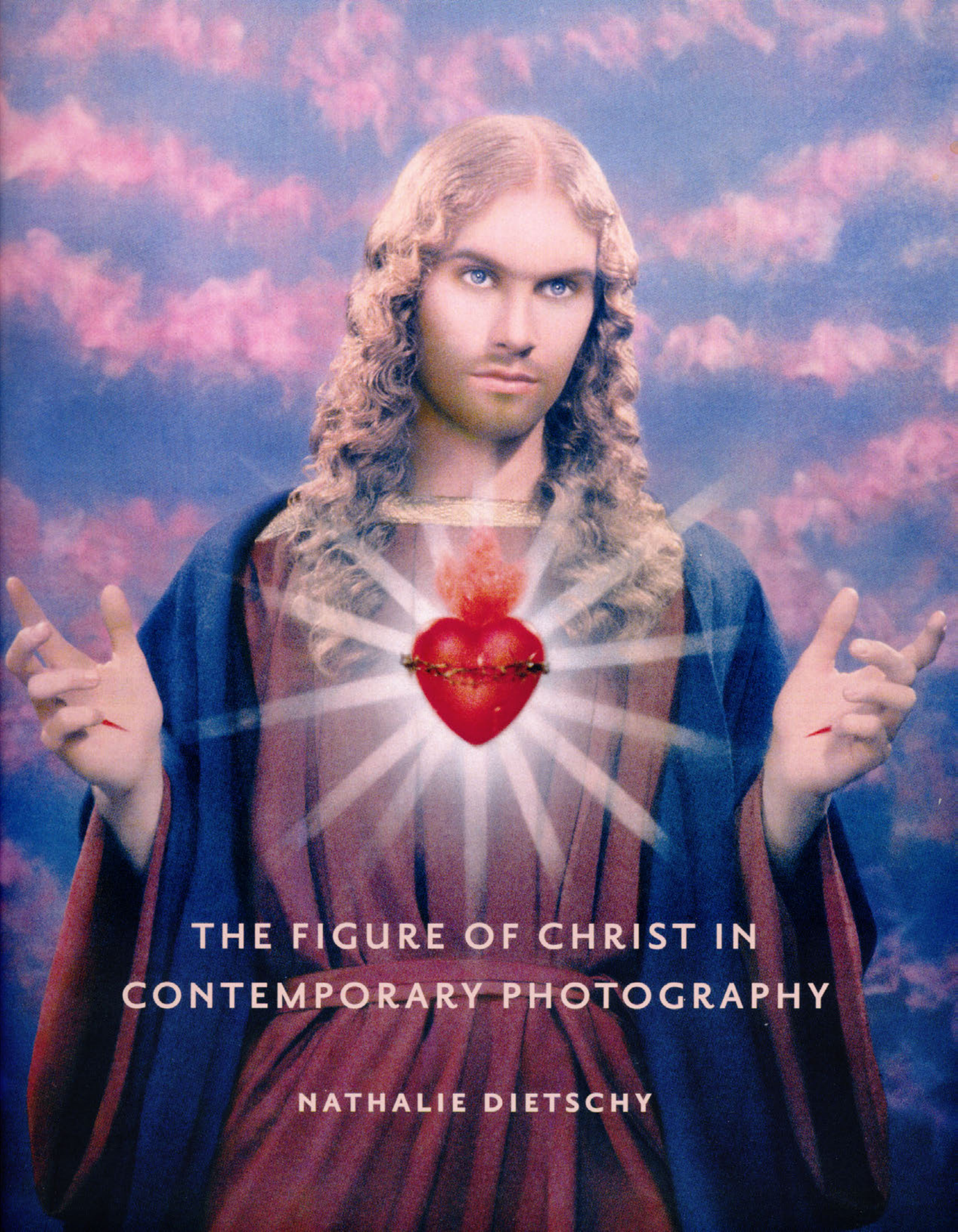


THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN  
CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

NATHALIE DIETSCHY



THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN  
CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

NATHALIE DIETSCHY

the Trinity. Cauchi points to himself, in imitation of Dürer's famous self-portrait, in which the painter suggests his divine filiation through his resemblance with Christ. Max Oppenheimer was one of the many modern artists who, centuries later, produced versions of this *imitatio Christi*, and his *Self-portrait* of 1911, which Cauchi's photograph closely resembles, is based on Dürer's painting, presenting the artist racked by doubt and marginalized, in a coat, shirt and tie, his right hand in the same position as Dürer's. Cauchi made another self-portrait evoking the figure of Christ, in which he is wearing a white shirt and a black jacket. He is not looking at the lens this time, but sideways out of the frame (*False Prophet*, 2005, illus. 27). The gesture he makes can be interpreted in several ways. His left hand pointing to the cupped palm of his right hand could be indicating one of Christ's stigmata. The gesture of his right hand recalls the hand of God as *Salvator Mundi*. A third possibility is that Cauchi is transferring the scene of Doubting Thomas to this photographic image and broaching the question of the trust one can place in the medium. Cauchi states that his work is not inspired by spiritual musings: 'I'm not a spiritual person in the religious sense, although a bit superstitious perhaps, but that kind of spiritual subtext isn't really a part of it. I suppose there's an element of the metaphysical – the orbs, shrouds, etc., are all part of that. Transcendence is something to aspire to.'<sup>22</sup>

The apparitions on Ben Cauchi's black and white photographs, the veils which both display and conceal, the tricks which the photographer performs in front of the camera like a magician – all these refer back to spiritist photography. They remind us that photography can never provide sure proof. Like Cauchi's *Veils of Veronica* on which no miraculous imprints figure, the 'magic' of photography's reflection of the real is never the whole story.

