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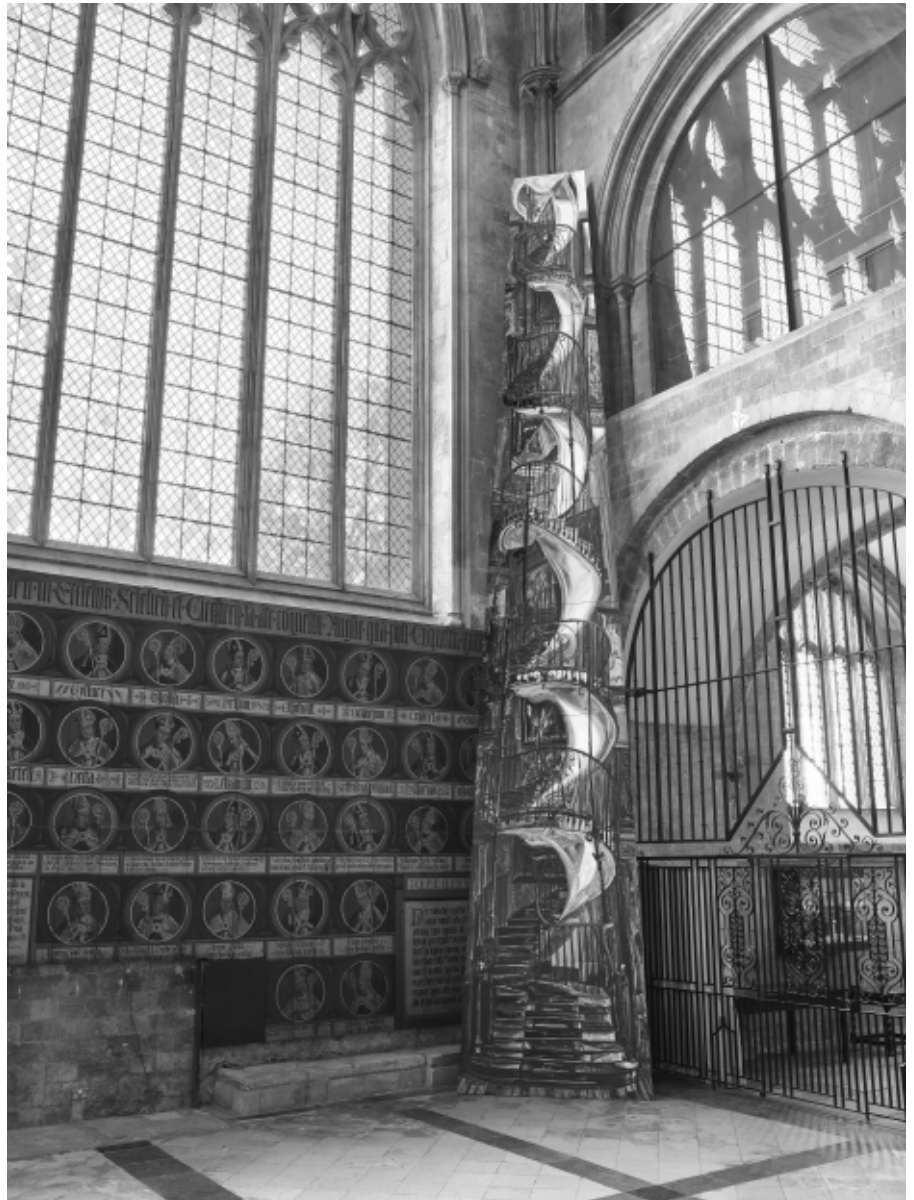
Helaine Blumenfeld *Taking Risks*, 2013

Baroque folds

Jonathan Koestlé-Cate examines the vertiginous work of Anna Freeman Bentley

The north transept of Chichester's 11th-century Norman and Gothic Cathedral is currently host to an arresting element of the Baroque. This at least is the language often used to describe the work of the London-based artist, Anna Freeman Bentley. *Descent* is an 11m high, eight-panel painting, tapering from base to apex. Rapidly executed in watery oils over a brief period of just two days, it depicts an improbably high spiral staircase, decorated with ornate iron balustrades in the Parisian style, highly polished reflective steps and banisters, copper carpet rails, and a white plaster reverse, rising to a curved aperture in the ceiling, all set against a background of golden-framed paintings. The staircase was modelled on one found in the Gustave Moreau Museum in Paris, formerly the family home of the Symbolist painter, only vastly extended, turning a single spiral into a series of tumbling twists and turns within an impossibly gigantic domestic interior. A significant aspect of *Descent* is the contrast shown between the rhythmic solidity of the wooden steps and the contorted fluidity of their plaster underside. It is this abstract, vortical shape threading each level together like stretched canvas that draws the eye, creating a kind of curvature, or folding, of form within the pictorial space.

