

The Two Ways of Life

Calum Colvin

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Time Frames: The Art of Calum Colvin

In a number of Calum Colvin's works of the last few years, we find ourselves in the inner sanctum of some sacred place that's half Temple of Dendur and half Temple of Doom. Like the latter, which was the discovery of Steven Spielberg's All-American archaeologist, Indiana Jones, this temple has been penetrated by an intrepid explorer with very distinct national characteristics, a kilted Scottish Action Hero whose mountain-climbing rope is slung across his body much as a bullwhip is across Jones's. Moreover, we can't help suspecting that this plucky character is exactly the same sort of alter-ego of his creator that Jones is of Spielberg. The fantastical world that Colvin has created around his hero also seems to be a diabolical mixture of projection and evasion, a daydream of such compelling intricacy and charm that we are too beguiled to care whether it's a looking glass in which we are seeing the artist reflected, or a smokescreen behind which he's hiding.

Either way, Colvin's labyrinthine vision, as studded with mysteries, conundrums, and allusions as a Hindu crown is with precious gems, would discourage even the most redoubtable iconographers. All except Dr. David Mellor, that is. His role is that played in the Indiana Jones movies, as I recall, by Sean Connery. His deciphering of Colvin's mythology has been both tenacious and sensitive to a degree that no other scholar can hope to match. (I wouldn't begin to try.) At the same time, though, as I believe Dr. Mellor would be the first to admit, Colvin's world isn't a forbidding one that we feel we mustn't enter without esoteric knowledge and hierophantic skills. On the contrary, it's as immediately accessible and entertaining as Spielberg's is. Like Spielberg's world, Colvin's relies upon special effects — optical illusions — at once transparent and convincing in a way that wins us over completely.

The particular special effect that is the most sensational and engaging here relies upon Colvin's ability to insinuate painted two-dimensional figures into actual three-dimensional spaces. Working always from the camera's monocular point of view, he disperses a figure here and there throughout his stage set in such a way that it will be restored to wholeness again on the flat surface of the photograph. These passages in his work begin as pure, unabashed cleverness, a *trompe l'oeil* tour de force, but quickly turn into a more formidable sort of cunning, a strategy that has much larger designs upon us.

In a few early pieces, he seems to have taken great pains to make some of the props he was employing fall into coincidence with the anatomy of the figure. In one picture, the fold in a baize thrown over a table neatly forms the juncture of the figure's thigh and hip. In another, the hole in the rubber tab from which a hot water bottle can be hung for storage is placed roughly where the belly button of the female nude into which it is incorporated ought to be. Filled with water and stoppered at the other end, the bottle gives a swelling fullness, an odd sensuality, to the figure's abdomen. The image also gives us the disconcerting impression that we are seeing both the erotic surface and the organic insides of the figure simultaneously. A constant motif in Colvin's work is Superman, whose powers included X-ray vision. It's as if Colvin's art has somehow endowed us with the same extraordinary ability.

Colvin is obviously a showman, and at times a show-off. He is unable to resist any opportunity to display his talent for visual puns, optical prestidigitation, pictorial gambits. His greatest stunt is that he makes us sit still for it all. The cornucopia of tricks spilling out of the picture plane never makes us feel as if we were being buried alive under it. It's lighter than air. We just can't become impatient with him. He's too amusing. And yet, he seems to have recognized all along that he had something more significant than "Now you see it, now you don't" to show us. His ability to make us sense the presence of a big theme under the shenanigans is, in fact, what ultimately keeps us fascinated.

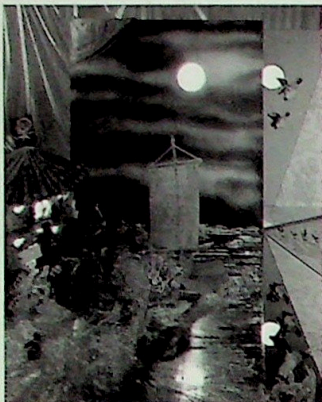
That theme is the place of mythic beings in the modern world. It is the way in which we still hunger for ancient spirits to inform even the most tacky of present circumstances. This is, literally (or rather, optically), what happens in many of his pictures. Figures from myth and history, and from art history in particular, infiltrate contemporary reality. Gods and heroes of yore live among us yet, abiding with us in our cluttered, tatty, everyday lives.

