



Calum Colvin

The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things

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Portfolio Gallery · Edinburgh

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Acknowledgements

The exhibition, *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*, has been specially commissioned by Portfolio Gallery and marks Calum Colvin's return to his native Scotland. The experience of working with Calum during the realisation of these works has been a particularly rewarding one and I am grateful to him for his dedication and commitment.

I would like to express my gratitude to Portfolio Gallery's sponsors, Tayburn Design, B & S Visual Technologies, and Fuji Photo Film, for providing expertise, facilities and materials to enable Calum Colvin to create these exquisite computer-generated images. This sponsorship represents a unique collaboration between recognised leaders in the photographic and design industries, and an innovative visual artist, and I am grateful to all of the individuals whose commitment and skill have contributed towards the production of the exhibition.

I am indebted to Tom Normand of St Andrews University, whose extensive knowledge of Colvin's work informs his illuminating essay. Finally, our thanks to the Scottish Arts Council for financially assisting the commission.

Calum Colvin's Seven Deadly Sins

Calum Colvin's photography has consistently toyed with conventions in a playful questioning which masks a deep ethical, indeed moral, commitment. This has been most obvious in the form of his work, where the overlap of discreet techniques – photography, the constructed environment, painted scenery, montage – has generally been viewed as an aspect of post-modern practice which disestablishes hierarchy and convention. Equally, the complex iconography of his photographs, incorporating visual puns, literary references, cultural clichés, ironic gestures and loaded symbolism, re-invents contemporary experience in a manner which interrogates the dislocated and fragmented nature of everyday reality. It might be added that the predominant subject of his work, culture and society, displays his overriding concern with process and change as a focus for his imagery. All of this points to a photography which, it has been acknowledged, is profoundly contemporary, visually exciting, witty and relevant. Underlying this, however, there is a critical consciousness which deploys the language of post-modern irony in the service of a neo-humanist sensibility which, in turn, deprecates the moral vacuity in post-industrial society.

It should be no surprise, then, that Colvin's latest project is based upon Hieronymous Bosch's intriguing *tondo* *The Seven Deadly Sins and The Four Last Things*. The work sits in the Prado in Madrid, and Colvin first saw it while on a visit to Spain. The attraction would be immediate, and is unsurprising for there are clear parallels between these artists. Bosch created extraordinary visions of decay, confusion and chaos in a fetid landscape peopled by grotesque human beings and terrifying monster-machines. His was a language of threat and menace articulated through the juxtaposition of the everyday real and the nightmarishly metaphysical. This sense of painted

montage is reflected in Colvin's constructed images where complex surreal landscapes are peopled by dolls and puppets acting out the dramas of human life. However, where Bosch's sensibility is directed towards the grotesque, Colvin's art highlights the absurd. He is prepared to use humour in the service of revelation in much the same way Bosch deployed terror to this end.

In both artists, also, there is a common 'feeling' to the work. The overwhelming sensation when viewing a painting by Bosch, or a photograph by Colvin, is the sense of imminent menace, the feeling that something extraordinary is happening, or is about to happen. At their most characteristic Colvin's photographs involve narrative and process where the outcome is uncertain, but in which the potential for a sinister and cataclysmic conclusion remains open. Here, the terrors of the medieval world, and the uncertainties of the contemporary world, find a confluence, and this is certainly the case in Colvin's most recent project.

It is worthwhile briefly examining Bosch's original work, in order to trace the transformations and metamorphoses into Colvin's *Seven Deadly Sins*. Bosch's work is presented, using one of the conventions of his age, on a table-top. In the centre of the table-top is a roundel, a circular arrangement of images in which the seven deadly sins are depicted. At the four corners of the table four separate pictures represent the *Four Last Things*; *The Death of a Sinner*, *The Last Judgement*, *Hell* and *Paradise*. In the centre of the roundel there is an eye, and in the centre of the eye the image of a risen Christ. Beneath the Christ the words 'Beware, Beware, God sees' are written. For Colvin this would have been the first level of identification with the picture. The eye is the all-seeing, omnipresent representation of God who sees and judges. In Colvin's work the eye is replaced by the camera lens. Ever-present, objective and judgemental,

it functions both as witness and conscience in the modern secular age.

