

FORGED HALOS

Nic Plowman - No Other Knowledge

Laura Skerlj, 2015

More than once Nic Plowman wandered toward life's edge. On these occasions, he moved more briskly than his usual saunter, propelled by forces he could not control. Thankfully, as death came into view, he turned around and danced back—unready, rib tickling, bold, in love with the world. Suffering a congenital heart condition that incited two bouts of open-heart surgery, as well as a near fatal accident five years ago, Plowman's understanding of the tightrope between life and death is intimate. He can recall moments—from hospital beds, his mother's house in the country, and the comfort of his closest friends—when everything, quite suddenly, became fragile.

However, when fragility muscles up it turns to tenderness. Moving past the place where things fall apart, what was once weak finds a sympathetic and elastic strength to cope, and move forward, despite ill wind. In this way, death was never an earthen endpoint. It was not a religious nirvana either. Instead it was a state that could define, through opposition, the exquisite quality of life and human tenacity in the face of deep loss, pain and struggle. In Plowman's exhibition *No Other Knowledge* a series of people from the artist's life—some well known, others he met quite recently—are elevated for heroically wandering out to the end, before dancing back. As he might call them, lion-hearts.

This tenacity connects the sitters in Plowman's newest portraits. These women and men have experienced addiction, abuse, malady, the loss of loved ones. Each has faced great existential tests. And each, through various faiths (in gods, in people, in pure momentum), has resurrected themselves. As Plowman's sensitively wrought visions describe, the everyday person rises to sainthood not through perfection or piousness but through a commitment to keep evolving: we are reminded of their battles by the small halo-bubbles that contain mementos from the past; by the way their wrinkles, tattoos and blemishes seem to smile-out their secrets.

In this way, flesh circles the halo. Using a corporeal palette—blue of veins, ochre of skin, purple of bruises, crimson of tissue—the artist's chosen aesthetic is blood-bound. In keeping, the religious quality of Plowman's work is less concerned with the following of God (one he grew up with, yet abandoned) than with a profound belief in the humanity of his loved ones, be that someone he met in a life drawing class or a long-time kin. Here, humanity finds religion an empty vessel without seeing itself inside, a mere story for which to be anchored: true spirituality, however, emanates, just like the recurrent halo-shroud found in these works, from the imperfect narratives of everyday sainthood.