Colvin soon saw that what mattered more than the way his figures of legend fit into the modern world was the way in which they touched that world. The figure who must make do with a hot water bottle for a womb (or bladder), for instance, curls her languorous, Ingres-inspired arm around her head, and holds down the disconnect bar on a telephone. The receiver lies inside her head with the mouthpiece in her brain and the earpiece at her eye: she is apparently a creature capable of doing all her listening visually, and of speaking telepathically. It's no wonder she has no need for telephones. Other figures Colvin has implicated in his interiors are equally symbolic. Their fingers touch the frets of guitars in which their own bodies are involved, as if they themselves were their instrument; or they grasp a vacuum cleaner handle that also touches their mouth as if it were a pipe or timbrel out of Keats's sonnet that they were about to play.

In the series that is the subject of this exhibition, as well, there is a panel where a little plaster putto that holds up an ugly occasional table emerges from the thigh of a classical male nude. This piece of gilded kitsch in the very worst contemporary taste is apparently the final result, the end-game, of a line of progeny that began when Hera was born out of the thigh of Zeus. In the photograph, what makes it so enormously pathetic and poignant at the same time is the acknowledgement it represents of the unanswerable yearning of our own age for an ancient spirituality.

COLIN WESTERBECK
The Art Institute of Chicago

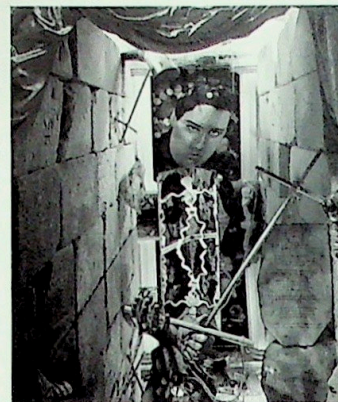
The Two Ways of Life 1991



1. The Empty Universe



2. Siren



3. His Hand in Mine



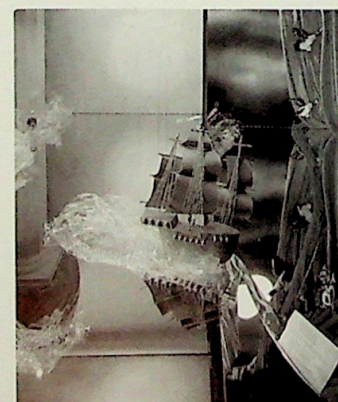
4. The Two Ways of Life



5. Crying in the Chapel



6. Bacchus



7. With the Great Plenipotentiary

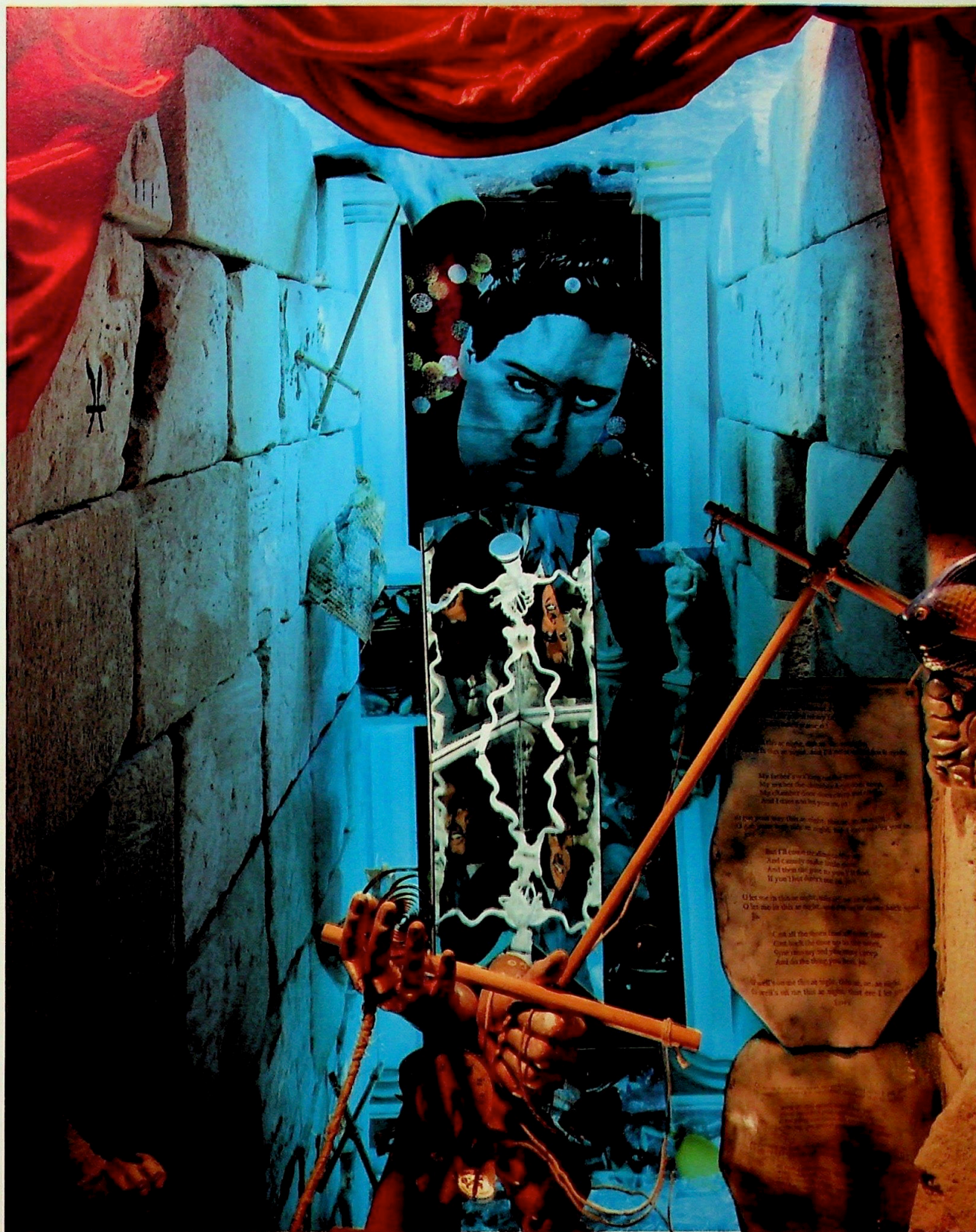
Cibachrome prints, 1-3, 5-7: 61" x 48", 4: 61" x 76¼"
An edition of 10



