

STRANGE CLAY: CERAMICS IN CONTEMPORARY ART, Hayward Gallery, London (from 26 October) • HILMA, starring Lily Cole (in cinemas 28 October)

VOICES UNWRAPPED: THE SIXTEEN, Kings Place, London (24 November); Virginia Woolf's ORLANDO • Garrick Theatre, London (from 25 November)

Tuning in to God

Madoc Cairns visits a London church with a history of radicalism to experience the latest installation filling the space of the Grade I-listed building

PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE & CO

THE RADIOS, putting out their hum and static directly in front of the altar, make for a melancholy congregation. “I wanted them to be just on the edge of picking up a channel,” artist Jesse Darling explains. “But then I realised it might suggest Magic FM is God.”

We are in St James’s Church, Piccadilly, in central London, where a collection of radio sets, welded to metal struts, are crowded into the nave. A few pews down, two radio-creatures perch, antennas expectantly aimed skywards; off in the not-quite-a-lady-chapel, a madonna and child array is flanked by an icon on the same theme.

This is “Miserere”, Darling’s installation, purpose-built for the space after the artist had a residency there last month. It’s a simple piece; intentionally so, Darling says. And affecting all the same: someone tells me it reminds them of the experience of “having a noisy head”.

One piece, *Our lady Batman of the empty center*, sits behind a side chapel’s altar. It’s premade, but Darling feels it’s entirely appropriate here: “She’s found her home.” And in some ways, it seems Darling has too. Despite – or perhaps because of – being slap bang in the most privileged bit of London, St James’s is a hive of radicalism. It’s long had that reputation: its rector in the 1980s was Donald Reeves, described by Margaret Thatcher as “a very dangerous man”. Reeves had a reputation for being a turbulent figure, given to peace-making projects, and was happy to be a thorn in the side of the establishment. Then came more radical thinking from Reeves’s successor, Charles Hadley, who installed solar panels on the church roof long before it was mainstream, back in 2003. And long before that, St James’s had been at the heart of campaigns for women’s ordination and LGBT inclusion in the Church of England.

The current rector, every bit as radical as her predecessors and the reason Darling has his commission, is Lucy Winkett. She was one of the first women to be ordained in the Church, often spoken of as a contender for the first woman bishop and maybe still the first female Archbishop of Canterbury. A professional soprano before she was ordained to the priesthood in 1995, Winkett embraced

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the chance to work here when it came along 11 years ago because, she tells me, she realised she had found a congregation that matched – or even exceeded – her own appetite to think outside the box.

What thinking outside the box has looked like, for Winkett, included a boat hanging from the rafters of her Grade-I listed church in 2015. Arabella Dorman’s *Flight* transposed a refugee boat from the Mediterranean to the gilt and plaster of St James’s vault, suspended in mid-air above the nave. It’s not uncommon for churches to act as art galleries. It sometimes works, and sometimes grates: spaces patterned with so much meaning can’t always bear the weight of newcomers.

Winkett has a careful, realistic attitude to art in her church. “I think about the words of the ‘Magnificat,’” she says. “He has scattered the strong in the imagination of their heart.” Human creativity is, she thinks, a participation

Radio sets welded to metal struts form the installation ‘Miserere’ by Jesse Darling

in God’s creativity, always tripping on the edges of transcendence. “But it doesn’t have to be. There’s a disciplining there too, a direction. If I thought it wasn’t right for here, I wouldn’t have a problem saying no.”

Less than a year ago, St James’s appointed Richard Parry as its first creative director (“Are we the only church with a creative director in the country? As far as I’m aware ...”). He’s never worked in a faith organisation before. Before St James’s he directed Glasgow International, one of the UK’s benchmark contemporary art festivals. It’s an unusual hire for a Church organisation, and, in this way, a radical statement by the parish.

It’s a radical step for Parry, too; having to relearn curation for a new kind of space, with different expectations. Art and religion sometimes share a language, but the grammar is different: the valency of individual artworks shifts, subtly, irrevocably. Sometimes it’s not

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subtle at all, of course. “We were talking to Lucy about where to place one work and she said ‘that would put it in the Holy of Holies,’” he says, laughing, surprised: “I’d never heard that before in my life”.

For all that, entering St James’s was crossing into new territory for Parry, he knew exactly who he wanted to bring into the space: Darling, he believes, is “one of the most exciting rising stars in contemporary art”. Other labels, more-or-less disputable, and more-or-less-digestible in the art world, are attached to Darling: feminist, queer, politically radical, working-class. And one you wouldn’t necessarily expect: Christian.

It’s not legible through terms of institutional

affiliation, or belief in a formal, systematised way (“I can’t quite get on board with Jesus,” he tells me); but all the same, faith has been a constant, haunting presence in his work for years, an engagement with Christianity that’s all the more striking for the lack of obvious ties Darling might have to faith. Aged 41, he was raised in a secular family in Oxford, came to art late when he became a student at Central St Martins at the age of 30. But his 2018 Tate Britain show, “The Ballad of Saint Jerome”, was the first Tate exhibition for some time to focus explicitly on religious themes.

Agnostic about God, Darling’s not at all agnostic about faith. One phrase he uses about St James’s – “the electro-magnetic field of hope” – seems to capture something impor-

tant about the relationship between space and community, people and church: electric, uncontrollable, unseen, bringing light to darkness, turning silence into sound.

The soft, constant buzz in “Miserere” is “the frequency you might turn to to help babies sleep”, he says. Filling the space of the church, it makes for an ambiguous experience, dominating but indistinct, both in- and out-of-place, wordlessly communicating in terms we can’t quite grasp, reaching towards something they can’t touch. The altar is from the seventeenth century; the radios the late twentieth; the questions they pose much older than either. It’s his contribution, Darling says, to a group show that’s been ongoing for thousands of years.