Bosch's work may be an early piece, or, some argue, from his middle period and completed mainly by studio apprentices. At any rate it is only in the Hell image of *The Four Last Things* that we see his characteristic monster-machines. The seven images of the sins take the form of tableaux in which figures, in contemporary dress, act out their folly in a recognisably Netherlandish landscape. Though there are clear elements of his sinister fantasy, Bosch generally maintained the iconography of his period in his study of the sins. Hence Sloth, which was understood to be not simply laziness but a kind of spiritual indolence, is represented by a figure reclining in a chair, by a fireplace, while a woman enters carrying a bible and a rosary to remind him of neglected duties. Likewise Pride shows a woman posing in an absurd bonnet before a mirror, which in turn is held by a demotic figure with a grotesque hat. Other sins, like Anger, are shown as men fighting in front of an inn. Lust, as lovers in a tent accompanied by a jester figure. Avarice shows a judge taking bribes. Gluttony, an obese man devouring food, and Envy as jealousy between rivals. It is these vices and follies which the central eye views, and in the Hell scenario of *The Four Last Things* we are reminded of the torment that awaits these sinners. Bosch accentuates these follies with banner quotations from the Book of Deuteronomy, declaiming 'For they are a nation void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. O that they were wise, and that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end'.

Parallels between these episodes and Colvin's work are significant, but it would be wrong to over-emphasise the similarities. Colvin has maintained the convention of naming the sin, in Latin, on the image. Moreover he includes quotations, from a variety of sources, which are liberally scattered throughout his photographs and highlight the sentiment of the action. This, of course, has been a commonplace of his imagery in the past. However where Bosch's work is schematic Colvin's is anarchic, and where Bosch has been quite literal in his interpretations of the sins, Colvin presents us with a more cryptic and eclectic iconography. In part, this is due to the nature of the technique employed in Colvin's work. He is sensitive to the fact that he manipulates his photographs on a computer, and this encourages a free selection of enhanced images. More importantly he acknowledges the contemporary breakdown in a universally shared system of signs and meanings, and accepts that any

iconography must be highly personal. As a function of this, the iconography of each sin overlaps, and there is a sense in which each photograph contains a multiplicity of sins. Indeed, Colvin insists, the images 'don't deal with particular sins, but they run into each other, since it's not really a black and white world any more'. It is this combination of variety, allusion and double-meaning which makes the current project so fascinating.

In his *Seven Deadly Sins* Colvin mixes symbolic history, philosophy and literature in equal measure with trivia, picture postcards and the debris of popular culture. He creates complex scenes in which sign and symbol collide in images replete with association and suggestion. One of the most accessible photographs is the study of Anger. Two figures battle against a kitsch landscape which has been slashed by the artist and back-lit. One figure, the kilted action man, wields a sword, while the other, a self-portrait of the artist, defends himself with a toy coat stand. Amongst the foreground debris an empty Campbell's soup can leaks tomato soup against a tin of Clan lager. A banner behind the swordsman carries the tattered logo of McDonald's fast-food chain. In the left foreground a shell ornament shows a scavenger fish eating smaller fish, the reference here being to the Flemish proverb 'Big fish eat little fish'. Clearly there is a narrative established here, but it is not as straightforward as it appears. Colvin conjures with the history of Clan Campbell and Clan Donald rivalry, but he opens this out to touch on the issue of international capitalism and the nature of multinational corporations. Simultaneously he places, at the feet of the figures, a shadow head of James Loch. Loch was the agent for the Duke of Sutherland and, in the 19th century, one of the most hated men in the Scottish Highlands. It is said of Loch that he 'assisted in the near-extirpation of a society, a culture and a people', and his role in the Clearances is infamous. There is a sense in which the references appear arbitrary, but in fact they create a complex web of associations where ideas relating to the theme of anger, and to different types of anger, are layered and linked.

