

CALUM COLVIN



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WORKS 1989

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## THE BOOK, THE BOX AND THE SONG

### *Noises in the Deaf Man's House*

Begin with writing; the word 'poesie' is inscribed in red. There are words everywhere in Calum Colvin's pictures, words that act like his mirrors that glance off from the scenes he has set up to views of some other, hidden, place. Begin with a book: representations of the Temptation of St. Anthony usually turn on the significance of the book which the ascetic saint has to hand. Reading passages of scripture, St. Anthony seems both to generate a parade of evils - "by a trick of the text", (1) - and hold them at bay. Colvin's triptych photographic version of **The Temptation of St. Anthony** follows this pattern. Yet the book which lies open before the saint in Colvin's picture is not the Bible but Shelley's **A Defence of Poetry**, a sacred text of the secular Romantic imagination. A sentence from the **Defence of Poetry** is xeroxed and glued by Colvin to a partition of wood in the central panel of the other triptych he has completed this year, **The Deaf Man's Villa**: "Man is an instrument over which a series of internal and external impressions are driven, like the alterations of an ever changing wind over an Eolian lyre which move it by their motion to an ever changing melody." (2) As in Colvin's photographs, the body according to Shelley is metamorphosed, swept over by the world and events, as they are projected across the flesh. It becomes a sounding board of flesh, a vehicle of lyrical aspirations, a locus for the divine afflatus. This is a text to be murmured over (by St. Anthony) or one which causes the body to sing and jubilate in colour like the blue boy does in **The Deaf Man's Villa**.

By annexing auditory signs, Colvin's triptych echoes to their sounds. The reverberations of birds; a parrot caged and uncaged; a song thrush (whose song is given in dispersed, homophonic words). And signs of music too; an accordion expanded and ready to play; an open record player and a trumpet - these all fill the air in **The Deaf Man's Villa**. Here is the profane 'noise of the world' of the gnostics, those sounds that clamour in Max Beckmann's paintings or Robert Frank's photographs - the Babel side of lyricism. We must peer through a squinted opening in Colvin's **Minotaur** to see the Tower of Babel, but it is there, there as the start and end point for the killed Action-Man, the dumb protagonist of these pictures who must also be deaf to the bulging catalogue of sounds from Babel.

Little Boy Blue, blowing his horn in **The Deaf Man's Villa**, is strictly an oxymoron. To the house's hidden owner (peer into one of the dim mirrors for a sight of him, that obscured painter with the tam-o'-shanter), the silence is deafening across this untidy stage of art and language. Audience and spectators are enjoined to be silent because of a motto with some words out of sight that reads:- "What... cannot... silence". Perhaps the Deaf Man willed his own infirmity when he was faced with the clamour of the world and Colvin's chaotic bits and pieces; perhaps he blocked his ears to the claims of 'poesie' or the orphic outpourings of the blue boy's paintbrush-trumpet. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter" (3). Against all the odds, what you discover in Colvin's maddening round-song of confined spaces is the return of a certain genre of Romantic lyricism: but a return into the world of labyrinthine rubbish and junk-shops.



### The Shelters of Perception

Like Keats, (and Gilbert & George) Colvin is an impossibilist 'slave to art'; at least his killed Action-Man is, worshipping the Venus de Milo in her temple or museum-like precinct, clasping his paint brush as her devoted servant. Detached from the shifting narratives of the other panels, this chilly, hidden little ritual would have overtones of those fetishistic pleasures which Maurice Blanchot described as part of the consumption of art: "One must be gifted to hear and see: this gift is a closed space - the concert hall, the museum - with which one surrounds oneself in order to enjoy a clandestine pleasure" (4). Colvin's new pictures abound in these secretly pleasurable 'scenes'; we peep at 'closed' oracular ceremonies through mirror-like round windows in the side panels of **The Temptation of St. Anthony** and there are the double stone shelters where **Venus** and the **Minotaur** reign, incarnate and enthroned in the walls. There are other shelterings too - pierced and open 'gifts', like the bird cage and the Wendy-House which St. Anthony inhabits as an anchorite's cell. Behind this Colvin has papered a children's patterned wallpaper of schematic houses and rocking horses, driving further into the abyss of self-referencing by quoting his own iconography. Homes and infancy: in **The Deaf Man's Villa** there is a diagram of a child's home-made camera; a little room of light in a box. The theme of secure encasement - whether of photography itself and its crossed lines of light written in red or in the colour photo of the technologically swaddled monkey - is paramount in these pictures.

