

SILENT FILM



By Gregory O'Brien

TWO primary raw materials of photography, time and light, also happen to be two concepts central to the monastic life. Anne Noble's exhibition, *IN THE PRESENCE OF ANGELS*, which has been touring New Zealand for the last two years, captures the reality inhabited by the Benedictine nuns of Tyburn Convent, near the centre of London, and also illuminates the photo-artist's own practice. Noble's exposures reflect the nuns's preoccupation with transcending the materiality and temporality of existence. In a catalogue essay to the show, Mother M. Xavier McMonagle describes her monastic vocation as a "spiritual dance between time and eternity"¹. Photography is, in its own way, also a dance or transaction between time and timelessness. Its objective, like that of the liturgical life, can be "to sanctify time and all human activity"².

humanity to God..."⁴.

For Noble, photography is a comparable "inward activity" — it seeks to go beyond appearances to reach a personal, "spiritual" reality and, perhaps, glimpse something beyond even that.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in a poem from his *Book of Hours* presented as part of Noble's exhibition, similarly seeks to go beyond "the narrow wall" which divides humanity from its "neighbour God", a barrier "buildd of... images" which the poet is always trying to breach while, at the same time, appearing content to celebrate its existence. In *The Book of Hours*, Rilke adopts the persona of a Russian monk to write about the abandonment of ordinary life, his method as well as his concerns prefiguring aspects of Noble's photo-essay.

"Here my spirit in its dress of stillness stands before you,
— oh do you not see?" Rilke.⁵

In a 1989 *NZ Listener* interview, Noble noted her desire to "somehow

AS the nuns cross-circuit time by their "toing and froing from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven" in prayer, so the photographic art is made of chinks in time, moments lifted from the flow. In *Another Way of Telling*, John Berger wrote that "any photograph, under certain conditions, can

be used in order to break the monopoly which history today has over time"³.

Mother McMonagle writes: "In our monastic timetable, time and history is only the outward aspect of an inward hidden spiritual activity which joins earth to heaven, time to eternity,

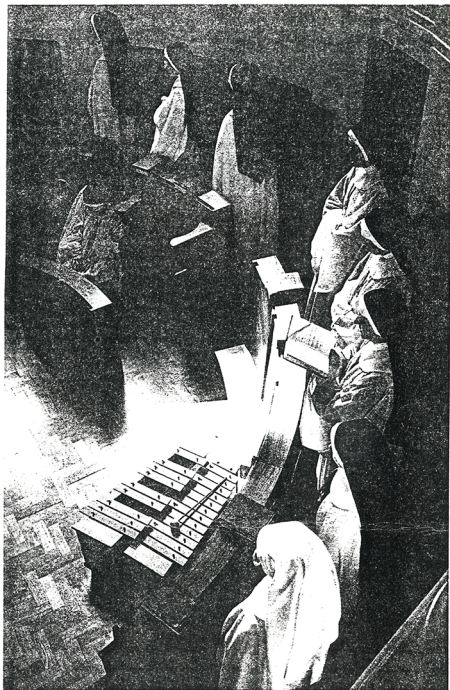
express life with distilled intent", sharing the nuns's belief that "life is a very great mystery and there is a capacity to wonder; not explain or be clever... I love that in picture making — something very close to prayer: excitement, awe, beauty..."⁶.

As the maker of these 55 black and white images, Noble achieves the resolution of light and dark through the play of time and light on film then paper. She creates images or "stills" which capture the monastery's silence, a silence not stemming from passivity but from the "spiritual" activity of her subjects.

For the nuns, the ultimate aim of life is to pass through the world of appearances and chronological time into an illumined state of eternity. Centred on both the *knowable* and the *unknowable*, the mysticism of light (cataphasis) and the mysticism of darkness (apophasis), the monastic life seeks a state where both darkness and light are completed in an all-encompassing "superresplendent" darkness.

The Tyburn convent nuns are part of a tradition of English religious life going back through such fourteenth century figures as Julian of Norwich and the anonymous author of **The Cloud of Unknowing**. Noble captures the dignity of the nuns, and also an archaic sense of the feminine more complex and rich than the prevalent Virgin Mary and Eve "role models" of Christianity. The nuns's tradition includes figures like the nineteenth century Saint Therese, "the dove" of Lisieux (who appears on a bookcover in one of Noble's still lives), and it's worth noting that the fourteenth century English recluses referred to "Jesus our mother".

