

# Of beastly beatitudes

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## VISUAL ART REVIEW

### PATRICK HENIGAN

*St Francis of Assisi*, Watson Place Gallery, 2/14 Watson Place, city, until May 6

### JOHN GILLIES

*Divide*, in 2006 Contemporary Commonwealth, ACMI, Federation Square, until May 21

Penny Webb Reviewer

EASTER Saturday in Melbourne was a day of sudden downpours, but when Franciscan monk Patrick Henigan, 81, walked into this city gallery, the hem of his brown habit was dry and so were his sandalled feet.

He wasn't trailing sand, but I don't doubt he has experienced his share of desert places. Didn't he once walk to Sydney, setting out entirely without funds and without having made the usual arrangements simply in order to test his faith in — what? God? Providence? St Francis of Assisi?

Henigan, who was born in Staffordshire, England, and arrived in Australia in 1950, was a regular exhibitor in the 1980s, but this is his first show in 12 years. And it's a marvel. His 11 large black ink-and-wash drawings on gessoed paper, worked on the floor, depict events in the life of St Francis. But another story is played out in Henigan's materials and methods.

"Arte povera" is not usually



divinely inspired, but Henigan's poverty of means (\$2 Shop brushes as wide as his finger to three fingers wide, any old black ink on paper in which gesso is both ground and background colour) resonates with the philosophy of the founder of his order.

And, like any artist who came of age in the mid-20th century, he has taken what he needed from the early modern movements (neo-primitivism, expressionism, even vorticism) in refining his work to achieve an almost naive quality.

Henigan has travelled in northern Italy and the two figures in *Francis Returns His Clothes to His Father* and

*Francis and the Leper* (one of the smallest works at 54 cm x 103 cm) achieve that quality of simplicity that Albert Camus so admired in Italian primitive paintings with their "stiff and motionless" characters.

"It is with the appearance of smiles, and expression in the eyes, that the decadence of Greek sculpture and the dispersion of Italian art begin. As if beauty ended where the mind begins." (Love of Life in *Betwixt and Between*.)

If Henigan works simply, artlessly, John Gillies' digital video *Divide* (2004) is a compendium of filmmaking techniques, including a voice-over, but the result is a work as elemental as

Henigan's. However, Gillies works on the senses, with sumptuous, extreme close-ups in velvety blacks as light-absorbing as a mezzotint, and with four actors chosen for the watchfulness of their eyes, their immobile faces and the litheness of their walking bodies.

In shocking contrast to Gillies' tightly edited rhythm of images of men under duress, herding sheep in a hostile landscape, cut to a non-naturalistic soundtrack of exaggerated natural sounds, a girlish voice, just above a whisper, tells the story of Genesis 12: "Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country ..." and the colonial settlement of Australia is given an Old Testament reading.

I enjoyed this film even more on a second viewing. Its extreme theatricality (a Chinese opera singer encountered in a densely wooded area at night remains a fabulous enigma to me) is perfectly judged by Gillies, who was born in Queensland in 1960 and lectures in time-based art at the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW, Sydney.

It's too nuanced to be called "Australian Gothic", but, on reflection, St Francis, who was born at the end of the 12th century, would surely have recognised its tenor of beastliness.