1. The Empty Universe



2. Siren

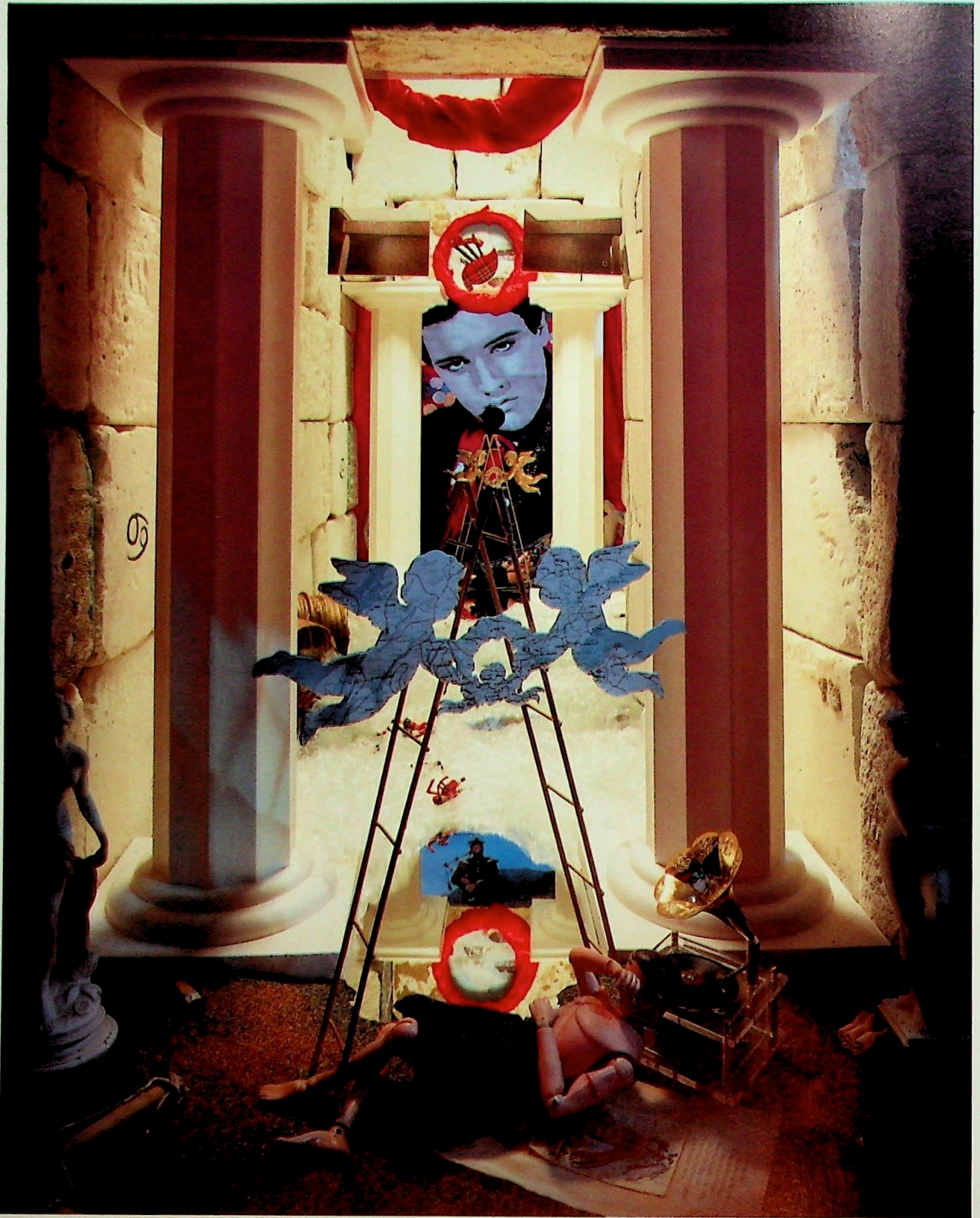


3. His Hand in Mine

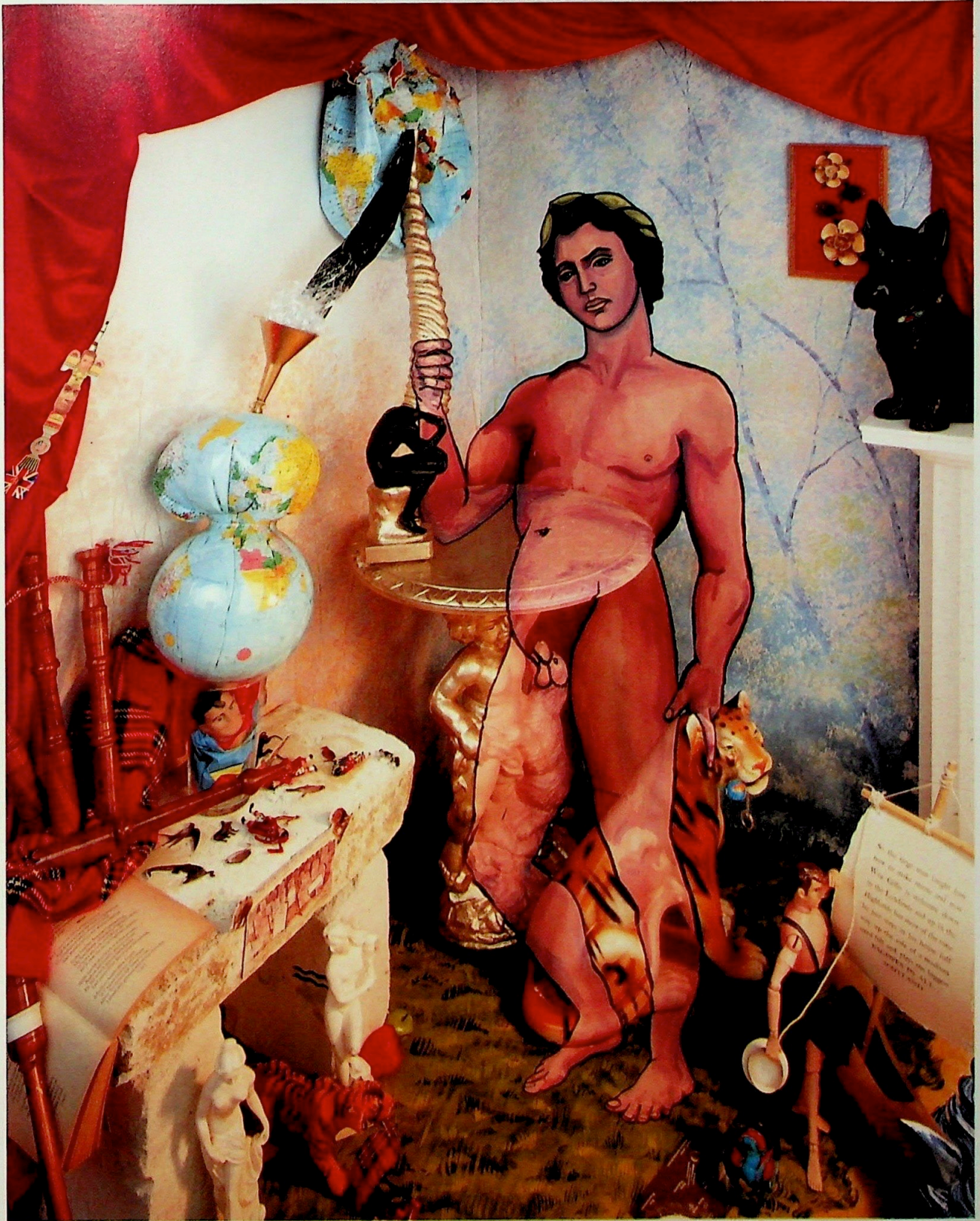


4. The Two Ways of Life





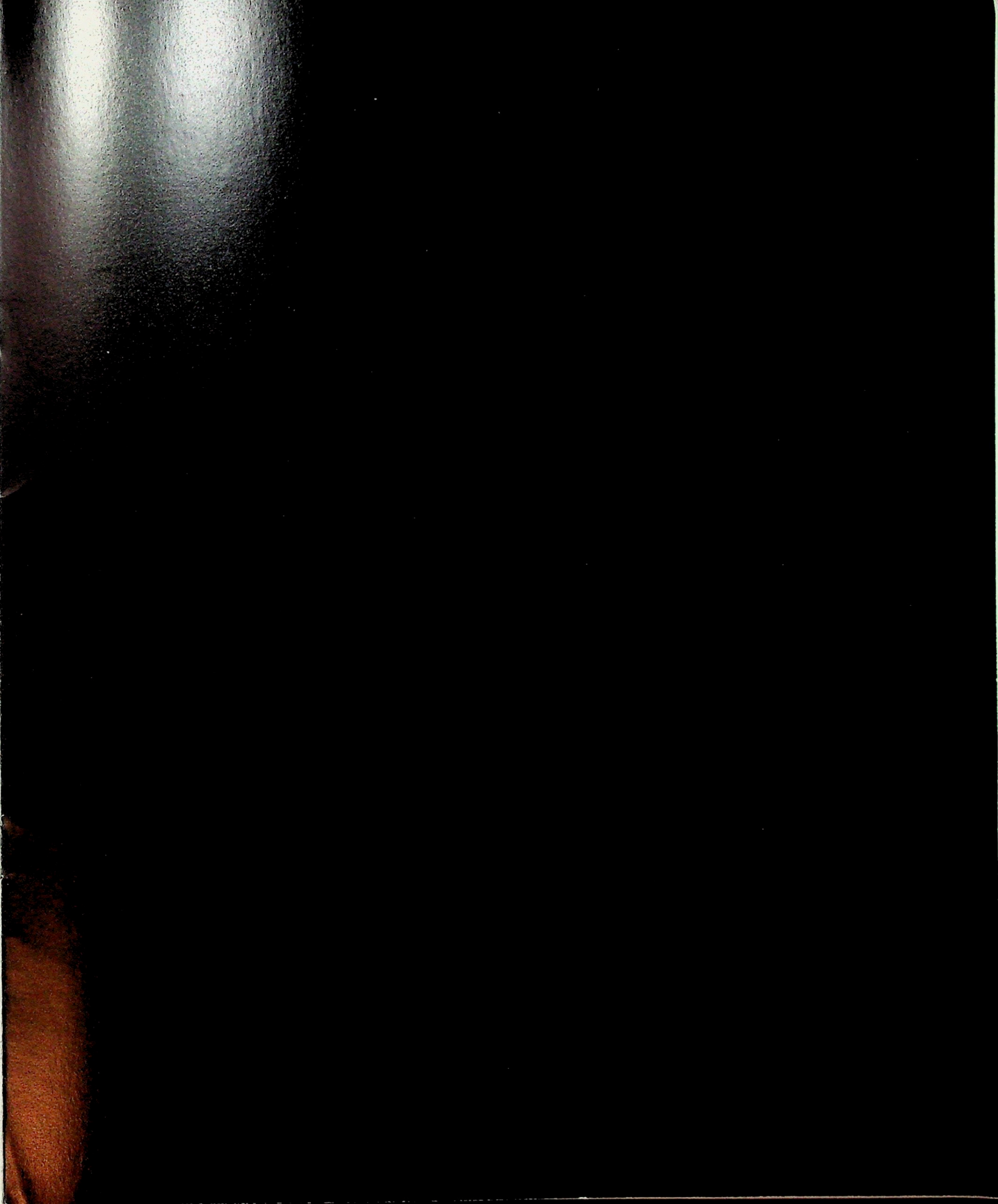
5. Crying in the Chapel



6. Bacchus



7. With the Great Plenipotentiary



The Two Ways of Life

Calum Colvin's *The Two Ways of Life* is a recent addition – but a perverse one – to a long series modernising that commonplace of Renaissance iconography, The Choice of Hercules. Like O.G.Rejlander's version of this topic in 1857, Colvin has assembled a vast multi-part photographic tableau. But while in those previous handlings by Hogarth and Rejlander there was a confirmation of high moral seriousness and of Virtue against Vice, Colvin has thought otherwise. Instead he has upset the moral fixities of Industry and Idleness, of Virtue and Vice by way of a turbulent narrative, an *amphigouri*, a sea of nonsense across which a fantastic voyage is undertaken by the manniken toy-hero of his previous photo-tableaux. The Ship of Fools, the *Narrenschiif*, is the carnival