A similar approach can be witnessed in the study of Lust. Here the central motif is the eponymous 'Mr. Bum', who ritually drops his trousers to the command of an air pump. The pump symbol is repeated in the tiger water pistol to the right of the picture, included to express both the animal and the mechanical nature of raw lust. To the left of the image the omnipresent kilted action man fires arrows into the absurd 'Mr. Bum' in a caricature of Cupid's love play. The scene

takes place before an altar which shows a young girl surrounded by the skeletal remains of a stag and bedecked by a partially formed wild horse jigsaw. In the foreground a classical head lies amongst a ruined landscape of rocks, shells, bottles, stags' antlers and dirty postcards. The image gives expression to an emotion which is both tragic and ridiculous. The mechanical satisfactions of the lustful 'Mr. Bum' expose a sham eroticism, which is in turn heightened by the disposable pornographic images casually strewn throughout the photograph. A subtle metaphysics is explored here, one where the dislocation of human kind from nature is framed within the failure of eroticism and desire to rise above what the artist calls 'the inanity of pornography'.

The photograph relating to *Pride* most closely parallels the subject as developed by Bosch insofar as the mirror plays a key role in the development of the symbolism. Here the kilted manikin holds a bone and money, and is ceremonially dressed in a feathered hat and gown. In the mirror his image is reflected as a bird's skull, complete with feathers. Above him, on a fossil rock plateau stands his Doppelgänger who holds aloft a bird headstone which he is about to drop. The action takes place in a landscape littered with the jetsam of the seashore which the artist has collected from his local beach in Portobello. Besides the driftwood and the jet lie the feathers of sea-birds and a condom stretched over a letter-opener in the shape of a sword. A seaside postcard lies at the feet of the central figure and refers, in a classic *double entendre*, to 'stuffing birds'. Kitsch candlesticks and Doric columns complete the scene which takes place within a bird-cage. This is clearly an image which went through various stages and has a multiplicity of meanings. The references to the sin of pride in the central motif are clear; the figure admires itself in the mirror unaware of the death's-head which is reflected there. Equally the Doppelgänger holds a bird which alludes to Icarus's conceit, the dream of freedom and flight. The sins of anger, envy, avarice and lust function as an undercurrent here as the Doppelgänger attacks the birdman, the birdman covets his own image and his money, and the condom reflects the intent manifest in the postcard. The theme of the birds and the bird-cage, however, is crucially important for this refers to the Braer disaster in Shetland which occurred contemporaneously with the construction of this image. The imminent sense of the work is of impending disaster consequent upon the conceit and pride of human kind, and in particular the belief that we have jurisdiction over the earth. Indeed Colvin

makes this point clear by including a deflating plastic globe in the background to the composition.

The bird theme is developed in the image relating to the sin of *Sloth*, and here also the symbolism multiplies. The action takes place in a kind of labyrinthine crumbling landscape. The kilted figures appear by fireplaces on the extreme left and extreme right of the picture, idly contemplating their respective images in mirrors. The mirror theme is repeated on the firebrick pillars, where the mirrors reflect the decay of the scene. In the background manikin figures adorn themselves with feathers in a frustrated attempt to simulate creative flight. Hanging from the central pillar there is a toy human skeleton with the skeletal head of a sea-bird attached. Hanging with this composite there is a bra. This is one of the darkest, most pessimistic, images in the set. The scene is one of death and decay, skeletal heads, broken bottles, shattered pillars, and, in the lower left foreground, a dead bird spewing oil. Again there is a link with the Braer disaster, but clearly the symbolism runs deeper than environmental protest. *Sloth*, here, is the equivalent of creative indolence. The bird comes to symbolise innocence and creativity, and by extension the artist. The feathered manikins aspire to the creative and imaginative but are rooted to the terrestrial which is being destroyed as much by indolence as by malice.