In his introduction to Gustave Flaubert's **The Temptation of St. Anthony**, Michel Foucault analysed a 'domain in depth', where the monsters emerged from "cardboard scenery...from the hellish confines of the box where they were kept. But this is only a surface effect constructed upon a staging in depth. It is the flat surface which is deceptive in this context" (5). This description exactly anticipates Colvin's painted and staged encodings of discrete levels and heterogeneous objects into just such a 'deceptive', continuously surfaced and encased theatre of boxed visions. Whether in Foucault, Flaubert or Colvin, the drama of St. Anthony is produced from 'an extremely complicated space' (5), where texts unwind.

Shelley's **A Defence of Poetry**, with its prioritisation of the imagination, of 'poesie' and the lyrical untrammelled body, licences the tumult of visions that flank Colvin's St. Anthony. But there is another text close to the saint, one which offers a key of sorts to the 'complicated' spatial configuration of encasement and to Colvin's 'deceptive' topologies in general. Offered up to our eyes from the desert waste is a page from Wittgenstein's **Tractatus** - proposition 5.5423, in fact. A diagram illustrates it, showing a cube frame in an ambiguous outline, a diagram which actually rehearses - in little - the two dimensional, flattened space of the illusionistic Wendy-House of St. Anthony above it. The text points to the perceptual possibilities of "two different ways of seeing the figure". Thus Colvin has pressed Wittgenstein's cube into an allegory of his own duplicitous surfaces which can be doubly read too. For example, the protruding wing of a toy 747 airliner can also be read as the painted eyes and nose of St. Anthony. In the museum-cum-temple of Venus in **The Deaf Man's Villa**, the skeletal directions for building the play-house are juxtaposed with a version of Wittgenstein's cube, now numbered as if for 'home assembly'. This is a caging place of silence beyond the Babel of things. On the drawing board above is mounted a final observation from Wittgenstein about the limits of language and the unspeakable: "That which we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". Restored and whole, this was that elusive fragment of text from the centre panel which read: - "That... cannot... silence."



Much of Colvin's project nostalgically seeks to be a site of sheltering - of *abritement* - such as the hermit saint finds in his refuge. Yet there remains another direction which Colvin pursues; to tear the house down, to effect a de-sheltering, a *désabritement*. There is nothing so forlorn as the spectacle of his tableaux after they have been photographed, in the dark, part demolished. Among his new pictures, as one half of the *Minotaur* diptych, Colvin has de-structured and destroyed the pristine, built-up other half, pitching it into ruin and night. But Colvin's work, even before this moment of desolation, carries with it the pathos of *désabritement* in his persuasively painted, but disillusioning, lies about space. This effectively estranges and de-shelters us as we view them. In much the same way Blanchot seeks to explain Heidegger's concept of *alétheia* - of unveiling or disclosure of truth - as kind of *désabritement* (6). The grim white ruins house "the monstrous child" (7), the *Minotaur*, since Minos, his father, determined to build a labyrinth to "rid his home of this shameful sight" (7). As with *Venus*, these particular bleak and bleached enclosing spaces are entrapping; they are lairs. In Colvin's stagings, both of these mythical creatures, Venus and the Minotaur, are inhabitants of spaces where the body is laid waste. *Venus* is more precisely a siren or a Lamia in this representation, a woman's body that unsettles and threatens. She is a trap for the artists fascinated gaze, the sovereign of her fatal garden, which is a place of sexual fear, with its trophies, wreaths, skulls and morbid fauna; those lizards, monsters and centipedes. The diagram of a Celtic maze on a stone in her garden cites Colvin's larger mazing of space, his entrapping of the optic, as well as his plundering of signs of (pre)historical 'Scottishness'. His miniaturised constructions and sets are found as counterparts to the architectural maze which Daedalus built to house the Minotaur; comparable "enclosure(s) of elaborate and involved design" (7). Like Daedalus making his maze, Colvin in his tableaux obliterates the familiar and its topologies, "confusing the usual marks of direction and leading the eye of the beholder astray by devious paths" (7). So the photographs lead the spectator, like Theseus or the Scottish Action-Man, by indirections, towards bafflement, towards the *désabritement* which "leads back to wandering" (8).

