

*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
What profit hath a man of all his labour
which he taketh under the sun?*

- Ecclesiastes 1:2



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All quotations are by Doug Jones unless otherwise indicated

The first thing that struck me when I saw Doug Jones's work was his delight in ornament and colour. The second was the melancholic thread woven through absurdity.

In *Inservi Deo et Laetare* Jones introduces us to his comical Brotherhood of Saints. Some robes reference personal experiences: the narrow escape of his sister during the IRA Harrod's bombing; symbols of Freemasonry; a replica of an altarpiece in Sophia where Jones lived for three years. Others engage with more public themes: celebrating outreach ministers who operate in inner cities; a tribute to a Rwandan congregation massacred at church; comments on the schism in the Anglican communion over homosexuality.

He sources beautiful and appropriate fabrics, and gained special access to the ecclesiastical robes of Southwark Cathedral for his research. The robes of the BHS accurately replicate these various hierarchical forms.

“As individuals we may join the organisation, wear the uniform and adopt the doctrines. This may allow us comfort, protection, purpose and a sense of identity within a group. All may not remain so idyllic however as ambition corrupts the most beautiful or strong. Lucifer was after all the angel of light, the most beautiful, the most gracious and unfortunately the one with a big mirror in his bedroom.”

Once the language of scientific clarity used by European intellectuals to communicate across language boundaries, Latin titles now serve to render meaning elitist and obscure.

Jones is prolific artist who hungrily consumes influences from high and low culture. *Coena Pro Viginta* manages to reference the lost British music hall tradition, Golden Age vanitas paintings from the Netherlands and Judy Chicago's seminal feminist piece *The Dinner Party*.

Dinner for one is a cheesy British comedy sketch watched every New Year by a vast international TV audience. It features James the butler and Miss Sophie, who hosts

a dinner every year for her ex-suitors, oblivious she has outlived them all. Watching the sketch is a nostalgic ritual, though this maudlin theme is presented as slapstick. After dinner James and Miss Sophie retire to the bedroom to complete the annual celebration - perhaps sex is after all the antidote to death.

“In Marx it (butlering) is the epitome of unproductive labour. The butler’s performance can reach heights of elegance and co-ordination; still it is maintaining a subordinate role. In *Dinner for one* the pressure of his responsibilities, complicated by a responsiveness to the master’s emotional needs...make the butler stumble but cannot stop the execution of his performance.”

Coena Pro Viginta utilises mass-produced souvenir ceramics, once prized but now easily picked up from charity shops. Each item commemorates an event, organised into twenty categories reflecting contrasting beliefs and life-styles:

“I am interested in the relation between leisure, labour and the world of heritage production...the whole table is intended as a celebration of disappearing practices.”

The faintly humanoid skittles of *Aequa Servare Mentem* stand in imminent danger. Like the pottery industry itself, they are irreplaceable once smashed. Jones manufactured this piece using transfers obtained from a Stoke factory as it closed down. Reflecting on both these works, I am reminded of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, with it’s recurring motif of the (supernatural) potter:

“Once more within the Potter’s house alone
I stood, surrounded by the Shapes of Clay...

“...Said one among them –‘Surely not in vain
My substance of the common Earth was ta’en
And to this Figure moulded, to be broke,
Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again?’ “ *

A gallery of re-worked needlepoints overlook the table. *Men at Work* shows a red warning triangle disrupting the image of a haymaker, warning against over-romanticising the past. In *In Vacuo* the suspicious Mary fruitlessly attempts to shield her child from the gaze of strangers. *Resurgam*, a tiny monument to constrained domesticity, pastiches the larger-than-life bronze men striding our cities. Comfort can become confining - as stifling as the uniformity required by regimented societies.

Jones also engages with issues of value and exchange:

“People buy a cross-stitch kit and all the wool and spend hours making it. The end result is something that is immediately worth less than what it cost for the materials, and they are probably never going to be seen, but will just get put on the ladies’ back room wall”.

Though of course, monetary value is not the point of the activity. The activity could well be the point of the activity. The display or gifting of these images to appreciative friends and family has value, and the original makers would undoubtedly be horrified by Jones's adaptations. Is he celebrating these labours-of-love or scorning them? Will what is he creating in their stead have a longer or greater value? The economist and artist Hans Abbing has pointed out that -

“Within fifty years of an artist's death, some 90% of his or her manuscripts, scores, compositions and paintings have disappeared into the rubbish bin...of all the paintings that hung on walls in the Netherlands during the Golden Age, less than 1% have survived to the present day.” **

In his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, W B Yeats values the beauty of art over the fleeting nature of life. He yearns to be admitted as a saint in an ageless golden mosaic:

“An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick...

“O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
“...gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.” ***

Don't let Jones's toilet humour distract you from the seriousness of his themes – it's all whistling in the dark. We will ourselves be taking the places of the departed guests at the next serving, or donning the robes of his hollow Saints.

Footnotes

* *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, Omar Khayyám (1048–1131), translation by Edward Fitzgerald, 1859

** *Why Are Artists Poor? - The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*, p 54, Hans Abbing, Amsterdam University Press.

*** *Sailing to Byzantium*, W B Yeats, 1926