



SACRA PRIVATA

WORKS ON PAPER BY BLAIR BRENNAN

7 June – 21 July 2007

OPENING RECEPTION: 7 JUNE, 7:00–9:00 PM

FOR IN MY NATURE I quested for beauty, but God,
God, hath sent me to sea for pearls.

— Christopher Smart, *Jubilate Agno (Rejoice in the Lamb)*, 1758–63

During the five years the English poet Kit Smart spent incarcerated in a madhouse writing *Jubilate Agno*, his magnificent song of praise to the glory of God, he eventually settled down to a rate of one pair of lines per day. The poem became a timepiece, a daily rite of worship, a string of pearls for keeping track of the passing days of a resented confinement. Blair Brennan's remarkable series of drawings *Sacra Privata* is named for the private religious rites of a Roman household. The drawings are not acts of worship observed in the isolation of a prison cell but personal delvings undertaken in the privacy of home, in the bosom of family life, amidst the usual domestic clutter. Often, though not always, made daily over a period of nine years, as in a journal, as in an account book of the soul, each entry is a dive into the dark waters of the artist's unconscious, and each dive has issued in a pearl.

Behind *Sacra Privata* are Antonin Artaud's works on paper, with their fragments of text and burn holes and diagrams and disturbing faces; the sculptural, tormented drawings of Joseph Beuys; Ed Ruscha's mischievous, increasingly literary work with collage and text; the spare detail and hatched lines of Louise Bourgeois' fraught domestic drawings. Brennan works quickly, with materials that are close at hand. He eyes the world like a pack rat, always carting bits and pieces home. When he dives, he is not questing for beauty, but beauty keeps breaking through. His elements are common, but they are not common in the way he puts them together. He is after the Mystery in the banal. Again and again he reminds us how little, day by day, is needed to make a world, when the mind is open and the heart is large.

The meaning of Smart's *Jubilate Agno* is not always clear. He is celebrating God but not always in terms the reader can understand. As a record of private, sacred acts, as an encyclopedia of the personal, *Sacra Privata* does not suffer that flaw, perhaps because it operates like an array of dream visions. Like a dreamer, the artist is not in the business of representation. He has no subject or meaning he is seeking to communicate. It is as if he has no idea until the ink touches the paper whether it will be a dot or a dash or a line, a piece of text or geometry or an image. This is because these are soundings from below the level of symbol. Language or image, the mystery goes deeper than the difference. The moment of the plunge, the contact with the page, is magic, it contains everything.

What results, and what we are privileged to witness, is not Brennan's rendition of how things are but the immediate feel of that interior, dreamlike state of perception below the surface. As in a vision, there is a rightness in the juxtapositions of the elements: the faces—enigmatic, haunted, bizarre—the grids, the psychic landscapes, the numbers, the words or letters, the everyday creatures and objects and patterns, familiar and alien. It is a rightness that first and foremost we feel. It has a necessary, organic logic. It has, above all, emotional truth. This is not something that can be faked, any more than—as William S. Burroughs puts it—you can fake a good meal. If the emotional connections are true to the artist's experience, and they are rendered with emotional honesty, they will communicate. In this way dreams are shared.

Dr. Johnson did not think Kit Smart should have been locked up. "I'd as lief prayed with Kit Smart," he said, "as any one else." *Sacra Privata* is an invitation to the world to pray with Mr. Brennan.

— Greg Hollingshead, April 2007

GREG HOLLINGSHEAD lives and works in Edmonton. A winner of the Governor General's Award for Fiction, his latest novel is *Bedlam*. He directs writing programs at the Banff Centre.

BLAIR BRENNAN combines his writing and art practice from his home in Edmonton. His drawings, sculpture and installations have been exhibited nationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions. Brennan has contributed articles to a number of national arts and cultural publications.

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