

Sanctae: A portrait of secular saints

*This project is dedicated to the memory of Niki,
who died two weeks after her photograph was taken,
she was a true inspiration and an honour to work with*

Sanctae is the culmination of a four year project carried out following the birth of lone Rucquoi's first child. The installation celebrates and pays tribute to the cultural predicament and domestic ambiguities of contemporary womanhood. It reaches out to the divine space of Sisterhood.

Resonant with symbols and byzantine in their elevated remoteness, the gold haloed saints are icons, of individual women, each marked by their corporeal experience and presence upon this earth. Their individual stories are universal.

Sanctae offers sanctuary, a space where its subjects can be what they are without shame, where they are beautiful and where they hold power, where they welcome and confront the judgmental viewer with challenging gaze. The images expose the things we ignore, give a voice to silent suffering, physical form to emotion, and capture the intensity of passing experiences.

The installation brings together religious and earthly imagery. The black bird marks the burden of sins of exposed flesh; the sexual organs revealed in the dissected lily reference the Annunciation, and with it, the brutality underlying sanitized religious imagery. We are confronted with earthly images of the outcast mother of never-born children; the mother whose breasts, ovaries, womb, whose every biological sign of womanhood has been removed; the breastfeeding mother in her fencing mask 'en garde', urine and milk running down her leg pooling on the ground.

The architectural arrangement of the panels is inspired by the wooden Stave churches of Norway. Their simple intimacy contrasts with the grandiose formalism of Catholic cathedrals, highlighting a deep appreciation of churches but discomfort with their patriarchal hierarchy: alienation from the natural and organic. The circle of space reflects the female cycle, and its enclosure echoes the womb – a place of security and growth.

Rucquoi's other work often references Carl Jung's concept of the Shadow. Here her images present us with aspects of ourselves that society repudiates, aspects that, like the Shadow, are buried and remain hidden. These images arm us with the tools to uncover the experiential truths of being.

The female form is presented in its unmasked state, to reveal aspects of personal history marginalized in the everyday, and by this revelatory experience, we can reconcile our own personal narrative through the brave acknowledgement of Another.

The artist would like to thank Arts Council England, Spectrum Photo, Mike Smallcombe, Tom Glastonbury, Rosie Martin, Stephen and Lucinda Emanuel, Terri Windling, Samantha Emanuel, Clare Capper, Amy Wray, Lindsey Carr, Lliana Bird, Laura Turley, Jo Ensum and all her models for making this project possible.