Descent was created during a year's residency at the Florence Trust, an artists' studio and training ground for early career artists based in St Saviour's Church, London and first shown in the deconsecrated Neo-Gothic space as part of the final exhibition. The setting in Chichester Cathedral proves more challenging. Here the work finds itself in a visually busier context, flanked on one side by the treasury, visible through an iron grille and on the other by a wall of 16th-century portraits of Chichester's bishops, and adjacent to a Gothic window of clear glass, which at certain times of the day mists the painting with ambient light. As Anthony Cane, the Chancellor of Chichester Cathedral, reminded me, this is one of the challenges for art-



Anna Freeman Bentley *Descent*, 2011
installed at Chichester Cathedral, 2015
Photo: Rowan Durrant

works in churches, rarely subject to the environmental controls of a gallery, but also one of its advantages as changing conditions literally throw new light upon the work.

As one approaches the painting the bottom panel visually sits at ground level, tempting the viewer with the possibility of walking into the painting and beginning an ascent of one's own. The work is called *Descent* however

and thus we have to reorientate our view of it. Though one naturally lifts one's eyes upwards, the inference of the title is of a movement downwards. Within the context of the cathedral (and with William Blake's spiralling staircase in mind), the precedent here is clearly Jacob's Ladder, that oneiric conduit between Earth and Heaven. Typically, whether in the writings of Irenaeus or Origen, Gregory of

Nazianzus or John Chrysostom, among others, as an allegory of the spiritual life the ladder is seen as a means of ascent, whether by acts of virtue or by grace. Yet in Genesis we are plainly told that Jacob saw angels 'ascending and descending' (Genesis 28:12), an inference picked up in John's Gospel where Jesus himself is pictured as the ladder upon which 'the angels of God' are pictured 'ascending and descending on the Son of Man' (John 1:51). A relationship between Earth and Heaven seems to be at stake in this image, an intercourse between two realms rather than an exhortation to ascend, in which Christ himself acts as an intermediary between God and mankind.

As a painter Freeman Bentley generally works in oil on hardboard, which provides a smooth surface over which thin washes of colour can be brushed and dragged. She prefers to work at speed, each painting usually completed on the day it is begun. This approach encourages impulsive decision-making and exaggerates the sense of drama, movement and energy in her works. Although essentially figurative, her paintings have been described as 'dense to the point of abstraction'¹. Watery washes of a generally muted colour palette abut intensely dark, shadowy passages or sudden moments of luminous colour, their textural, brushmarked surfaces disclosing optical depth. This is amplified by her frequent depiction of mirrored and reflective surfaces, introducing a note of visual disorientation. The visual field is fractured, fragmented, fissured, yet the works do not fall into disunity or fragment into incoherence. These are highly structured, tightly composed images, all serving to produce visually rich, if not easily legible worlds. Her paintings typically engage with interior spaces, always unpeopled and often visually complex, ranging from the jumbled clutter of junk shops to the ornate flamboyance of 17th-century church interiors. These atmospheric, unpopulated interiors are ambiguous spaces, sometimes evoking the eerie emptiness of abandoned buildings, but more often than not claustrophobic, stiflingly overloaded with visual stimuli. In each case she sees her work principally as a visualisation of longing.

However, in discussions with the artist about the ideas that motivate her paintings there is another theme that repeatedly surfaces: that of the Baroque. What is it about the Baroque

that she finds so inspirational and what justification can be found for this assertion? Reading around its history it soon becomes clear that it is notoriously difficult to distil it into a single idea or set of ideas. Attempts to establish any fixed and definitive meaning appear futile, since, it is claimed, the Baroque is inherently 'volatile and unstable'². Nevertheless, in Robert Harbison's fascinating study of the Baroque a number of defining features are identified that closely accord with Freeman Bentley's paintings: 'bold chiaroscuro, disorienting asymmetries, exaggerated contrasts, decorative and expressionistic use of formerly structural elements' with an emphasis on 'subjective and perspectival vision'³. But it is the affective rather than stylistic qualities of the Baroque that are of particular relevance to her work. Above all, Freeman Bentley finds in Heinrich Wölfflin's classic definition of the baroque effect ideas that resonate with her own:

The momentary impact of baroque is powerful, but soon leaves us with a certain sense of desolation. It does not convey a state of present happiness, but a feeling of anticipation, of something yet to come, of dissatisfaction and restlessness rather than fulfilment. We have no sense of release, but rather of having been drawn into the tension of an emotional condition⁴

