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**Avaritia**

**CALUM COLVIN** The Seven Deadly Sins

**RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD** A. D. Coleman

**OWEN LOGAN** Bloodlines

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Cover photograph  
Avarice, 1993  
CALUM COLVIN



Memorial to Lorenzo Demarco  
OWEN LOGAN



LE MODÈLE, c. 1973  
PIERRE MOLINIER  
from *Public and Private*,  
Stills Gallery, June

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This issue is the first of two featuring exhibitions during Fotofeis, the first Scottish international photography festival. The festival, which takes place throughout Scotland during June, is structured on four broad themes: the family, new imaging, photography/mixed media, and 'views from the edge' – the work of photographers who operate outside the geographical or cultural mainstream.

CALUM COLVIN's return to Scotland is marked by an exhibition of specially commissioned new work, incorporating computer imagery. Based on Hieronymous Bosch's the 'Seven Deadly Sins', Colvin looks at morality in post-modern society.

The family was a recurrent theme in the work of RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD, whose surrealist dramas from the '60s tell stories about the ritualised nature of relationships and the inevitable transition from youth to old age.

The concept of kinship is explored by OWEN LOGAN in an exhibition about Italian communities in both the south of Italy and the UK.

Finally, SALLY MANN's series *Immediate Family*, about which a great deal has already been written, is discussed from a broader perspective.

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# Calum Colvin and Deadly Sins

CALUM COLVIN's new work, involving computer-generated images, takes as its starting point the 'Seven Deadly Sins' and the 'Four Last Things' which were illustrated by the 15th century painter, Hieronymus Bosch, in the great roundel now at the Prado, Madrid. Here, he discusses his work with JIM LAWSON.

**JL** Tell us about the 'Seven Deadly Sins'.

**CC** Well, I'm interested in moral themes. I might mention, by way of prelude to the 'Seven Deadly Sins', that I did a piece based on Rejlander's 'Two Ways of Life'. I took one of the most famous montaged treatments of moral issues. And I tried to isolate certain elements, like for example the Sirens, the Good Youth and the Bad Youth, and themes like industry. And I organised them as a journey in discrete images rather than a single one. Rejlander provided a sort of path - from which, in fact, I deviated rather a lot. But the idea of a framework for a moral progress and the fact that it was a photographic icon - from history - drew me.

**JL** What's the nature of the dialogue with imagery of the past when you make this explicit sort of reference?

**CC** It has never been a problem for me to share my thoughts with artists of the past, if I can put it like that. I've never believed that art is original in its essence. (Too many connections, of all sorts, would have to be severed as the interests of originality were approached).

Bosch is full of ideas that have been repeated and repeated. And because my work has a tendency towards obscurity, I welcome the sort of framework that he uses - and inherits, of course.

I haven't used Bosch's 'Seven Deadly Sins' as a journey. In fact, the words that accompany his images - the ideas - of sins have been more important. I haven't tried to illustrate sins by showing instances, but rather tried to illustrate the fact that we're all unwilling sinners because of the way that the modern world is structured.

**JL** You're saying that sin is a matter of environmental condition rather than because of a divine ordination that we're all Fallen human beings?

**CC** Yes. And, in any case, I don't propose to nominate causes with social-scientific precision. Bosch provides me with titles to hang an image on. They're like associations or musings.

I mean, Anger and Envy and Greed overlap in my series. And I made linkages through a sub-plot. I make reference to an event from Scottish history, the Darien Scheme - where these moral categories are

spectacularly indistinct. It was an imperialist enterprise that failed disastrously, and all these vices are present. And, considered in terms of its moral elements, it's repeated and repeated in history and now.

**JL** How do you fit in Sloth then? It doesn't seem like an imperialist vice.

**CC** I took the idea not so much of lolling about eating and drinking, as of a spiritual indolence and vacuity. In fact, it is the most complex image of the series. It also contains thoughts about drugs - all sorts of drugs, like television - and the lack of empowerment that they involve.

Birds figure in the image. In fact, birds appear throughout the series, contributing to the overlap that I was talking about, and as a multi-faceted symbol, of the artist and of innocence and of victims. And I'm intending the *word* to be said too, triggering the associations.