#### *Boundary Plays*

His perceptual game of 'round-the-houses' arises from the impossibility of grasping the narrative of a tableaux such as *The Deaf Man's Villa*. Except you might grasp them (only to loose them again), as the threaded play of returns and permutations of a confused space and its content of dolls, mirrors and reflections. This apparently interminable aspect to Colvin has its basis in the slipping and sliding of frames which produce a Post-Modern text besides a Romantic (visual) text. Which is to say that Colvin 'plays the frames' when he produces, "A web of traces indefinitely referring to each other, a differential network" (9). As we speculate and spectate *The Deaf Man's Villa*, we carry away traces scattered across the triptych's three panels; we 'play the frames' as well. Moving between these panels, the web of references and inclusions proliferate. Not only do the objects (the fretted mirror, the statuette of Venus de Milo, Action-Man-with-kilt) carry over from panel to panel within the triptych, they also refer to other Colvin photographs and triptychs where they play out their dumb-shows. The prototype of Venus - a painting of a Prescilla Presley look-alike, c.1971 - was first insinuated into the right hand panel of *The Deaf Man's Villa*; a lurking predator, risible behind the potted palms. This play of references across separate pictures and separate frames is a parergonal play, a "parasitical contamination of inside and outside, internal and external, interior and exterior distinctions" (10). In common with contemporary artists like Richard Ross (11), Colvin thematises his concern with the *parergon* - the frame around the work or *ergon* - by suturing



the edges between things and equivocally making ornaments and decorations his content. For, like de Chirico's paintings and drawings of 1916-7, Colvin's tableaux are primarily composed of enclosures and enframements - the many play-houses, cubes and cameras. But these frames are then re-framed within the triptych arrangements; forming an abysmal series which itself is broken into by a contamination between whole groups of pictures; a noisy excess beyond all framing protocols, a spawn that recognises no proper boundaries.

In his new triptych the exemplary centre is put in question within the tripartite totality. How is this performed? By the boundary play with the two flanking panels (the central panel's *parerga*) which rearrange the centre's privileged content, fixing and unfixing it into new combinations and scenes; in this way the centre is de-centred by its own attendants. On the record-player in the central panel of **The Deaf Man's Villa** is the lapidary (but implausible) promise, "Fidelity". But the truth is somewhere out of sight, behind the wooden partition - (peer again in the convex mirror, in the glass darkly, at the smokey vision of the painter holding an oversized brush at arms length, with a decomposed Venus de Milo). Here is the secret (shameful?) primal scene of art. It is this scene which is re-composed in the mirror of the right hand panel: but on this occasion the tam-o'shanter wearing plaster artist is displaced by the questing Action-Man in his pursuit of Venus. We oscillate between the scenes; the Action-Man in the central panel had been picking at a Spanish tourist resort souvenir guitar. (A stray cultural reference - together with the tall, pointed *penitentes* hats that metamorphose into bird's beaks - to that distracting citation of Goya made in the title, **The Deaf Man's Villa**). Playing on all three sides, multiplying his scenes and his narratives in this fashion, Colvin's double and triple-crossing frame-playing unleashes a "layer of untameable, unframeable plurality" (12). The open bellows of the concertina has a multitude of compartments: closure never comes to the many mansions of **The Deaf Man's Villa**. The foliations, slices and compound reflections are evidence of Colvin's painstaking strategy of "generalised fetishism" (13), an oscillation within a ubiquitous field of fascinating points, a between play. Perhaps one (camouflaged) result of this can be seen in the wavering and zone confusion within the fantastically anamorphic woman/plant/bird in the left panel mirror of **The Deaf Man's Villa**.

#### *The World Turned Upside Down*

In such a carnival of tricks and inverting changes by mirrors and anamorphic painted perspectives, in his spaces where a 'generalised fetishism' flourishes, Colvin is able to mock the "privileged phallus which ceases to be a fetish" (14), as with the grotesquely phallicised guardian gnomes in the upper left panel of **The Temptation of St. Anthony**. The spectator of Colvin's tableaux is presented with a spectacle of buffoonery and undecideability around sexuality and representation. Categories of gender are dissimulated:- the penis of the blue boy grafts another gendered identity unto the female torso with which it shares the space, becoming undecideably double sexed, oscillating. Masculinity is averted in Colvin - literally so, if you look back to his **Male Nude** (1988), diminished to a toy version of mastery in the Scots Action-Man or in the inanely grinning and garlanded surf-bum doll who undergoes a tortuous test of manhood in the centre panel of **The Temptation of St. Anthony**. The carnival of gender spreads its contamination, its dis-order through the mode of hybridisation (15). So chimpanzee is juxtaposed with man, and flamingo shares a body with a female nude in the mirrored left panel of **The Deaf Man's Villa**.



