

St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow

open, inclusive, welcoming

**For the Feast of the Transfiguration
St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
6th August 2020**

**Dr. Deborah Lewer on Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil,
Untitled [feet and foliage], ca. 1950
Cyanotype
©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**

1

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration today. Jesus, on a mountain, transfigured by light, suddenly radiant. Conversing impossibly with two men, prophets, from another time. His three disciples bedazzled, befuddled. How can we imagine such glory in the world we know?

Let's take a slightly different view. Not to the traditional images in art's long history, but something else. A photographic blueprint, untitled. It was made in a New York apartment, around 1950, by a pair of innovative young artists at the very start of their long careers – Susan Weil and Robert Rauschenberg. Their means for making this work was light – and its power to transform.

2

What do we see? In the loose play of scattered light, there are three pairs of feet, bare, treading softly this strange bright world. They meet on a ground that looks more like sky, like heaven, or a garden, and that is, of course, at the same time, New York in 1950. This is camera-less photography. It's an old technique, sometimes called cyanotype. Paper is chemically sensitized, objects are placed in contact with it, and when bright light falls on it, the

exposed paper reacts, slowly turning a deep blue. People have long used it to record the shape of botanical specimens. Here, these indeterminate feet tread such fragments of life, ferns, grasses and cut spring flowers. On this ground, sensitive to anything radiant, the effects of matter illumined are as miraculous as they are utterly ordinary.

3

This is a work that poses questions about painting, at a time when painters in New York were revolutionising what art could be. No hands made this image. It was taken from the ground and yet could be hung on a wall *like* a painting. How might we see it in relation to traditional art? Art has long made light the stuff of haloes and of holiness. But here, everything that casts shadow is transfigured into light: this light is all *substance* - of flesh and matter underfoot. Feet, grasses, every little seed, every tiny speck – it's all luminous. Like all photographs, it collapses time, connecting us with the trace of bodies in the past. Anyone who's ever made a cyanotype in the sun, or watched a photograph developing in the bath of a darkroom knows it's a little miraculous and a little disorienting. It's like seeing ordinary things in a new way for the first time.

4

This work does not try to picture the Transfiguration. That isn't its story. But it might remind us of light in our world. Of other feet that have trodden our ground at other times. Of the light that remains. Prophets, a teacher, friends, all seeing the light of glory even while facing the dark of confusion. The disciples were disoriented by what they saw. Words didn't make much sense. Unsullied light is perhaps hard to bear. Shadows and dark places are a more familiar part of our picture - otherwise there *is* no picture, nothing to see, no outlines of beauty. For all that we do not easily see beyond our time, perhaps this modest little blueprint, might help us glimpse that life's light rests on all ground and there is glory, ordinary and miraculous, present, whatever the day.