**JL** Its an intriguing coincidence that the Italian word for 'bird' and its derivatives have sexual connotations.

**CC** Anyway, the scene is framed at either side by a person - the same person - looking in a mirror over a fireplace. On the left, there's reference to his hope that vision and power will come with a drug-induced escape - or flight, and on the other side, he sees on an easel in the mirror his half-completed - or incomplete - jigsaw of a bird. The idea of being eagle-eyed and able to fly and conquer distance like Icarus is presented in a sort of litter of bird images and picture postcards of places like Weymouth and Rothesay in between. The picture is of the nature of a cycle or a labyrinth from which there's no escape.

**JL** You're making a metaphorical representation of this condition of inertia and lassitude. Sloth is like the condition of having Icarus's failure in our heads.

**CC** Partly. It was about spirituality and the difficulty of engendering it in yourself when you've had a Scottish Protestant upbringing - in my case, at school rather than at home.

But, I confess, sometimes odd things happen that make me question the integrity of mundane reality. During the period when I was working on this project, I'd go down every day to the same shop, the Cancer





Anger, 1993. 76cm x 112cm

Research Shop at Portobello and often, when I lacked a prop for one of the constructions, I'd find it there in the window. Curious. Superstitious really.

**JL** It's interesting that you should talk about coincidences. As you've been talking about the programme of 'Sloth', and your notion that we share thoughts with people of the past, I've been struck by how close your image is in its content to Durer's engraving of 1514, 'Melancholia I'. We haven't got space here to amplify the ideas of Durer's work: but by your different route, standing in a different age and surveying a different place, you've pictured the same condition of having lost the spiritual capability of flight (if you'll excuse the tautology) with the advantages of perspective and understanding that it promises. Your idea of sloth is close to Durer's of melancholy, and they're both pretty epic.

**CC** Well, while I was assembling the ideas of the picture, I was thinking about tunnel vision; about being unable to use one's imagination to shift one's point of view. Being aware of that makes for this lassitude of sloth.

**JL** Do you sometimes feel when you're working away that you're plugged in to some sort of Jungian world spirit?

**CC** In a very general sense, yes. When I'm working on a project, a lot of my time is spent reading or thinking about it. I 'limber up' to the job. And then I go at it full pelt and I live it: I live these pictures. I feel that I'm living in two realities here, and one of them is the work itself.

**JL** You have a library in your studio. Do you have any system for garnering the content of the work.

**CC** It's not like conventional research. It's just a matter of what interests me. Whatever appeals to me, I collect. For example, William Blake is a great influence. But he's not a reservoir of images. Rather, he's the idea of Blake; Blake as visionary, as revolutionary, as poet. He figures - a quotation from him - in 'Sloth'. And, of course, the props themselves are like texts.

**JL** I'm finding myself a little perplexed. You're creating the impression of there being - and I'm sure it's correct





- sets of stepping stones, and one can leap from Bosch back to mythology, with Icarus say, and forward to Brueghel, on to Blake, on to the contemporary scene, or the contemporary condition. One gets confused where one stands in historical time.

**CC** It's like the Chaos Theory: a butterfly flaps its wings in Mexico City and a building falls down in Pakistan.

**JL** Yes. Post-Modernism - a temporal version of Chaos Theory. I like that.

**CC** I recall, years ago, Murray Johnston called me a 'cultural skimmer'. He wasn't referring to superficiality; he was thinking about the way I alighted on things. I liked that.

**JL** There used to be a very old idea which was that instruction could be delivered through pleasure: that something that delights needn't be void of instruction but, quite the contrary, the pleasure can predispose

you to it. In effect, the argument is that aesthetic considerations need not be isolated from moral ones. What do you think?

**CC** Absolutely. I don't like art that intimidates or hectors. Galleries can do it too. I use humour: it can be a leveller. I don't want people to feel that they've got to understand things totally. It's not that kind of test. Things needn't be taken literally, and I don't want to dictate exactly what they're to make of the work. Feelings and looseness of association, as opposed to facts - that's enough.

**JL** You want an undogmatic art?

**CC** I don't want an art without a point to it. In fact, on the contrary. But, broadly, I suppose you could say that I'm attached to solitariness, and so I can't claim that social realities, while they're very important, stand at the very centre of things - for me. I'm not like a monk, though; more like a sceptic. Solitariness was





*Sloth, 1993, 75cm x 195cm*

one of the reasons for leaving London.

**JL** Your work, if it has the quality of a document, tells us about the tenuous nature of connections between things. And detritus has a sort of poetry of disconnectedness. The poetry has a wryness. Rubbish and kitsch have an unaccountable quality that's a charm in itself.

