

Philip Clairmont

1949–1984

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Philip Clairmont's crucifixion makes no concessions to the pieties of the subject or the sensitivities of the viewer. Christ's mutilated and disintegrating body hangs limply from the cross, a strung-up slab of decaying meat. Clairmont's high-octane, nerve-jangling style works to torment Christ and those viewers sympathetic to his plight. The depiction of Christ with the lower body of a woman or an hermaphrodite drives the final nail into this sacrilegious version of the crucifixion. This is a darkly comic variant on the *Exquisite Corpse* game Clairmont played with fellow Expressionist Tony Fomison.

Clairmont refuses to let Christ hang serenely in the centre of this composition, which in many crucifixions symbolises salvation and acceptance. His Christ is the active centre of a dramatic, angled composition, out of which an explosion of colour and form radiates to the edges of the picture plane. These energy-giving diagonal brushstrokes are familiar from Clairmont's larger paintings. But here, as drawing marks made on a small scale, they take on an additional intensity that conveys the anguish of Christ writhing in pain on the cross. The background of pulsing forms and clashing colours further intensifies this sense of energy and violence.

Christ's body is subjected to the most extreme treatment. The slashes of white paint over acidic yellow and green viscerally capture the body in pain. This grotesque torso is at odds with the more delicate line drawing in the lower, feminised portion of the body. Clashes of discordant images, forms, colours and textures characterise Clairmont's style. Here these clashes mount an assault on both the senses and religious beliefs.

Clairmont often reinterpreted iconic themes and objects. This cross-dressing of Christ is comparable to his reversals and inversions of the swastika form in other works. In both cases sacred symbols of human suffering are reworked in a manner designed to provoke and shock. This approach is only one step removed from the transformation of innocent domestic objects into sinister 'beings' in Clairmont's paintings. In this drawing the cross takes on human form, wrapping its arms around Christ. It is related to the sneering sink, grimacing fireplace and swaying light bulb of Clairmont's paintings.

Clairmont stressed what he saw as the artist's imperative to experience, transform and depict a reality radically different to that accessible to others. He used music and drugs to heighten levels of perception, and his art seeks to convey these experiences in visual terms.

These ideas about the role of the artist also form the basis of Expressionism, the artistic tradition that provides the context for Clairmont's crucifixion. Here Clairmont places himself in a long tradition that reaches back through the German Expressionists of the early 20th century to Matthias Grünewald, whose green-tinged Christ in the Isenheim Altarpiece (1513–1515) is a direct antecedent of Clairmont's crucified Christ. Clairmont looks to art history, but offers a new Christ for a grotesque modern world yet to resolve the same human predicament that haunted those earlier artists.

Aaron Lister

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www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
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www.fernergalleries.co.nz
www.govettbrewster.com
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www.victoria.ac.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issues11to20/clairmont11.htm

Books:

Edmond, M. (2000). *The Resurrection Of Philip Clairmont*, Auckland University Press.

Web search:

Tony Fomison
 Matthias Grünewald

