanted there to be a message of hope and strength of the human spirit about it."

Given its positive message, it's perhaps surprising that Howard chose to model her composition on Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb*, the harrowing image before which Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin exclaims in horror: "A man's faith might be ruined by looking at that pic-

ture!" Holbein's life-sized image, painted in Basle in 1521 when he was still a Catholic, gives us a cutaway, claustrophobic view into the coffin where the dead Christ's emaciated body lies rotting.

What could the 24-year-old Holbein, future court painter to Henry VIII, have meant by this gruesome image? The livid swellings around the nail wounds in the hands and feet may hold a clue. Just four years earlier, Martin Luther had pinned his 95 theses to the doors of Wittenberg church, banging the first nails into the coffin of sacred art as Holbein knew it. The picture's earliest listing describes it simply as "A dead man by Hans Holbein, oil on wood, with the title *Jesus Nazarenus Rex*". Dead man or God? Holbein left it open.

Perhaps he wanted to hammer home the point that sacred art, in mixing the mystical with the matter-of-fact, merely acknowledges the miracle of God made flesh. If so, it's a point Howard picks up in her modern version. "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me." Could the Christ who spoke these words be somehow present in empty bedding abandoned by a dosser in a doorway? Like Holbein, Howard lets her audience decide - although by abstracting Christ's body, she has created an image to which even iconoclasts couldn't object.