metaphor by which Colvin satirises his chosen framework of Humanist idealism. This ship sets sail in the first picture in the *Two Ways of Life* suite, *The Empty Universe*, and it then journeys on through all the other panels, by way of the moral geography of rocks and grottoes and wrecks.

The Empty Universe

Is he Ulysses, the Fisher King or a young guy from Dundee on a Benidorn package holiday, who stands kilted, ready to embark? Colvin has always been marked by this Eliotic, *Waste Land*-ish melancholy. However much it works against the register, this is still a High-Romantic picture, resembling Turner's *Parting of Hero and Leander*; full of bravura vapours and spray, a moonlit Cling Film (TM Copyright) sea with a beach party in progress and an adventurous – perhaps fatal – return to homeland in the offing. The drunken boat bearing a sail blazoned with Robert Burns' Highland anthems to lechery approaches the Barbary coast in this prologue or overture. Such unheard – to the beholder of the tableau – Scottish songs, complement the uniformed bagpipers and drummers who mutely cross the map of Scotland and into a skewed map of England in . . .

Siren

Colvin unsettles the conventional meanings of the female personification of Vice within his parasitised allegory. In Rejlander's 1857 picture the Sirens call and detain a heeding youth falling on the 'wrong' way of life. Here Tintoretto's *Susannah* is ironically used by Colvin to dismantle the notion of the temptress; Susannah is a type of purity and innocence – a triumphal figure who rejects the sexual advances of the Elders – reversing the signification of Siren and the roles attached to it. It fits, then, that this image of dissimulation against type, is composed anamorphically, a cryptic double of body and music making still-life, which generates chaste melodies, disdaining the rout of Scots bandmen on the rocks below her right foot. An object of the voyeurs gaze of the Elders and the kilted toy hero in his erotic craft, she is their nemesis and ruin. Like the virtuous Elizabeth I in the Armada portrait, she stands as a rock while a storm devours the importuning, hostile boats around her.