It could be that, paradoxically, Ovid is denied in these metamorphoses; denied because the narrative of transformation is never quite accomplished; we are halted, held up in undecidable, impossible states of metamorphoses. The Minotaur *pace* Colvin is a figure of suspended and messy compromise rather than one of tragic horror. Described in Ovid as, "the strange hybrid creature" (16), he is marked by public disgrace that runs counter to his self-portraying representation by Colvin. In this representation there is instead some slight embarrassment and awkwardness - no more than that - at having horns protrude from his head. His aspirational gaze complements another auto-fiction of the artist and horns, Little Boy Blue, who blows his own trumpet of fame. The dwarves, the gnomes, are other hybrids and they announce themselves singing 'Hi Ho' in that riot of divided body parts and fractured heads, spilling out of the broken mirror in the centre panel of **The Temptation of St. Anthony**. One of them at the front of the procession holds an hour glass, that conventional symbol of carnival and its "inversion of the relations between the upper and the lower worlds" (17).

#### *Clouds of Seeing*

The scandalous mix of different worlds is a topic of **The Temptation of St. Anthony**. Hierarchic and ethical division are voided as zones overflow and St. Anthony struggles to maintain his separateness from turbulence and heterogeneity. He remains a bizarre construction, regarding the grotesque parade with a pious look, ascending in the words of the pulp love-story text on the sand, into 'another deep green world':- his astro-turfed Wendy-House. His asceticism may still be proof against the devices of worldliness and the monsters which erupt about him. A sulphurous sub-world is glimpsed through the tilted mirror to the left, where flesh is threatened and tormented, and where a heavy-metal poster of a black panther snarls. To the right is the dismembered flood of dwarves carrying shards of broken mirror glass. In Colvin's triptych no-body can be disentangled from the seeing devices that they are intricately in. Seeing and viewing has run amok, like the dwarves. A Babel of looking has been assembled around the saint:- a mask, a sightless plaster head, cameras, and a fold-out cardboard dissected eye.

The texts by Shelley and Wittgenstein offered two ways of reading the triptych. Amongst the bristling plurality of writing included by Colvin into this work there is probably a third: the open book beneath the round window in the left hand panel. Colvin has appropriated the 'sexological' writings of Magnus Hirschfeld before, and here he re-uses Hirschfeld's book, **Analysis of the Sex Taboo**. The page emphasised by Colvin describes perceptual disturbances - particularly visual field ones - suffered by a (male) lover. 'Love' - the word is written out in soft pink psychedelic plastic letters on each of the triptych's panels. 'Love' is recounted as a state of ocular hallucination and carnival: "The whole world quivers and glows...the barriers of time and space waver,...flicker and vanish". The linguistic conundrums of Wittgenstein and the lyrical body of unfettered imagination in Shelley meet a kitsch account of eroticism as a transgressive lifting of the conventionalised categories of instrumental perception. This text of flesh and vision can be read as a commentary across the 'distorted' vistas of the triptych. In the pursuit of 'art', as a slave to Venus and Love, and as a framer and re-framer of representations of the female nude, Colvin's unrestrained optic aspires to a lyric register, joining Shelley in a 'madness of vision'(18). We glimpse Colvin - now not in one of his own treacherous convex mirrors - but in some Instamatic snap-shots which he has glued onto the drawing boards of **The Deaf Man's Villa**. A domestic snap-shot: Colvin, head and shoulders, but almost unseeable due to flares of light which have driven over him, rapturous optical



disturbances, excesses and 'mistakes'. This particular snap-shot frames him to one side of an open bird cage; it displays him in the role of that commonplace of Romanticism - the poet who creates in the same mode as the unconfined bird sings.

University of Sussex, August 1989.

1. Michel Foucault 'Fantasia of the Library' **Language, Counter, Memory, Practice** 1977 p.94
2. P.B. Shelley **A Defence of Poetry** n.d. p.12
3. John Keats' **Ode on a Grecian Urn**, 1918
4. M.Blanchot 'Reading' **The Gaze of Orpheus** 1981, p.91
5. M.Foucault op.cit. p.96
6. M.Blanchot **The Writing of the Disaster** 1987,p.95
7. Ovid **Metamorphosis** 1955, Book VIII, p.183
8. M.Blanchot **The Writing of the Disaster** 1987, p.95
9. Sarah Kofman 'Ça Cloché', ed. H.J. Silverman **Continental Philosophies** 1989, pp. 108-138, p.127
10. Mary Harvey 'Derrida, Kant and the Performance of Parergonality' ed. H.J. Silverman op. cit,pp 59-76, p.65
11. See D.Mellor 'The Delirious Museum', **Museology, Photographs by Richard Ross**, 1989
12. M.Harvey,op. cit p.71
13. S.Kofman op.cit. p.133
14. *ibid*
15. cf. P.Stallybrass and A.White **The Politics and Poetics of Transgression** 1986, pp.43-4
16. Ovid op. cit.
17. J.E. Cirlot **A Dictionary of Symbols** 1989, pp.152-3
18. The title of Christine Buci-Glucksmann's study of the Baroque, **La folie du Voir**, 1986







