

CHANTAL BIZZINI

Collage Cephalophore, 2013
photomontage, 22.5 x 8 cm



courtesy the artist

DALE PENDELL

Broken Symmetry

John Piper's Windows & the Ruins of Modernism

In 1940 the German Luftwaffe bombed Coventry, an industrial city with factories producing automobiles, bicycles, airplane engines, and munitions. Heinkel pathfinders first dropped marker flares, one of which landed on the roof of St. Michael's, the fourteenth-century cathedral. This first fire was extinguished, but others followed. High explosive bombs broke the city's water mains, and the number of fires in the city center overwhelmed the firefighters, who ran out of water and sand. Fires on the cathedral roof melted through the lead, and soon the interior was burning. Toward morning, the roof collapsed.

The outer walls remained standing, but the ruined cathedral was an empty shell. Fourteen years later, in 1954, Basil Spence won the commission to design a new cathedral, to be built adjacent to the old one. Spence's challenge was the problem of all twentieth-century art: how to "make it new"—a problem made all the more acute by the presence of the old walls. While mature (and senescent) cultures revere the forms of the old masters—duplicating them, refining them, finding new derivatives—at Coventry, any such attempt would have been futile and imitative. The old forms were half in rubble, yet any new building done in a similar style could never have hoped to match the elegance of what remained. So Spence's design was "modern."

Spence connected his new cathedral to the ruins of the old walls with an elegant and simple arch, but the linkage is clearer in the glasswork. First, the ruins of the old cathedral form a backdrop for the emaciated saints and angels rising with the trumpet-sounding of the final judgment on John Hutton's sandblasted translucent windows filling the entire west wall. Second, the connection to the past shines through every pane of stained glass.

The ten nave windows, designed by Lawrence Lee, Geoffrey Clark, Keith New, and students at the Royal College of Art, are set into the recesses of the overlapping splines of the walls like the barbs on a harpoon, in a sawtooth arrangement—they are only visible by looking backward from the altar. Spence chose the themes: youth, in greens; midlife, in reds; old age, in purples; and afterlife, in gold. There is variation in style, many miniatures are embedded in the windows, and the overall effect retains the Gothic penchant for assemblage. Their half-hidden emplacement seems to add to their inspiring richness.