His Hand in Mine

Shipwrecked, the horn boat has foundered in the chambers of a malign Poseidon, while the Action-Man hero peers in on the scene with his camera. Aground in Davy Jones' Locker with its textual sail torn from the mast, the fool's ship with its announcement of questing male desire now resembles a temporary crucifix in penitential hands: asceticism (rather than codified 'vice' – another handy dandy switch by Colvin) is in the ascendance. Just as it was in Picasso's Blue Period, aptly described by Apollinaire as: ". . . aquatic painting, blue like the damp bottom of an abyss and inspiring pit". This submarine defile corresponds to those sacralised spaces and temples that Colvin has built in such earlier pictures as *Cenotaph* (1987). So Elvis presides with a look from the depths for those in peril on the sea, an almost demoniac antetype, a false idol cast into the deeps, now made amphibious by Colvin, inhabiting the worlds of water and air.

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Near drowned, the toy sailor has toppled over a wall into a bizarre spectacle resembling the Hall of the Mountain King. The Christian narrative is continued in this central panel which has its counterpart in Rejlander's guiding patriarch at the dividing point of the 'two ways'. Colvin had earlier thought of painting Moses parting the Red Sea; he concluded with a version of Raphael's *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, his absent reed cross referring to the lashed cruciform mast of the *Narrenschif* in the previous panel. What does St. John preach in this context which Colvin has abducted him to? At least three topics have structured the suite and they are laid out here in Baroque splendour. The first is the confiscated culture of 'Scottishness': the shrine behind St. John is a kind of Highland reliquary composed of stags bones and antlers, the bagpipes and the heraldic chart of the Scots clans, Jokanaan in the milieu of a fusty Highland lodge. Secondly, the conventional nobility of High Renaissance art is desacralised here, as it is in the use of Michelangelo's *Bacchus* in the sixth panel of the suite, and in the pop-up book display of Leonardo painting. This confronts a similar cardboard pop-up vision of Elvis at Las Vegas, his voice, like that of St. John, crying in the wilderness. A semi-deified Elvis forms a final strand of meaning in this panel – an Elvis also of two ways, signified in the change of his career after his entry into the US Army, cited by Colvin as 'Golden Boy/Soldier Boy', in the shadow of the boy preacher St. John. This combination is powerfully reminiscent of Max Ernst's mutations of Christian iconography in the early nineteen-twenties.

Crying in the Chapel

Together with *His Hand in Mine*, in *Crying in the Chapel* Elvis flanks the high altar and shrine of the central panel, his face found in what amounts to two transept chapels dedicated to his cult. But there are differences: instead of the cold submarine light of *His Hand* . . . , in this instance, (as in all the panels to the right hand side) some notional sunlight falls into a crypt space where the sailor, fetched up on pebbles, listens to the music of the sirens, but (Eliotically, again) on an archaic phonograph. He shields his eyes from an angelic vision rather than the mortifying skeleton's dance in *His Hand* In a mirror at the far end the beholder comes under Elvis' gaze, while gilded angels hover about a ladder. The vision, of course, cites Jacob's Dream, but it drastically shifts the revelation of the House of God to a mournful secular site; that of Scotland dispossessed. This is discovered in the burning light of the wreath the angels hold; a row of Highland cottages under a mountain, inverted, indistinct, is compressed like the toy crystal snow sphere in *Citizen Kane*, into an always already lost souvenir of Scotland. This had been previously glimpsed in the central panel as a political cartoon from the late nineteenth century, showing rows of tombstones as the only assured pieces of land and property the Highland Scots had claim to. This Jacob's Dream is soured, fatalistic.