Freeman Bentley sometimes frames her practice within a reading of the Baroque as theatrical excess and visual saturation. This reference to Wölfflin, however, encourages a reading of her work in which mood, affect and longing come to the fore. Even so, the negativity evident in his view of the Baroque is countered in Freeman Bentley's oeuvre by a sense of hope and anticipation. Ben Quash has written of the provocations her paintings make to this notion of the Baroque through their recourse to 'a strange remembering of times past and a hopeful looking forward into eternity', a future-oriented tendency he labels 'towardness'⁵. One might speak, for example, of an ever-present sense of the infinite as a hallmark of the Baroque, above all the intrusion or irruption of the infinite and eternal into the everyday world. *Descent* is described in precisely such terms on the cathedral's own web pages. In somewhat hyperbolic language it claims that the drama of the work 'overpowers the viewer and reacts with the space', and here is the key phrase, 'pointing our gaze towards

infinity'. For Wölfflin, such judgements marked the Baroque as a regressive movement away from the clarity of the Renaissance. In his view it is a sign of decadence and aesthetic decline that baroque space is 'unlimited and undefined', its depth offering only obscurity as 'the gaze is led toward infinity'⁶. However, if the infinite is at work in *Descent* perhaps it is not in the manner that Wölfflin's negative assessment supposes. After all, though dramatically extended, the staircase clearly has two levels, a lower and upper floor, a beginning and an end. The apex of the stairway disappears into a hidden room or enclosed space; rather than continuing upward into infinity it leads to, or perhaps, in view of the work's title, descends from another level. Where then do we find its intimations of infinity? Here, another key identifier of the Baroque is helpful: allegory. John Rupert Martin speaks of the Baroque's 'innate tendency' to allegorise, 'concealed beneath' its naturalistic exterior⁷. In allegorical terms, there is one trope associated with the Baroque that goes unmentioned by Freeman Bentley's commentators but seems eminently applicable to her work: folding. For the philosopher, Gilles Deleuze with whom this idea is associated, there is little point in seeking an essence of the Baroque, like an art historian eager to categorise or periodise; better by far to consider how it operates. It works, he suggests, by endlessly producing folds⁸.

The concept of the fold is the means by which Deleuze seeks to trouble the simple dichotomy between inside and outside, surface and depth, appearance and essence, since it presents the enigmatic possibility that the one is simply a fold of the other. Deleuze's cryptic way of pictorializing such foldings is a two-tiered Baroque building. The lower floor is steeped in the material world, while the upper chamber is entirely enclosed. This upper level designates the incorporeal, immaterial or (dare we say) spiritual aspect of experience. On the one hand, it differentiates between public and private realms. On the other hand, at least for Deleuze, this model is a picture of the relations between the material, sensing body and the soul. Equally, we can say that the lower level is related to the exterior façade, evoking the gravity, exuberance and complexity of the physical world; the upper level is 'a weightless, closed interiority'⁹, indicating the levity, grace and harmony of spiritual elevation. Crucially, rather than constituting



Detail: *Descent*, 2011. Photo: Rowan Durrant

ing two distinct worlds, Deleuze proposes each to be inseparable from the other, 'by dint of a presence of the upper in the lower. The upper floor is folded over the lower floor. One is not acting upon the other, but one belongs to the other, in a sense of a double belonging'¹⁰. Inevitably a theological reading will translate this hierarchy of levels into the material and spiritual, secular and sacred, the Christian experience to be in but not of the world, materially joined to it yet spiritually distinct from it. For Freeman Bentley, longing is the name of the fold that stitches together these two realms. As such, she says, the staircase stands 'as a physical representation of desire, of the search for fulfillment'¹¹. If the concept of the fold is, then, a device that separates and joins, articulating the relations between visible and invisible, material and spiritual, in purely architectural terms it is well represented by a staircase, which connects not only separate rooms but separate levels. Indeed, in Anthony Vidler's analysis of this deleuzian theme he fortuitously writes that the two floors of the 'Baroque House' are 'joined by a stair of infinite folds'¹².

Harbison inventively described the many lives of the Baroque beyond its 17th-century origins, finding influences and characteristic traits of the Baroque in modern forms of art and architecture. In Deleuze's idiosyncratic vision these hybridisations are envisioned as foldings, one thing folding into another. As such, the metaphysical lesson of the Baroque is a movement away from the Cartesian divisibility of body and soul, towards a notion of the fundamental inseparability of phenomena¹³. However eccentric this reading may be (and Harbison for one treats it so), with *Descent* in mind the notion of the fold rather neatly complements Freeman Bentley's associations of her work with a baroque sensibility. In the painterly materiality of her works depth of vision is achieved by an infolding of their many layers, 'fold after fold', as Deleuze would say.