This theme, incorporating human ambition and the destructive element in Western development, is explored in the subjects *Avarice*, *Envy* and *Gluttony*. The overarching theme in these works is the nature of Imperialism and the history of colonialisation. *Avarice* shows the action man figure sailing a tea-trolley into an unspoilt tea-tray landscape. The trolley encompasses a deflating globe depicting the cosmos. The sail is emblazoned with mathematical symbols emphasising the proselytising mission of logic, reason and enlightenment. At the feet of the figure toy swords symbolise the tools of persuasion. In the tea-tray landscape the real purpose of the mission is presented in the shape of a dead sheep, which recalls the 'Golden Fleece'. The point is driven home in the purse, coins and jewels scattered on the left of the image.

Envy and *Gluttony* have been treated as a triptych with the two named pictures surrounding a tableau featuring an open book entitled 'The Religion of the Savages near the Isthmus of Darian'. The activities of the indigenous peoples are highlighted in the exposed text, notably the healing practice of firing arrows at the sick (this practice is reflected in the *Lust* image where 'Mr. Bum' is fired on by the action man). The role of

'Scottish adventurers' in the ill-fated Darian Scheme is also mentioned, and this aspect of Scottish imperial history is the axis around which the imagery revolves. The banner quotation in Latin roughly translates as 'That which you are we were, that which we are you will be', and clearly reflects the missionary zeal of the colonisers. In this image the assembled cakes and 'Scotch pies' ironically refer to the provisions for the journey, while the golden ball and exotic shells reflect on the promise of riches.

Distinctions between light and dark, sun and moon, are a key feature of the triptych. While the 'Sun' specs are a comic reflection on the tabloids' myopic support for Imperial adventurism, the broader interest in the sun and sun-worship features heavily in the picture entitled *Envy*. Here the action man, with sword and staff, comes to a sun-drenched landscape to proselytise and pillage. The Union Jack handkerchief sits atop a death's-head on a ship's mast. Beneath this a sun-scarred corpse lies prone beside two grinning skulls. The false prophet of the invader is symbolised in the ghostly Elvis figure, while all the action takes place under a bird-cage to denote the illusory nature of this promised freedom. This image is complemented in the *Gluttony* picture, which in fact represents greed and the destruction caused by exploitation. In a darkened and desolate landscape, again framed by a bird-cage, the ghostly Elvis now appears as healer. This idea is contradicted by the reality of the stuffed bird which straddles a prone manikin. The metaphor is clearly one in which the sexual victim is combined with the victims of imperialism. This is highlighted in the wretched landscape, strewn with shattered bones, tattered flags and wasted trees, while the 'horn of plenty' continues to offer its promise to the right of the picture.

In a sense these *Seven Deadly Sins* are a contemplation on the 'Fall' of human kind. At one level they examine the ambitions of advanced and post-industrial societies, and reflect on the negative and exploitative dimensions of their desires. At another level they comment upon human conceit, particularly the conceit of dominion over the planet, and examine the destructiveness of this characteristic. The 'fall', then, is not so much a fall from Grace, but a fall from Nature, from a point of balance where life exists in equilibrium.

With the *Four Last Things* Colvin takes his hero on the final odyssey. In the *Death* sequence amoeba-like forms are moulded by manikin hands, in a work which touches on creation, birth and death. Death is signalled in the oil coloured background, where the caricature Scotsman and Arab, comic representatives

of the exploitation of earth's resources, can be seen in profile in a decaying plasterwork replete with skeletons. The kilted action man is seen to fall into a funnel. He will emerge to *The Last Judgement* where he can be seen walking a bamboo tightrope between two wicker baskets. Here the eye of God, in fact the eye of a dead turkey, but also a direct reflection of Bosch's iconography, makes its judgement assisted by the foreground birds. To the left lies darkness and Hell, to the right, light and Paradise. The vision of Hell is formed against an oil smeared wall, blackened candles, devil's horns, and the caricature Scotsman and Arab are again present. The manikin figure approaches a mirror surrounded by images of false prophets. In the mirror gloved hands reach out against a background of a dying tree of life and an incomplete jigsaw. With *Paradise* a more positive image transports the now winged action man across the Styx and into light.