**CC** And it can be hilarious. The Mr Bum character, for example, you stick in the back window of your car, and there's a pump mechanism that you squeeze, and he drops his drawers. And it's international. I went to Los Angeles - to their equivalent of a car boot sale - and you find the same stuff. It's all made in Taiwan. It makes a sort of nonsense of geographical diversity.

**JL** Let's talk about the making of the work. It happens, I suppose, under three heads: the constructing of the tableaux, the photographing, and the processing of the

photographic material by the computer. Could you explain how you've made, say, the 'Death of the Sinner'?

**CC** First of all, it's important to say that the computer has just made things easier. It has extended the facility of being able to do certain things. But look at what Heartfield could do with his means. When you're in the studio with a camera and a few lights, it's very difficult to visualise, to grasp the idea and the feeling that you want the image to carry. That's why my painting method was so helpful...

**JL** You mean the things that you're probably best known for, where you painted an image on three dimensional objects with the camera as the privileged observer...

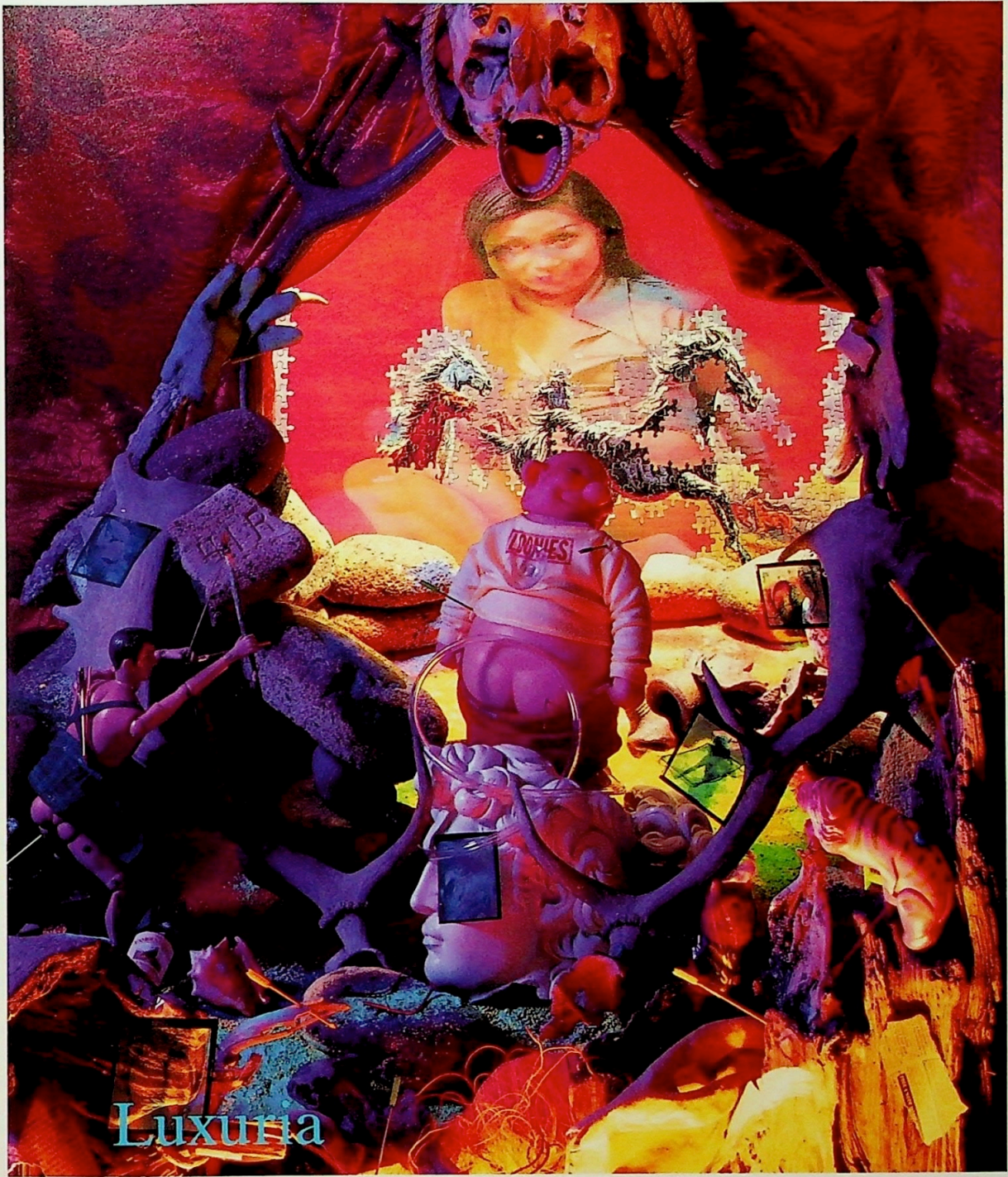
**CC** Yes. It was a way of pulling things together and creating a narrative. The computer's another way. You have control. The tyranny of scale is vanquished. I can