## CATALOGUE

1. Jacob's Ladder 1989  
Cibachrome  
152.4 x 122cm/60 x 48in or 101.6 x 76.2cm/40 x 30in  
Each size in an edition of 10
2. Icarus 1989  
Cibachrome  
152.4 x 122cm/60 x 48in or 101.6 x 76.2cm/40 x 30in  
Each size in an edition of 10
3. Minotaur 1989  
Cibachrome  
Diptych  
152.4 x 259cm/60 x 102in or 210.1.6 x 162.6cm/40 x 64in  
Each size in an edition of 10
4. Flying a Kite 1989  
Cibachrome  
122 x 152.4/48 x 60in or 76.2 x 101.6/30 x 40in  
Each size in an edition of 10
5. Deaf Man's Villa 1989  
Cibachrome  
Triptych  
152.4 x 358cm/60 x 141in or 101.6 x 218.4cm/40 x 86in  
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6. Temptations of St Anthony 1989  
Cibachrome  
Triptych  
152.4 x 358cm/60 x 141in or 101.6 x 218.4/40 x 86in  
Each size in an edition of 10
7. Venus 1989  
Cibachrome  
152.4 x 122cm/60 x 48in or 101.6 x 76.2cm/40 x 30in  
Each size in an edition of 10

The following images have also been printed in an edition of 3 in these sizes:

Deaf Man's Villa	243.8 x 584.2cm/96 x 230in
Temptation of St Anthony	243.8 x 584.2cm/96 x 230in
Minotaur	243.8 x 406.4cm/96 x 160in







## Biography

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

## Selected Exhibitions

1983	Compass Gallery, Glasgow Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
1985	Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design, Jerusalem <i>'Ten out of Ten'</i> , Hamilton Gallery, London <i>'The 85 Degree Show'</i> , Serpentine Gallery, London
1986	<i>'Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie'</i> , Arles <i>'Constructed Narratives'</i> - Calum Colvin and Ron O'Donnell, touring exhibition
1987	Seagate Gallery, Dundee <i>'Towards a Bigger Picture'</i> , Victoria & Albert Museum, London Kathleen Ewing Gallery, Washington DC Sander Gallery, New York <i>'True Stories and Photofictions'</i> , Fotogallery, Cardiff Riverside Studios, London <i>'The Vigorous Imagination'</i> , Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh
1988	Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Heidelberg Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin <i>'Juxtapositions'</i> , Salama-Caro Gallery, London <i>'Foco '88'</i> , Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid <i>'The Male Nude'</i> , Salama-Caro Gallery, London <i>'Recontres Internationales de la Photographie'</i> , Arles The Ludwig Museum, Cologne Galeria 57, Madrid
1989	California State University, Long Beach, California <i>'Towards a Bigger Picture, Part II'</i> Victoria and Albert Museum <i>'Towards a Bigger Picture, Contemporary British Photography'</i> Tate Gallery, Liverpool Portfolio Gallery, Edinburgh <i>'Machine Dreams'</i> , The Photographers Gallery, London Salama-Caro Gallery, London <i>'Through the Looking Glass'</i> , Barbican Art Gallery, London, and Manchester City Art Gallery Friedman-Guinness Gallery, Frankfurt <i>'Das Konstruierte Bild'</i> , Kunstverein Munich, travelling to Kunsthalle Nurnberg, Kunstverein Karlsruhe, Forum Bremen. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston Piers Art Centre, Orkney Ansel Adams Center, California
1990	Haggerty Museum, Wisconsin Glenn Dash Gallery, Los Angeles Torch, Amsterdam Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh



## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

California State University, Long Beach, California  
Contemporary Arts Society, London  
Dundee Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans  
Oldham City Art Gallery, Oldham  
Royal Photographic Society, Bath  
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh  
Scottish Arts Council, Edinburgh  
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh  
Unilever, London  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Sarah Kent, *On Calum Colvin*, *Time Out*, September 13-20 1989  
David Chandler, *Machine Dreams*, The Photographers Gallery, 1989  
Nicola McAllister, *Art of Deception*, *Scotland on Sunday Magazine*, 17 September 1989  
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Francis Hodgson, *Photography, Calum Colvin: New Work at Salama-Caro Gallery*, *Arts Review*, 22 September 1989



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