Thomas Merton said the role of contemplatives was to be independent, alive and "alert to the light that has been placed on them"⁷. These are the main qualities which come through in Noble's exhibition, a sense that each of her subjects (to quote Merton again) "seek to know the meaning of life not only with their head but with their whole being, by living it in depth and purity"⁸. Noble's pictures deal perceptively with the rituals and strict conditions under which the nuns live. Without portraying the nuns as theatrical or superstitious, she captures the sense that their vocation



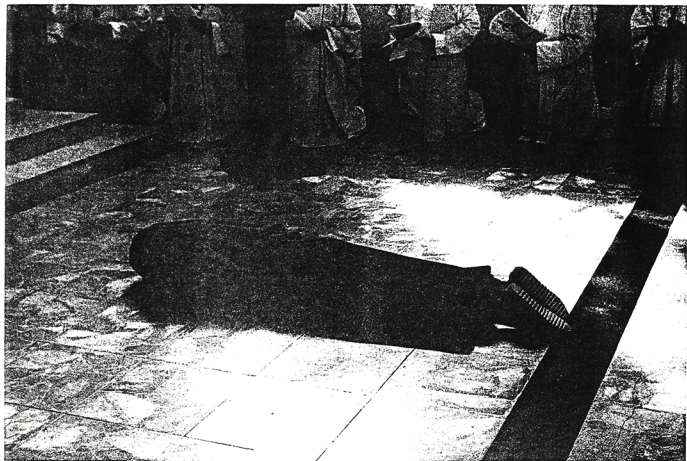
isn't centred on the suppression of nature but on the transfiguration of nature through obedience and grace.

Mother McMonagle maintains that such a strict regime is necessary to shape the spiritual path so "the locked barrier of time with its closed circle of repetitive activities (can) be dissolved and (the) spirit carried... to eternal realities..."⁹. However, for the Benedictine sisters, the laws and restrictions are not the most demanding part of their vocation. Laws have limits and are predictable, unlike *pure charity* which is boundless and which is the real "law" they live under.

Addressing themselves to the lives of the women, the photographs are neither mere aesthetic contrivances

nor are they simply projections of the artist's preconceptions, although one reason the images work so well is because of a mirroring between the artist's "vocation" and aspects of convent life and daily liturgy, a thought echoed by English poet Edith Sitwell who said that poetry (and, it follows, art) is a religion and "should make all our days holy."¹⁰

As well as imparting stillness and solemnity, the photographs can also be funny — a kind of English battiness surfaces in pictures of the nuns at recreation. And there's a girlish god-humour in the detail of a McIntoshes-type toffee in a dinner setting still-life. The more playful images enhance rather than undermine the



coherence and power of the exhibition. After all, the requirements of the monastic life, according to Merton, are "simplicity, individuality, humility and ever-present elements of humour."¹¹ There's a Zen-like playfulness in the commingling of austerity, silence and of personality; a mood shared by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* who wrote that the religious person should "play hide-and-seek with God, taking care you don't hide yourself away so thoroughly that He can't spot you at all!"¹²

Avoiding virtuosity or showiness, Noble's images use natural lighting to render the convent as an activated zone of contemplation, where everything is a symbol. Light from windows often illuminates only part of each image leaving some forms obscured, hinting at the inherent "obscurity" of the cloistered life. The nuns' "obscure faith" echoes *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which talks of "the blind stirring of love... this secret love pressing upon the cloud of unknowing."¹³ IN THE PRESENCE OF ANGELS grasps something of this elusive state, as well as a great deal of the human side of a milieu not scrambled by the mass media or saturated in technicolour. Noble depicts a world outside fashion

and taste, without hype (beyond the reach of even Saatchi and Saatchi); an institution where fund-raising is still done (witness one of Noble's images) by way of signs hand-written in felt-tip on cardboard.

According to Paul Tillich, in *Theology of Culture*, "reality in the modern world has lost its inner transcendence... its transparency for the eternal."¹⁴ For the Benedictine nuns and Noble (and Rilke, for that matter), visual perception isn't a dead end—it is a window or mirror regarding a broader and more penetrating reality, which includes the seer as well as that which is seen.

It would be fair to say the Benedictine nuns are Noble's collaborators in this project. Noble stands half way between the viewer of the exhibition and the Sisters, imparting the forms of the nuns's lives by way of her photographic forms.

The paradoxical nature of these women who have discarded virtually everything ("that they may live more richly" in a silent cloister amidst a teeming metropolis matches the paradoxical nature of photography, the "ambiguity" John Berger finds inherent in the snapshot which, out of its intense privacy, can "look across his-

tory towards that which is outside time."¹⁵

In its low-key interplay of dark and light, the exhibition expresses both the clarity and the obscurity of monastic life. Noble's images also do what Louis Zukofsky said photographs should do: they record and elate.

NOTES

- 1 *In the Presence of Angels*, Exhibition Catalogue, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1989, pp7-10.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, Granta Books, 1969, p109.
- 4 *In the Presence of Angels*, op. cit.
- 5 Rainer Maria Rilke, poems from the *Book of Hours*, trans. by Babette Deutsch, New Directions, 1941, p19.
- 6 Patrick Smith, "Order in Life", *NZ Listener*, 1989.
- 7 Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Noonday Press, 1989, p128.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *In the Presence of Angels*, op. cit.
- 10 From an undated BBC radio interview.
- 11 Thomas Merton, op. cit., p153.
- 12 Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, modern translation by Clifton Wolter, Penguin, 1978, p73.
- 13 *Ibid.* p78.
- 14 Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1959, p43.
- 15 John Berger and Jean Mohr, op. cit., p108.