Michael Clark's paintings of wounds are now on display at Chichester Cathedral. **Iain Gale** views his 'conceptual Crucifixion'

The word made flesh

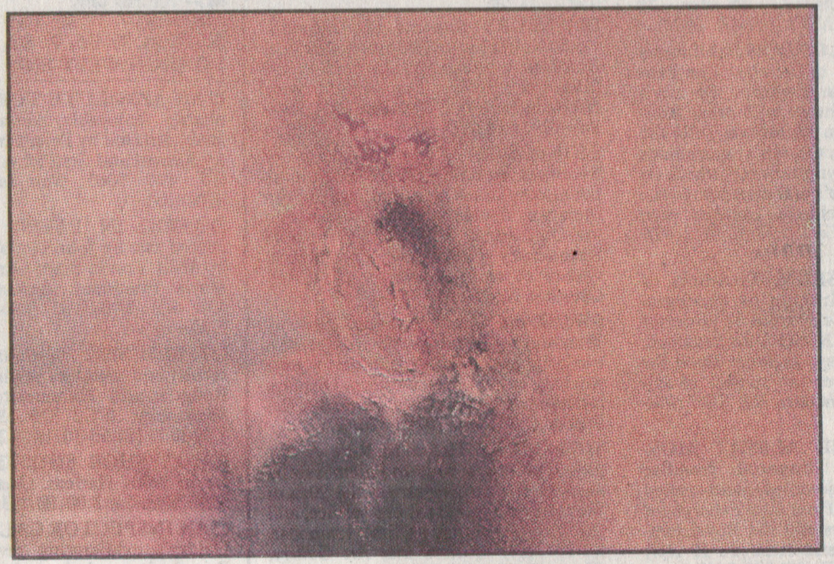
Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

John 20: 25

Michael Clark knows the mind of doubting Thomas. As much is evident from his triptych *Some may Lose their Faith*, currently on show in London. Clark, better known for his portraits of Francis Bacon, was inspired by Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522). His work takes its title from the words of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, on looking at the Holbein: "Some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture." Holbein's Christ, Myshkin realised, was nothing more than a dead man, in the face of which, a faith based on divine majesty, would be shaken to its roots. For Clark though, Holbein's painting is a starting point for belief.

In *Some may Lose their Faith* Clark presents three paintings of flesh with, above them, slides containing specimens of "human organic material" — fingernail and hair clippings and other "debris". Alongside hang 20 tiny canvas squares, painted with layers of glaze in numinous tones of red and ochre. These are Clark's *Wounds*, five of which are now on permanent display in Chichester Cathedral. In some the glaze is so heavy that their raised and gleaming beads of crimson appear to flow. In others pieces of yellow "bone" seem to rise beneath the skin. Any initial revulsion soon gives way to enchantment.

At once real and illusory, Clark's works transcend both the morbid pathology of Damien Hirst's conceptualism and the preoccupation of such artists as Sickert and Freud to re-create flesh with paint. In Clark's hands the paint made flesh is an echo of transubstantiation. Our inquisitive fingers are irresistably drawn, like Thomas's, to probe.



Michael Clark's *Wound IX* at Rebecca Hossack

In the *Wounds* the viewer comes face to face with the very real nature of Christ's suffering and consequently with our own mortality. "These works are forms to meditate upon" explains the artist. "A trigger-release mechanism; a way of opening up." Looking into Clark's paintings it is easy to become mesmerised, responding as one might to a large abstract by Rothko or a late landscape by Turner.

Just as Holbein's stark realism suited the melancholic 1520s, so Clark's equally post-Reformation *Wounds* find their audience in a post-Aids world obsessed with the duality of blood — the bringer of life and the carrier of death. It is Clark's intention to open our eyes to the dangerous mutuality of love and pain.

Clark's work at Chichester demands an intensity of contemplation rare in contemporary life but clearly understood by the 19th-century Romantics and the Abstract Expressionists and intrinsic to the now forgotten 15th-century "Doctrine of the Five Wounds". An audience of Van Eyck's time would find his *mementi mori* more easily accessible than any contemporary viewer. Clark's polyptych of pain has much in common with the Man of Sorrows of Grünewald or Mantegna, even though we have to reconstruct his body for ourselves. In Clark's words, "the cathedral itself is the Body of Christ."

□ *Michael Clark's work is on permanent display at Chichester Cathedral. Also at Rebecca Hossack, 197 Piccadilly, London W1 (071-434 4401), to 9 Apr.*