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## **The new *Golden Legend*: Patrick Nicholas's secular saints**

### **John Hartley**

We live in an age when so much information is available—so many billions of pages on the internet, so many images and stories suffusing the public sphere, so much careless beauty in magazines and on billboards—that sometimes it seems we can say or see nothing new.

Indeed, a new creative practice characterises our time, which might be called the age of 'redaction'—which is the word for 'editing' in many European languages. Here, editing does not mean cutting-back or shortening, but creating anew with existing materials; marshalling, choosing and reworking the old into new meanings.

This is the essential urge behind Patrick Nicholas's artful reworkings of Old Masters—and some not-so-old mistresses—as contemporary photographic artworks. He has captured the productivity of 'what we already know' by showing how much more it can mean if we look at it afresh.

So in one sense, the pictures in the *Belle* series are copies. Indeed their appeal originates in the pleasure to be had when you toggle back and forth in your mind's eye to see what he's done with the source image, which remains insistently present even though every single pixel in his version is changed.

And thus, each picture in this book is highly original. It is Patrick Nicholas's vision that we see on every page. He has made explicit something that is often only implicit in the way we look at classic paintings. Despite the fact that we can still see them (albeit wrenched from their defining context and abstracted on a gallery wall), we can never recreate the conditions of existence that filled them with whatever meaning they had for the ancients.

Instead, we fill them with our own meanings. However beautiful Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* might be, we can never 'see' it as its own contemporaries did. We only see it *through* all the multi-mediated junk in our own 21st century heads.

Patrick Nicholas gets some of this stuff out of his mental lumber room, polishes it up, arranges it in a familiar pattern, and thereby reappraises iconic (dare one say stale?) art; which suddenly becomes the pretext (literally) for new stories—funny, wild, and weird, some of them—with a touching humanity and contemporaneous immediacy.

This is what first drew me to his work: the ‘shock of the old,’ as it were; recognition in an unexpected context. I was looking at an Australian fashion/style magazine (as you do), when suddenly I came across a very familiar composition. It was Nicholas’s reworking of a painting by Théodore Roussel that I knew well, *The Reading Girl* (1887: Tate Britain).<sup>1</sup>

Roussel’s picture illustrates a turning point in the history of reading: the moment when ordinary people irrupted into history as the ‘mass’ reading public. Roussel’s *Reading Girl* was reviewed at the time as ‘vulgar’ and scandalous, for despite the heroic scale of the canvas she is no noble classical emblem of ‘higher’ virtues, but just a healthy, fashion-conscious, naked young woman; and the reading matter that she’s absorbed in isn’t poetry or philosophy but a *magazine*.

This portrait of Roussel’s 20 year-old model and mistress Hetty Pettigrew quotes classicism (Ingres), modernism (Manet), and English aestheticism (Leighton), to depict a thoroughly modern subject: the democratisation and feminisation of knowledge in the very act of private consumption; ordinary experience on a heroic scale.

But what I saw in the magazine was not Ms Pettigrew; it was a strapping Australian journalist called Katia Sanfilippo, just as naked and toned, but this time not isolated in graphic Japanese-style self-absorption. She is in the thick of the action; and she’s not reading but *writing*. Despite its wartime setting, Patrick Nicholas’s *Correspondent* brings ‘mass’ communication up to date. Here, an ordinary girl can go beyond consumerism for its own sake. This is a truth of our times—nowadays, with digital media, *everyone* can be a journalist.

It is also appropriate that I came to Nicholas’s work through a women’s magazine (popular culture); and that his *Correspondent* quotes movies (*The English Patient*) and media (*Picture Post*) as well as art. His ‘redactional’ vision has pulled together all these public references, and for every viewer there will be more personal ones too. For instance, the old typewriter upon which ‘the writing girl’ is dreamily composing her dispatch is the very same sit-up-&-beg model on which I bashed out my own first book.