Bacchus

And now we climb out of the abysses. This, remember, should be the traditional realm of virtue, a glimpse of paradise hardworn after surmounting the rocks and caverns. Conventionally so, but Colvin has subverted this usual patterning by representing a banalised peaceable kingdom with kitsch china tigers and dogs, presided over by Dionysus – personification of excess and disorder – rather than figuring Apollo’s harmonic golden age. This is no Parnassian scene but, in Colvin’s words, “a corrupted Garden of Eden, with Bacchus intoxicated with self righteousness . . . a siren of male desire. In Bacchus the image of innocence found in Susannah as the *Siren*, is taken up and perverted”. In other words, we might view *Bacchus* and *Siren* as inverted pairings which function like *His Hand* . . . and *Crying in the Chapel*, to undermine the prior iconographic schemas of Vice and Virtue. Yet Colvin does strongly moralise here, with a vast simplicity, both politically and ecologically; Bacchus, travestyng the figures of Industry, depletes the resources of a sagging globe, syphoning them via his puncturing horn of plenty into another distended, bloated world; a Bacchus who, like the early Nineteenth century Scottish Calvinist writer James Hogg, is “a justified sinner”.

With the Great Plenipotentiary

On the right hand edge of *Bacchus* the kilted toy sailor has regained his ship from a Van Gogh sea. The story, a harsh lesson for one setting out in the *Narrenschif*, seems wound up and at an end. On his sail is the printed conclusion to a Scottish fairy tale: the wandering hero has learned how to play the bagpipes and the reality principle is upheld. A certain neutering has taken place. However, there is still the final panel, a panel which recapitulates and pairs with the first, *The Empty Universe*. The sailor reappears, flailing the water as desperately as Burt Lancaster across the suburban lawns of *The Swimmer*. This epilogue picture – Colvin prefers to see it as the final shot of a pirate movie as the credits roll – entails a reflux of desire. Burns’ found lyric of Highland eroticism, ‘The Great Plenipotentiary’, from *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, is re-inscribed into this declining world. On a glassy, amber sea, a galleon surges by, its sails full of manic hope, flying a chorus line from Burns’ poem as its mainmast flag.

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Biography and Bibliography

- 1961 Born in Glasgow
1979 - 83 Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee
1983 - 85 Royal College of Art, London
Lives and works in London

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1987 Seagate Gallery, Dundee
Sander Gallery, New York
1988 Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Heidelberg
Galeria 57, Madrid
1989 California State University, Long Beach, California
Salama-Caro Gallery, London
Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Frankfurt
1990 Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin
Torch Gallery, Amsterdam
The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
1991 Salama-Caro Gallery, London
Art Institute of Chicago

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1983 Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
1986 *Constructed Narratives*, touring exhibition,
Photographers Gallery, London
1987 *Towards a Bigger Picture*, Victoria and Albert
Museum, London
True Stories and Photofictions Fotogallery,
Cardiff
Riverside Studios, London
The Vigorous Imagination, Scottish National
Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh
1988 Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin
Juxtapositions, Salama-Caro Gallery, London
The Ludwig Museum, Cologne
1989 *Towards a Bigger Picture: Contemporary British
Photography*, Tate Gallery, Liverpool
Machine Dreams, The Photographers Gallery,
London
*Through the Looking Glass: Photographic Art in
Britain 1945-1989*, Barbican Art Gallery, London
and Manchester City Art Gallery
Das Konstruierte Bild, exhibition, Kunstverein
Munich, Kunsthalle Nurnberg, Kunstverein
Karlsruhe and Forum Bremen
1990 *Photography on Site*, California State University
at Fullerton
New Scottish Photography, Scottish National
Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

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Calum Colvin and Ron O'Donnell*, catalogue, The
Photographers Gallery, London, 1986
A.D. Coleman and Susan Beardmore, *True Stories and
Photofictions*, catalogue, The Fotogallery, Cardiff, 1987
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Aperture, No.113, 1988
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Salama-Caro Gallery, London, 1988
David Brittain, 'Calum Colvin: Keeping the Beast Chained
Tight', *Artline*, Vol.4, No.6, April/May 1989
David Mellor, *Calum Colvin, Works 1989*, catalogue,
Salama-Caro Gallery, London 1989
Adrian Dannatt, 'Calum Colvin' *Flash Art*, No.150,
January/February 1990
'Comics, Kitsch und Kunst: Calum Colvin', *Frankfurter
Allegemeine*, January 16, 1990
Robert MacDonald, 'Calum Colvin', *Contemporanea*, February
1990
David Mellor *Calum Colvin* Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh,
April 1990
Charles Hagen, 'It's A Small World', *Art News*, May 1990
Natasha Edwards, 'Calum Colvin', *Artforum*, September 1990



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