

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

FIONA CRISP
ASPEX GALLERY

PHIL COLLINS
ORMEAU BATHS GALLERY

SHIRAN SHAHBAZI
TEMPLE BAR GALLERY

FABULA
NMPFT

DOLORES MARAT
OPEN EYE GALLERY



seats of power

Santa Maria by Fiona Crisp was at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth 3 May - 14 June

It is usually construed as a sign of increasing secularisation that so many galleries in the last 25 years have had their genesis in the renovation of a disused church. The Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth is just one example of this. Despite its almost complete transformation into a modernist 'white cube' exhibition space, traces of its prior sacred incarnation remain: the arches that housed stained glass windows, for instance, are still visible above the top of the gallery's far wall.

It is appropriate then that Fiona Crisp's latest work should be shown at Aspex. *Santa Maria* is the result of a six-month residency in The British School at Rome. During that time Crisp created images using a pinhole camera in many of Rome's churches; placing the camera on whatever seating was provided for the worshippers and then sitting alongside it while a 30 minute exposure was made. Seven of the resulting photographs, printed large and placed in a line, are on display at Aspex. Crisp has also installed simple wooden benches in eight rows of four within the gallery, the significance of which we shall come to later.

The pinhole camera that Crisp has used for much of her work over the last few years was ideal for a project based in churches. Outside of regular worship and ceremonial occasions, such buildings tend to be silent, echoing spaces. Occasional visitors to the church (whose brief stays were not long enough to record their existence onto the film) remained unaware that a photograph was being taken. Pinhole cameras make no noise while the picture is made. The flash of light associated with much photography is also absent. Instead the only illumination Crisp used was that already present within the church and any extraneous illumination which seeped in through windows. The latter seems to have resulted in a few spectral slashes of white and a number of glowing dots appearing in some of Crisp's images; the effects of



Left: installation photograph of work at Aspex Gallery, 2003.

Right: *Santa Maria in Trastevere*

Opposite: *Santa Constanza*

From the series *Santa Maria*, 2002
images courtesy of Aspex Gallery.

luminescence made evident. A reminder perhaps of how light itself plays a central role in most religions.

The seating in these churches, always ordered in rows, is designed to direct the sitter's attention towards the front of the church, with its elaborate altars and intricate friezes. But in Crisp's images, taken from a pew's-eye view, the seating has become the subject. In one picture the back rests of wooden benches, receding towards the nave of the church, almost entirely obliterate our view of anything other than the benches themselves. In another, a line of mass produced plastic chairs seem incongruously banal as they tower over the finery beyond. With no depth-of-field in these images the potential hierarchy suggested by focus disappears. Instead it is scale that implies relative status and in this respect it is the chairs that seem superior.

Crisp originally trained as a sculptor and her awareness of three-dimensional space is evidenced in the installation of the rows of benches. These are not the seats that are normally found in exhibition spaces, which we usually choose to regard as being as separate from the work as the gallery's bookshop. Instead the benches in *Santa Maria* are an integral part of the show. Minimalist in design, they occupy a place midway between sculpture and furniture. On entering the gallery we need to negotiate them. We could choose to pause and take a seat to look at the images on the wall before us. Or we might instead pass beyond the seating in order to access the front of the gallery and examine the photographs more closely. With the worshipful distance suggested by the placement of the benches this feels ever so slightly transgressive: like dipping a finger in the font or having a peek from the pulpit. With the placement of these benches in the show Crisp hints at the gallery's previous existence as a place of worship and, perhaps, suggests a link between the past and present roles of the building.

The images and installation of *Santa Maria* are subtly subversive. Central to the exhibition is its revelation about the power relations of architectural space and the positioning of the institutional subject. Crisp has used the pinhole camera like a confession box: a small dark space wherein truths are exposed. The photographs of the churches foreground the importance of ordered seating in controlling our point-of-view; both visually



and ideologically. Physically, churchgoers are invited to sit up straight, face front and gaze in awe upon the splendour of the house of God. The same spatial division between the respectful masses and the sacred object of attention is reinforced in the layout of many other institutional sites such as cinemas and lecture theatres. And, as the benches in Crisp's exhibition might somewhat devilishly suggest, the gallery itself.

Stephen Bull