

The Gallery

Andrea MacGlashan

It was the middle of winter, bitterly cold and while driving to Clifton Hill, in my reliable but aging Volkswagen, I wondered why I'd agreed to go. I don't understand performance art. For one thing, why isn't it simply performance? But Gianni my life drawing teacher had invited me, and the rest of the class, to the opening of his new show. At least I didn't have to take the West Gate Bridge. Maybe it's an urban myth, but I've heard that sometimes when people jump, their bodies become trapped in the mud and it takes several days before they pop up to the surface.

I found a park several blocks from the gallery. Only it wasn't really a gallery, but one of those red clinker brick factories, languishing between occupants; the ones that artists seem to find blindfolded and convince the owner to let them have cheap for a week or so.

Retreating into an oversized brown jacket that had recently become my favourite item of clothing, I ran through the rain. I thought of my counsellor Simone. Everywhere I go I feel as if she knows exactly what I'm doing. That's the lop-sided nature of therapy. I know precious little about her and she knows everything about me. It left me feeling like I'd been flayed and had salt rubbed into the exposed flesh.

All I wanted to do was crawl onto Simone's lap and go to sleep. Not that sleep was much of a refuge.

Tonight though, I stood in the doorway of the gallery and summoned up what I hoped was a suitable face for the occasion. Inside, people sipped wine from long-stemmed glasses, ate soggy finger food and chatted. I recognised some of the regulars from Gianni's class. There was Thunderfoot, so nicknamed because when she walked past your easel you'd end up with squiggly lines. Nancy was there too. She was a petite ex-dancer who wept when she saw her grey pubic hair as she put on her knickers one morning.

Gianni and Christo, one of our regular life-models, entered the gallery from a side door. Christo climbed into a large potato sack and Gianni tied the neck closed. Gianni pushed the bag across the floor and pulled it alongside the wall. The bag morphed unceasingly, limbs straining against the fabric prison. Back across the middle of the gallery they went, the crowd parting to let the mesmerising spectacle pass. No-one said anything. A strange numbness crept up my legs until they no longer felt like they were attached to my torso. The only sound I could hear was Gianni's laboured breathing and the muffled thud of Christo's body hitting the concrete floor.

Gianni pushed and pulled for an interminable time before the

bag escaped his ministrations and moved about the room of its own volition. The collective relief of the crowd was palpable. Liberty was short-lived though. Gianni regained his hold and dragged the bag to a rope over a block and tackle suspended from the roof. Gianni tied one end of the rope around the bag and Christo's feet, the other he hauled on until most of the bag hung off the ground. I wanted to scream at Gianni to leave it be but I had shrivelled to a disembodied pair of eyes hovering above the action. The writhing in the bag increased. But no matter how frenetic its movements became, it was only ever centimetres away from its antagonist. Finally, Gianni released the bag, untied it and Christo and Gianni took a bow.

'What did you make of that?' said Nancy, standing next to me with a glass of white.

I coaxed my shoulders away from my ears and looked at the red half-moon indentations in my palms.

'I'm not too sure.' My mouth moved and words came out, but I had no idea who the voice belonged to. My hands were inflating so I shoved the left one in my pocket. The right one I ran over the slash marks I'd carved into my belly with a size eight scalpel blade earlier that day. Simone had given me her home phone number and told me to call regardless of the time. But what was the point?