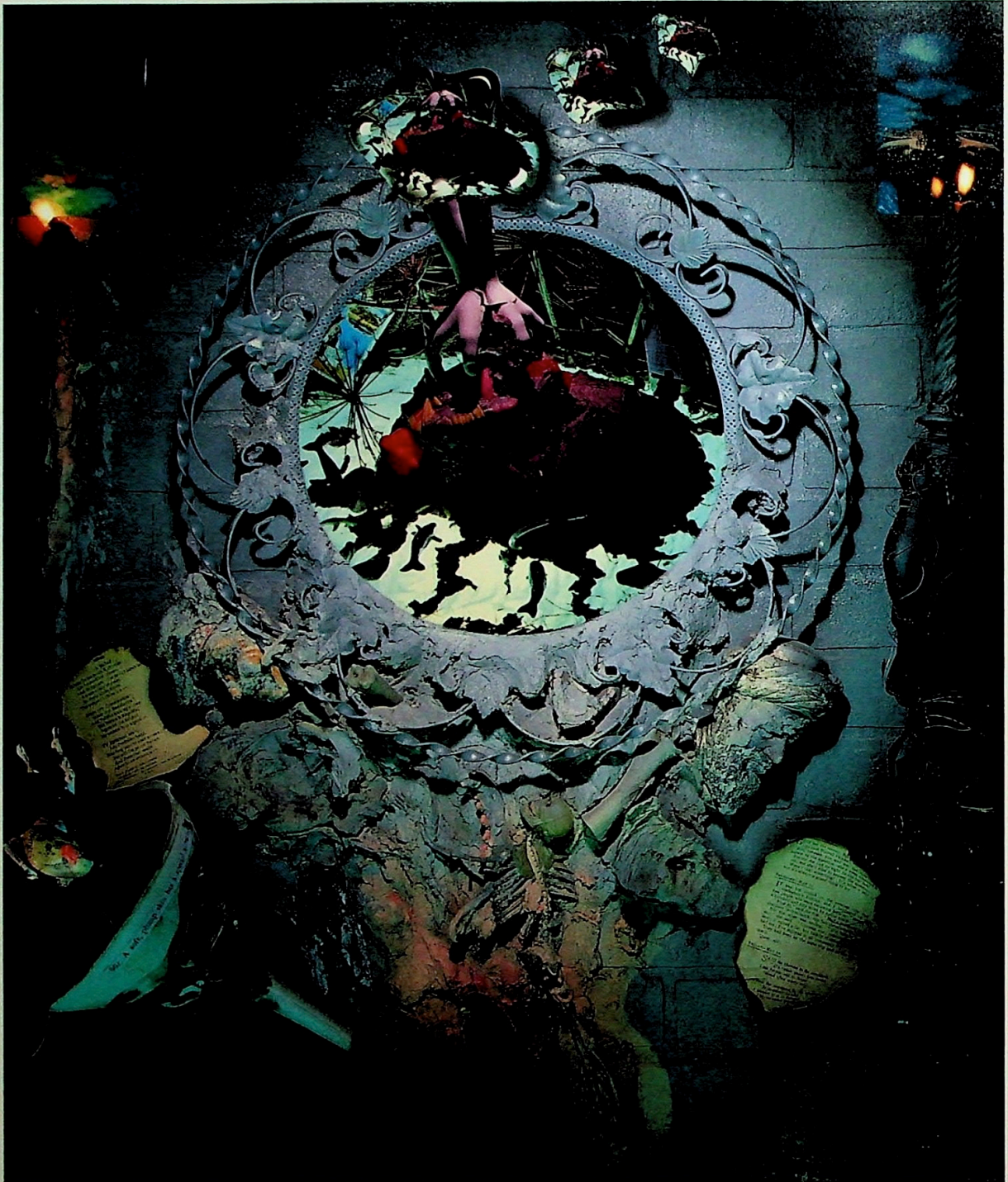
*Pride, 1993, 112cm x 76cm*





Lust, 1993, 112cm x 76cm





*Death of a Sinner, 1993, 112cm x 76cm*



make the detail of 'Big Fish Eat Smaller Fish' in 'Wrath', for example, out of an image of a single fish. You can change colours and do things that, if they weren't impossible, would be extremely difficult to do. Without the computer, 'Death of a Sinner' would have been a different image. I started off with a photograph of the mirror on the wall. My thinking was about flesh and clay turning into one another. My second image was of the hand in the clay. It's God's hand or the artist's hand, forming the clay. And at the same time it's pushing the figure - Mr Bum - down into the clay; enclosing him in the clay. The clay into which he's pushed is shaped like a beetle. I was thinking of Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'. There are also references to evolution in the opposite direction - from the mud - the one that used to be illustrated in children's schoolbooks and encyclopaedias. And the culmination of the process was a Fifer or suchlike. Anyway, the image was then made circular and made to bulge spherically, so that it could go into the mirror. But the hand of God or the artist is made to protrude so-to-speak from the convex mirror surface. Then there's the figure with the stone on his head. He's again a separate image. He's there recalling Camus' 'The Happy Death' where there's a character, dying at the end, who describes a weight, a stone, coming up his chest. He's staring out to sea, and the sun's coming up, a new day is emerging whilst his life is ending. It's a marvellous piece of writing - because it's terrifying.

**JL** So, you take your props, assemble your tableau - or tableaux...

**CC** They all come out of my head. I'll have made a few scribbles. Basically, I do what the computer does. The computer interests me because it's a vast library. Images can be placed in a computer and then called up at random. It's a huge memory. I saw an engraving once called 'The Art of Memory' by Robert Fludd. Fludd conceived a theatre. There are doors off, and one goes in and places thoughts at determinate locations, so that one can retrieve them later. The computer's similar. So, I try and think myself into a computer. Before the actual computer, I call things up - how much depends upon the capacity of the memory - and manipulate them in the sort of ways I've mentioned. There were a few happy accidents, but mostly the images here have turned out as I envisaged them.

