

Christmas Tree by Boyd Webb

13 December 1991 – 6 January 1992
Tate Gallery

CHRISTMAS TREE BY BOYD WEBB

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Boyd Webb was born in 1947 in Christchurch, New Zealand. His formal art training began at the Ilam School of Fine Art, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1968–71 and continued at the sculpture school of the Royal College of Art, London, 1972–75. His first one-man exhibition was held in 1976 at the Robert Self Gallery, which subsequently published a selection of Webb's work under the title *Tableaux*, 1978. In 1984, Webb designed and co-directed with Philip Haas the film *Scenes and Songs from Boyd Webb*, which was funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain. Since 1973, Webb has exhibited extensively in Britain and abroad. A major touring show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1987 travelled to Hanover, Edinburgh and Los Angeles. Webb is represented internationally in public collections including the Tate Gallery, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, and the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. He lives and works in London and Brighton.

As a sculpture student, Webb experimented with casting human figures in fibreglass. This practice proved expensive and manipulating the figures into groups awkward. Documenting the pieces led to photography which gave Webb greater control. Webb subsequently substituted the fibreglass statues with live figures. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Webb arranged actors – acquaintances rather than professional models – and props in stage-like settings which he photographed. The images created were both accessible and elusive. On first viewing they appear as narratives similar to the storytelling found in Victorian genre painting. At a deeper level they contain allusive elements which work in the same way as Sufi parables (Sufism a Muslim mystical movement). Webb is particularly interested in such tales because they have no single meaning.

In 1981, Webb adopted the Cibachrome process. This produced high quality prints with excellent colour resolution. The effect on Webb's work was to replace

the muted hues of the early work with a new brilliance of colour and also to increase the size of the image. Previously titles and captions had occupied an integral place in Webb's work. From the early 1980s these became more succinct, even deliberately omitted altogether. The fabricated environments became more fantastic and included cosmic, subterranean and marine universes, whilst the actors were gradually marginalised. In Webb's most recent works, the human figure has been replaced by images of animals, such as giraffes and flamingos. He has also made installation pieces. In these, the actors have been removed and the viewer becomes the human presence within the work. Throughout his work Webb addresses ecological issues, notably the threat of pollution, nuclear war and technology. Webb's approach is characteristically indirect, producing images which operate in a subversive rather than political way. Realism is combined with artifice, logic with absurdity, humour with melancholy. When invited to create this year's Christmas tree for the Tate Gallery, Webb was attracted by the idea of making the tree itself rather than just decorations. His installation consists of a quantity of trees fabricated into a much larger illuminated tree. By using a technique similar to that used in horticulture Webb has grafted the fir trees onto a central pole. The result is not a 'real' tree but a representation of a tree. The artist suggests that this tree is thus seen at 'second hand' in the same way that we gain so much of our knowledge of the natural world at second hand through, for example, television programmes. part of the viewer's experience of the installation is the strong scent produced by the profusion of trees used.

We are grateful to Clifton Nurseries who supplied the trees.

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