The morality in these images, while borrowing from Christian, classical and pagan mythology, is secular and humanist. They cry out for a balanced and sensitive approach to human affairs and to nature. Where there is despair, it is despair born of the human propensity for exploitation and the construction of inequities. But overall there is an undisguised joy in these pictures. They are unremittingly humorous and playful, replete with suggestion, association and multiple meanings. In this sense they allow us to look at human folly and realise its absurdity. In this realisation they afford, not redemption, but hope.

St. Andrews, March 1993



The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things, 1993



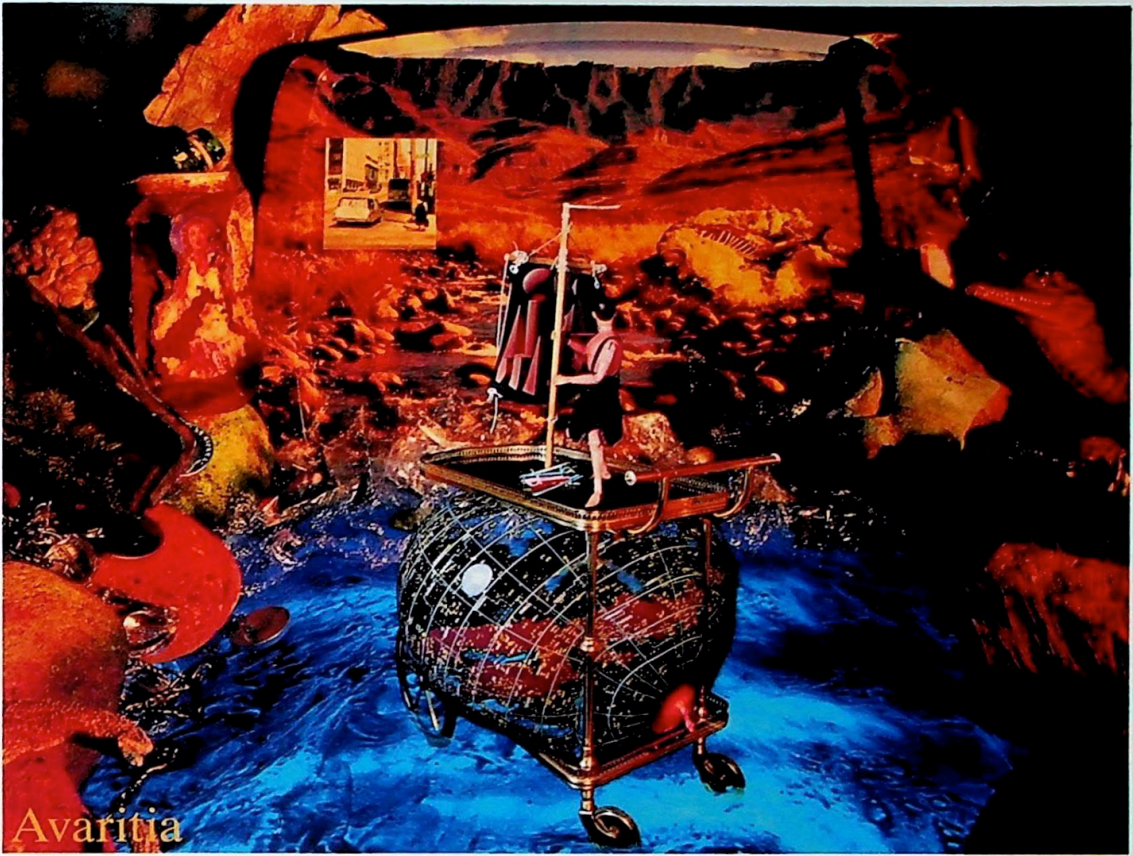
Anger, 1993



Lust, 1993



Pride, 1993

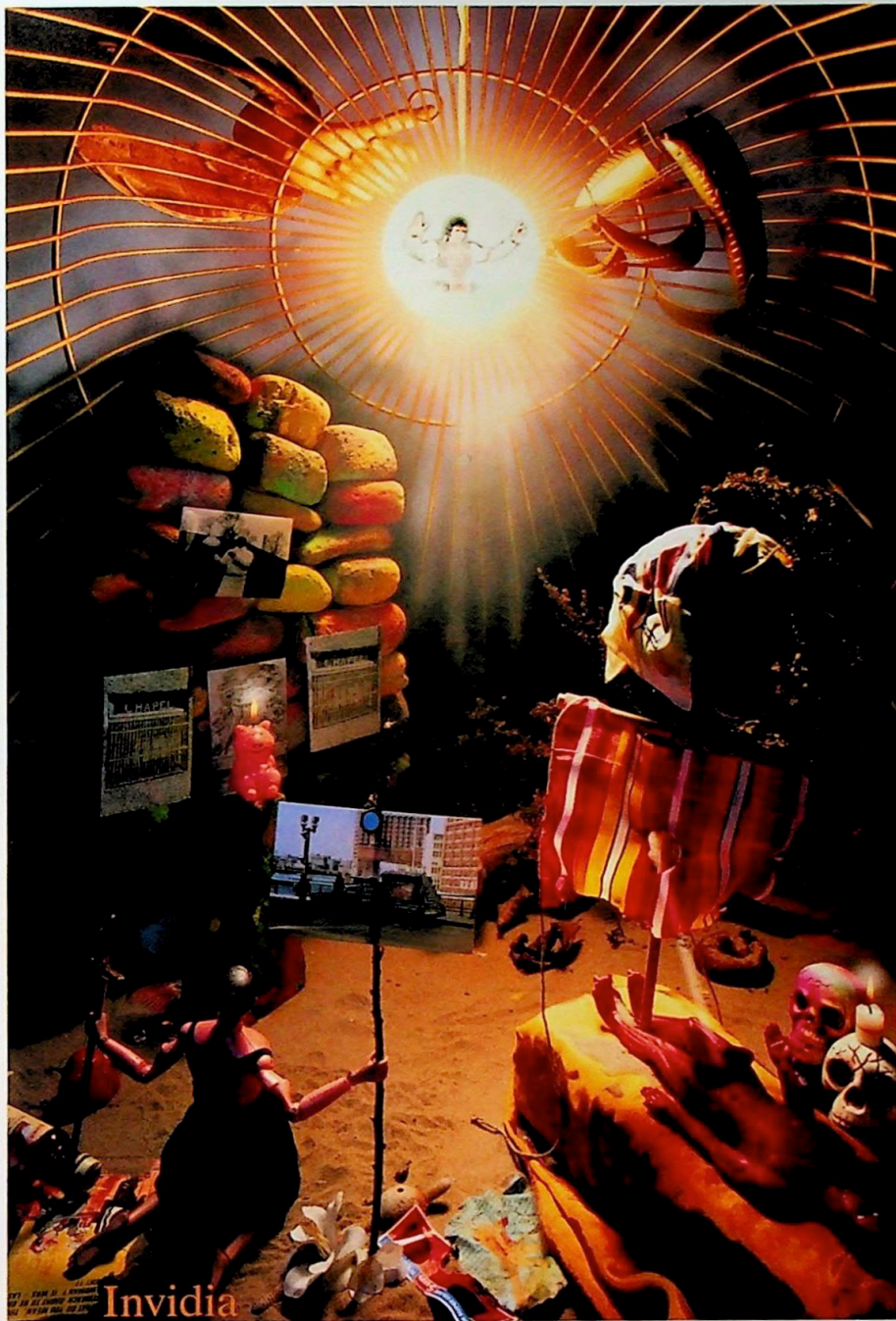


Avarice, 1993





Sloth, 1993



Envy, 1993

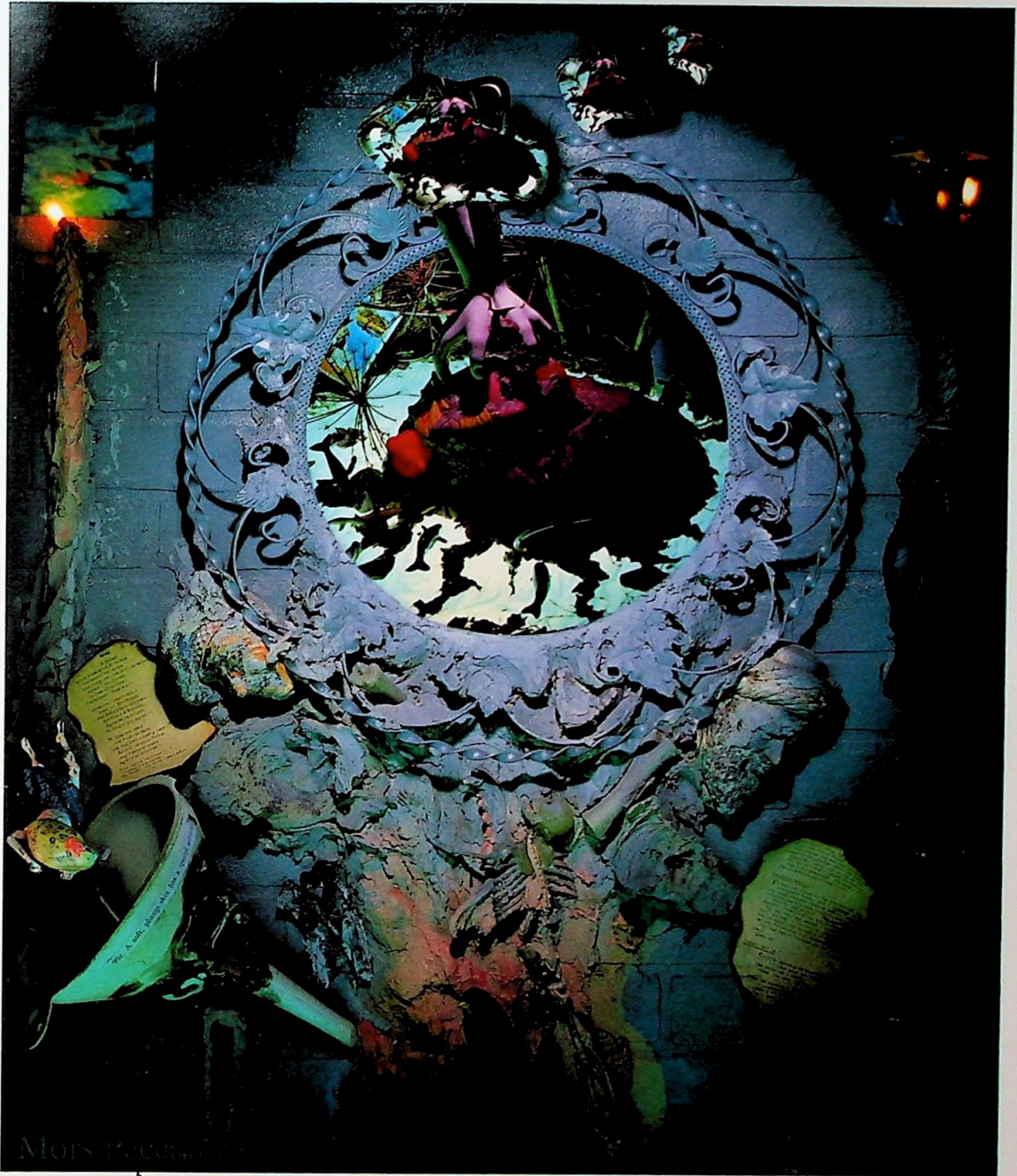
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Untitled, 1993