**JL** So, are you leaving the camera behind? You could say, I suppose, that the photographer imitates the camera that he carries. He thinks of himself as an eye, an observer with a particular perspective of the world. That first work that we know you for saw you using the camera as a projector. Are you moving from behind a camera in your imagination to being a computer in your imagination?

**CC** It's intrinsically photography, because photography is the crucial part of the process. All the images and processes are, at the end of the day, photographic.

**JL** Your process is an elaborate one, isn't it? These three separate and but connected stages. It's actually like the classic way of making paintings. There is the thinking and researching, assembling the graphic elements, even rehearsing the staging and stage lighting with manikins and props, and finally executing the work.

And the aim was memorableness. What's memorable can't be trite. It must in some sense be unfamiliar. That was the artist's challenge; to provide us with something that we can carry about in our head - that we can entertain, move around, manipulate. You've described your own process of composition in rather similar terms. It's interesting to think of the artist's and the observer's activity mirroring one another like this.

**CC** I suppose the idea of Post-Modern comes up in this connection. There's nothing that hasn't been done. Everything can only be reinterpreted. Everything's memory.

**JL** How do you see the observer coming away from your work?

**CC** The work's a dialogue with an invisible person. Whether you're addressing God or your fellow human being doesn't really matter. It's something between words.

**JL** So, would you say that you're aiming for something evasive, or should I say allusive, rather than rhetorically explicit?

**CC** Yes. I'm interested in poetry and nuance. And that's why I try to make my images as aesthetically pleasing as possible, seductive even - to invite the observer into another universe.

**JL** But you're not offering escape. Flight, not escape.

**CC** No, indeed. The world of the images is to be populated by realities, and in particular the realities that are denied in the outward shows of the 'real' world.

**JL** And your choice of medium ...?

**CC** Yes. I fancy that nowadays some of the famous History painters would turn to the omnipresent medium, photography. I see Blake as a photographer.

**JL** Making constructed images.

**CC** Yes.

Calum Colvin's exhibition  
'The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things'  
is at Portfolio Gallery, Edinburgh, 1 - 29 May 1993.

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