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Descent is at Chichester Cathedral 10 April – 12 June 2015.

A monograph of the artist was published this year by Anomie, priced £20.

1. Colin Perry, *Florence Trust Summer Exhibition Catalogue*, 2011, unpaginated.
2. Helen Hills (ed.), *Rethinking the Baroque*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, p. 66.
3. Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 217.
4. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, London: Collins, 1964, p. 38.
5. Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 281-282.
6. Wölfflin, cited in Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2001, p. 90.
7. John Rupert Martin, 'The Baroque from the Point of View of the Art Historian', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1955, p. 166. An obvious example might be the *vanitas* image particularly associated with Dutch 17th-century painting. This play between naturalistic form and allegorical content is a distinguishing characteristic of the Baroque.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 3.

9. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 29.

10. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 119. This distinction of two worlds is, of course, one we associate with the Platonic tradition, with its division of reality into Idea and Appearance. According to Deleuze, in the Platonic model 'The world was thought to have an infinite number of floors, with a stairway that descends and ascends, with each step lost in the upper order of the One and disintegrated in the ocean of the multiple. [...] But the Baroque contribution par excellence is a world with

only two floors', separated and joined by a fold (Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 29).

11. Anna Freeman Bentley, *Investigating the Shadows*, ACE/ASK Artist's Talk, King's College London, 2 February 2015.

12. Vidler, *Warped Space*, p. 233.

13. If this Deleuzian fold seems to lack theological justification we should note that Deleuze himself draws upon the theology of Nicholas de Cusa and Giordano Bruno in identifying three capacities of the fold. The triad of *complicatio*, *explicatio* and *implicatio* is

a trinity of folds and foldings: of enfolding (*complicatio*), unfolding (*explicatio*) and infolding (*implicatio*), a reading clearly referencing the *pli* or fold at the heart of each term.

Editorial

It's undoubtedly a positive frustration when the material amassed for issues of *A&C* tends to exceed the 20 page limit. Even this issue, which has been steered towards articles by and/or about women – a decision taken by the editorial board in a move to celebrate the striking number of women whose contributions to the visual arts and religion are consistently rich and varied – has been far from difficult to commission. Anna Freeman Bentley's impressive intervention at Chichester Cathedral is a distinctive artefact which Jonathan Koestlé-Cate unfolds in his astute examination of her painting practice set alongside that of the Baroque; Sophie Hacker talks to Jacqueline Creswell who has been mak-

ing waves with Salisbury Cathedral's visual arts programme; three women (two artists and one a curator) review exhibitions; and leading academics in the field Alison Milbank and Ayla Lepine take on book reviews.

All of this falls under the long shadow of Jane Daggett Dillenberger to whom Graham Howes pays tribute. Jane's long career writing on and teaching subjects previously overlooked by so many – *Secular Art with Sacred Themes* is an example of one of her more exacting titles – is testament to her tenacity and continually refreshed perceptions. And of course, one of Jane's great allies in this country was our founder and Director Emeritus, Tom Devonshire Jones, who also died

in February this year. Charles Pickstone's obituary recognises Tom's huge commitment to so many strands of the visual arts within Christianity, nurturing men and women alike in their endeavours and securing the renewal of serious art patronage in the church as well as serious contemplation its fruits. In the next issue of *A&C* we will be asking individuals to comment on Tom's (as well as ACE's) influence in their own practice or research, and on the current 'condition' of art's relationship to Christianity and other religions. Another bumper issue then ...

The Bishop Otter Scholarship

The trustees of the Bishop Otter Trust seek to appoint a person of proven academic ability to a new scholarship for exploration of theology and the arts, based in Chichester, working in partnership with the Centre for Arts and the Sacred at King's (ASK), London.

The scholarship will be for two years. The successful candidate will be ready to undertake some original, post-graduate work of research that will generate theological debate (seminar, lecture, blog, etc), provide a research resource for the bishop of Chichester, and achieve publication that will constitute serious scholarship. Residential accommodation (including utilities, etc) is provided. The scholarship is for £7,000 per annum. The time commitment to the scholarship is three days a week residence in Chichester, the equivalent of a .5 part-time post of 20 hours. Holiday is pro rata for a .5 part-time post.

Applications close at 12.00 noon on Friday 22 May, 2015.

Interviews will be held at The Palace, Chichester, on Tuesday, 2 June, 2015.

Details are available from Mrs Margaret Gibson, The Palace, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1PY
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