Gluttony, 1993



Death of the Sinner, 1993



Last Judgement, 1993



Hell, 1993



Caelum

Scotland may

refrains all the

Catalogue

The Seven Deadly Sins and
the Four Last Things, 1993
81 × 102
Table Top

Anger, 1993
81 × 102
Colour Photograph

Lust, 1993
102 × 81
Colour Photograph

Pride, 1993
102 × 81
Colour Photograph

Avarice, 1993
81 × 102
Colour Photograph

Sloth, 1993
75 × 191
Colour Photograph

Envy, 1993
117 × 76
Colour Photograph

Untitled, 1993
81 × 102
Colour Photograph

Gluttony, 1993
117 × 76
Colour Photograph

Death of the Sinner, 1993
101 × 81
Colour Photograph

Last Judgement, 1993
101 × 81
Colour Photograph

Hell, 1993
101 × 81
Colour Photograph

Paradise, 1993
101 × 81
Colour Photograph

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 Edinburgh

Selected Individual Exhibitions

1985

Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff
Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem

1987

Seagate Gallery, Dundee
Kathleen Ewing Gallery, Washington D.C.
Sander Gallery, New York

1988

Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Heidelberg
Galeria 57, Madrid

1989

California State University, Long Beach
Portfolio Gallery, Edinburgh
Salama-Caro Gallery, London
Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Frankfurt
Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston
Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney

1990

Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin
Glenn/Dash Gallery, Los Angeles
Torch Gallery, Amsterdam
Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
Aberdeen Art Gallery

1991

Salama-Caro Gallery, London
The Art Institute of Chicago
Willy D'Huysser Gallery, Knokke Zout, Belgium
Salama-Caro Gallery, London

1992

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
The Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary
Winnipeg Art Gallery

1993

Portfolio Gallery, Edinburgh
Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe

Selected Group Exhibitions

1983

Compass Gallery, Glasgow
Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh

1985

Ten Out of Ten, Hamilton Gallery, Edinburgh

1986

Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie,
Arles

Constructed Narratives, touring exhibition

1987

Towards a Bigger Picture, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

True Stories and Photofictions, Ffotogallery, Cardiff Riverside Studios, London

The Vigorous Imagination, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

1988

Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin
Juxtapositions, Salama-Caro Gallery, London

Foco 88, Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid

The Male Nude, Salama-Caro Gallery, London

Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles

The Ludwig Museum, Cologne

1989

Towards a Bigger Picture, Part II, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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 toured to Kunstverein Munich, Kunsthalle Nurnberg, Kunstverein Karlsruhe and Forum Bremen

Ansel Adams Center, San Francisco, California

1990

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1991

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Jones, London

1992

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Murdo MacDonald, 'Visual Illusions Which Challenge Conceptions', *The Scotsman*, January 23, 1989

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Philip Core, 'Snapping Back', *The Independent*, July 31, 1989

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Francis Hodgson, 'Calum Colvin: New Work at the Salama-Caro Gallery', *Arts Review*, September 22, 1989

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 California State University, Long Beach, California
 Dundee Art Gallery and Museum
 The Ludwig Museum, Cologne
 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
 Metropolitan Museum, New York
 Royal Photographic Society, Bath
 Scottish Arts Council
 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
 Scottish National Portrait Gallery
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Frontispiece: A Portrait of Calum Colvin
by Robin Gillanders, April 1993