#### **STEPHEN ALTHOUSE: VEILS AND FABRICS**

Stephen Althouse (b. 1948), an American photographer who was brought up a Quaker, symbolically addresses the theme of the Veil of Veronica in his black and white photographs through the abundant use he makes of textiles. On visiting the Prado Museum in the 1970s, Althouse was struck by a painting of St Veronica. He became intrigued by the motif of the veil, not only because of the technical possibilities it seemed to offer, which painters before him had exploited in their rendering of the

hang and folds of draperies, but also as a means of hiding or exhibiting, highlighting or concealing the content.

The objects portrayed in *Hammer with Braille* (2003), *Nail and String* (2003), *Closed Tongs* (2004) and *Sacred Tongs* (2004) are the instruments of Christ's Passion. Originally agricultural tools, popular in the late Middle Ages, they were the *Arma Christi* symbolizing Christ's suffering. They also have a hidden meaning. On some of them there is an inscription in braille, for instance on the hammer placed against a black background in *Hammer with Braille*. The words in braille read 'Dona nobis', a reference to *Dona nobis pacem*, the 'grant us peace' of the Catholic Mass. Braille expresses a direct and physical 'vision' of the world and of the relation to things. The spectator must acquire a new approach to objects and language, involving not only vision but also touch. The disused farm instruments Althouse photographs are a metaphor of the *homo faber*. Cloth is often present, either wrapped round the object or used as a background that lends it a new meaning, a symbolic dimension in which the profane and the sacred are closely intertwined. In certain works, textiles do not only highlight the tool, but also sacralize it, as in *Rake 1* (2003, illus. 28), where the white material, tied to the two ends of a wooden rake, evokes the ostension of the Veil by Veronica, as the artist comments: 'I felt that the cloth might add a degree of spirituality in my work and help to imply the mystery that I feel.'<sup>23</sup> The pure lines of the rake, the play of light and shadow and the explicit reference to the Veil of Veronica transform this still-life on the theme of agricultural work into a sort of mystical icon, pervaded by a sense of reverential silence. The rake, which has the form of a T-shaped cross, and the material that falls on either side, refer symbolically to Christ's outstretched arms nailed to the Cross.

The banal nature of the object, an everyday work tool, is suffused with a divine transcendence through the cream-coloured material. The meticulous care with which the objects are rendered, the sensitivity to textures, the contrast between the solid materiality of the wood and the folds of the material, and the masterful use of chiaroscuro, work to aestheticize these common objects. *Clamps and Shroud* (2003, illus. 29), which clearly refers formally to the ostension of the Veil by Veronica, is the most mystical of the series. Yet the cloth, displayed without the presence of the saint, shows no image. The material has become a shroud, and clamps replace the hands of Veronica as she displays the



miraculous Veil. Lastly, in *Royal Spindle* (2003, illus. 30), a spindle is placed in the centre of a piece of white material knotted at its four corners. The image clearly refers, formally, to the tradition of Holy Faces, and more particularly to Zurbarán's *Veil of St Veronica* (c. 1635–40, illus. 31), which shows a ghostly apparition on a light-coloured, crease-marked veil. In Althouse's work the object is never reduced to a two-dimensional surface by the photographic medium. It acquires a materiality and a symbolic sense that transcend its everyday meaning. The mundane character of the subject matter and its utilitarian function are sublimated in a representation that sacralizes the object associated with the veil. The fabric does not portray the face of Christ, but conveys the mystical symbolism that impregnates every object through an inspired vision of things and a transcendental approach to the world. A simple piece of material and two clamps thus successfully represent the Veil of Veronica, itself a symbol of the photographic image.

#### LEE WAGSTAFF: SHROUDS AND TATTOOS

In *Shroud* (2000, illus. 32), the British artist Lee Wagstaff (b. 1969) creates his own shroud, imprinting the image of his body on the material using the blood produced when he is tattooed, in a personal version of the Turin Shroud. He associates the Veil of Veronica and the Turin Shroud with the practice of tattooing, which is itself derived from printing techniques. His tattoos have a symbolic value due to the motifs he chooses, and the links he makes in his photographs with Christian themes.

In the middle of his chest, Wagstaff has tattooed a Sacred Heart, inside which he has drawn a swastika. A larger swastika adorns his stomach. These tattoos are not the same as the Nazi symbol, but resemble the original design from India, where the swastika is very common. In *Shroud*, therefore, the artist is linking the cyclical symbol of the swastika, the sign of a perpetual renewal, with the Christian symbol of divine love. He comments on the influences on his work of his Catholic schooling and of the culture and religion of his Indian family.<sup>24</sup>

In the West the swastika is immediately considered to be a Nazi symbol. William J. T. Mitchell lists the swastika as one of the images considered to be offensive, as 'an almost universal symbol of unredeemable evil'.<sup>25</sup> Despite the formal differences, the Western spectator continues to see in these tattoos the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime. As such,