And the model’s pose brings to my mind, as it does to Nicholas’s, one of World War 2’s most evocative photographs (by David E Scherman)—that of war correspondent and *Vogue* fashion model Lee Miller, triumphally naked in *Hitler’s own bath*, photographed on the day that she had witnessed the liberation of the death-camp at Dachau, whose filth can be seen on the mat under her discarded boots.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the great revenges: ordinary emancipation against the banal kitsch of totalitarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> See:

[www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=12984&tabview=text&texttype=10](http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=12984&tabview=text&texttype=10).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Calvocoressi (2002) *Lee Miller: Portraits from a Life*. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 12.

Nicholas reworks that particular emotion too, in his homage to Charlotte Corday; depicting her dead in the bath where she murdered Jean-Paul Marat (an earlier prototype of Hitler). Nicholas replaces Jacques-Louis David's mythologising grandiloquence with a more homely homage to his model Soraya: 'the first in a long line of willing, patient and extraordinary, ordinary women.'

Well, as the guy in the old shaver advertisement said, 'I liked it so much I bought the company.' Now both of these pictures hang on my wall; and another one, *Reality*, graces the cover of an academic journal that I edit (*The International Journal of Cultural Studies*, published by Sage, London).

Here, Nicholas is quoting Henry Fuseli's 1781 painting of the sleep of reason: *Nightmare*.<sup>3</sup> But instead of a Gothic incubus and a ghostly equine grin disturbing the slumbers of maidenly reason, as in Fuseli's painting, Nicholas visualises 'reality' itself—in the shape of Italian television, which boasts an exuberant tradition of trash TV, game shows and 'reality' TV.

Quite a few people would agree that reality television is a latter-day Gothic nightmare, Germaine Greer for one:

People who like watching torture will tune in to see a table dancer, an air steward, a hairdresser, a medical rep and a website designer struggling with the contradictions inherent in having simultaneously to bond with and betray perfect strangers .... Watching *Big Brother* is about as dignified as looking through the keyhole in your teenage child's bedroom door.'<sup>4</sup>

Such is popular reality, these days. In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's commercial TV station broadcasts a show called *Striscia la notizia*.<sup>5</sup> It parodies the news, and the presenters are hybrid entertainer-reporters; investigative comedians, as it were. Even more famous are the show's *veline*—'scantily clad' hostesses who have become a national icon of Italian television, and who form the looming backdrop to Nicholas's *Reality*.

Carlo Freccero, a celebrated TV director in both Italy and France, and academic at the University of Roma *Tre*, has dubbed that version of reality 'fascism lite.'<sup>6</sup> However, as Germaine Greer has wisely said: 'Reality TV is not the end of civilisation as we know it; it is civilisation as we know it.'

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Fuseli [Johann Heinrich Füssli] 'The Nightmare,' 1781. Institute of Fine Arts, Detroit.

<sup>44</sup> *Sunday Times* (2005) 'Profile: Germaine Greer: Big Sister takes up an exposed position.' January 9: accessible at: [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/article410054.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/article410054.ece).

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.striscialanotizia.mediaset.it/](http://www.striscialanotizia.mediaset.it/); see also 'Velina Upskirt' on YouTube (which has attracted over a million views) for a flavour of the show: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MArsEqjLtF4&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MArsEqjLtF4&feature=related).

<sup>6</sup> Interview in *Zapping International: Television Around the World* (episode on Italy), TV series produced by ARTE France, 2006.

And that is just as much a cause for celebration as it is for despair. Popular reality can be full of human hope, artful wit, and even reverence for the wonders of contemporary life. This is the reality that Patrick Nicholas plays with in the *Belle* series.

Hence, in the end, his book is a latter-day version of the *Golden Legend*, the medieval *Lives of the Saints* or *Legenda Sanctorum* that was a popular best-seller of the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> This strange compilation of beautiful but all-too-often brutally murdered young men and women, many of whom (like St Catherine of Catherine Wheel fame) probably never existed, was used to inculcate high moral values even as it provoked popular imagination and corporeal desire with literally far-fetched stories and illustrations at once devotional and scandalous.

Like *Belle*, the *Golden Legend* is a wonder of redaction; a glorious mash-up of reality, nightmare, art, popular culture, reverence, and tall stories featuring ordinary people in extraordinary scenes. Nothing is new, but the art of rendering the old original again is—as the man once said—a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

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<sup>7</sup> See: [www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/goldenLegend/index.html](http://www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/goldenLegend/index.html).