

How does the vicar feel about Hirst in the church? 'We're not sure we understand it'



Clergymen pondering Damien Hirst's 'The Last Supper' at St Stephen's, Islington
Timothy Allen

THE VICAR of St Stephen's chose his words carefully. Gazing at the Damien Hirst paintings lining the walls of his church in Islington, north London, the Reverend David Moore said eventually: "We are very pleased to be part of what we see as the start of a dialogue between the contemporary art world and the church."

He paused. "We're not sure we understand it but we are very happy to be part of it."

The contemporary art to which he was referring was a set of 13 paintings by Hirst entitled "The Last Supper", which are part of Art in Sacred Spaces, a three-week exhibition in 13 places of worship in London.

Hirst's work, which is being shown for the first time, looks forward to a time when humans will no longer have enough food and will subsist on a cocktail of drugs. Each painting represents a packet of pills, including omelette (each tablet contain-

BY KATE WATSON-SMYTH

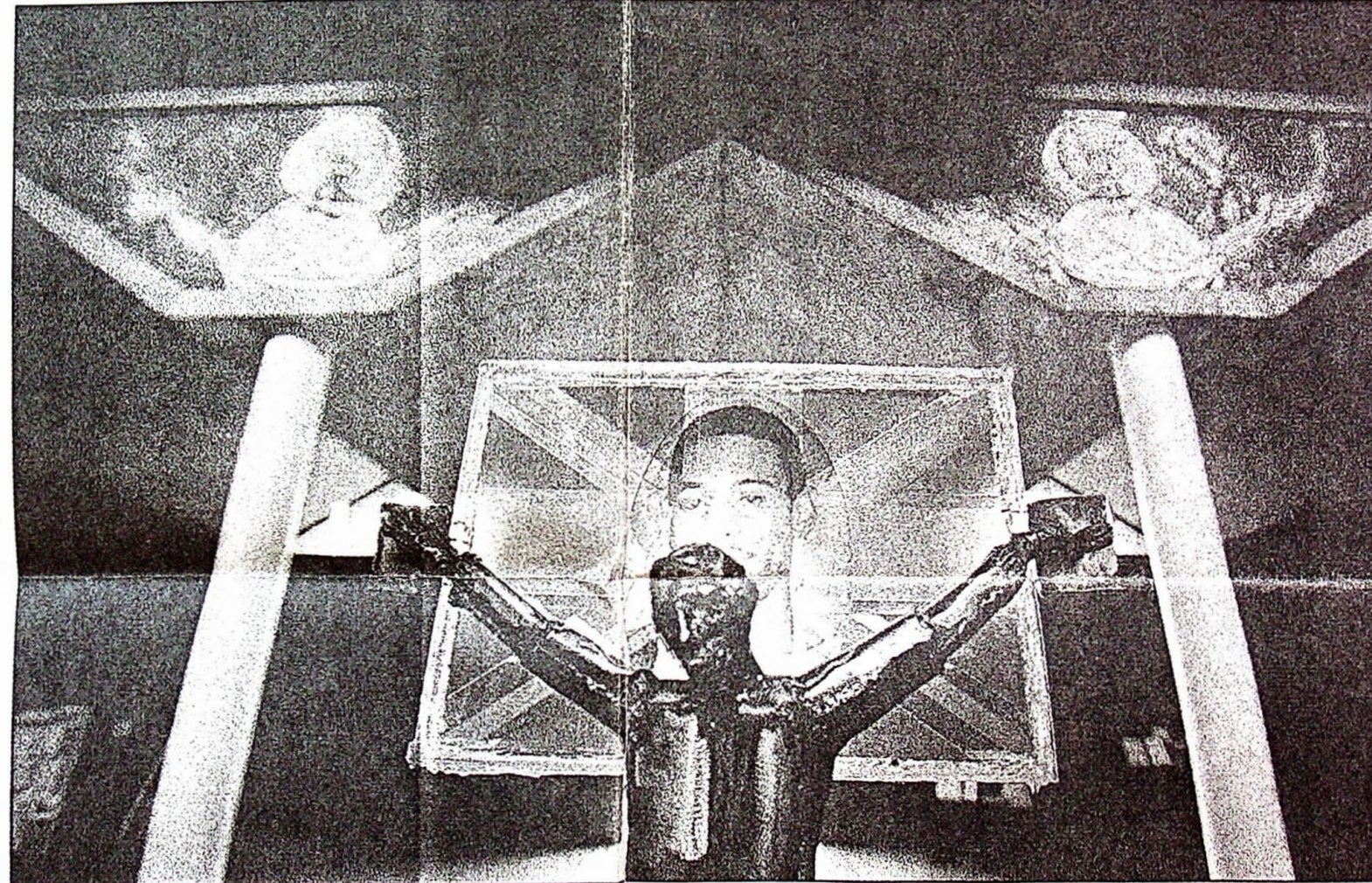
ing 8mg ondansetron), chicken (concentrated oral solution) and sandwich (270 capsules).

Anne Mullins, the project manager, said the idea for the exhibition arose last year after a group of Anglicans decided there was a lack of spiritual dimension to the millennium celebrations. "They came up with the idea of commissioning works of art for places of worship and wanted to involve other faiths as well," she said.

"It has taken about six months to put it together and some of the works are new and others, like the Hirst, are being shown for the first time.

"It was very important to us that the artists were also from different faiths and so we have Keith Khan, a Muslim, exhibiting in a church, and another group of artists in the East London Mosque."

Stuart Evans, whose law



'The Cross We Bear' by Sokari Douglas Camp has apparently not met with the approval of Stephen Lawrence's mother
Timothy Allen

firm owns the Hirst paintings, is a member of the St Stephen's congregation. "This is about a dialogue that does not often happen," he said. "A lot of people come here to worship and they are being surprised by these paintings and other people very rarely go to church and are having to come here to see this work, so

everything is seen in a different context."

One of the most controversial pieces in the exhibition, which also includes works by Tracey Emin, Rachel Whiteread and Mark Wallinger - whose life-size Christ recently adorned the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square - is on show at St Paul's Church in

Bow. "Cross We Bear", by Sokari Douglas Camp, shows a statue in the crucifix position holding up a Union Jack with Stephen Lawrence's face at the centre of the St George Cross. Ms Douglas Camp had hoped to give the work to Stephen's mother, but Doreen Lawrence is reportedly unhappy with the juxtaposition of the Union Jack and her son, who was murdered in a racist attack.

Ms Douglas Camp said yesterday: "I did not create this with the idea of making the St George Cross, which has connotations of the National Front, at the centre of the work but I can understand that people might see it that way."

"The Union Jack has been everywhere for the past five years as a symbol of the Brit-pack and the Spice Girls. Linford Christie drapes himself in

it at the end of a race and there is the National Front connection. It is a very powerful symbol and it just makes you wonder what it means."

"I simply wanted to point out that Stephen was a British boy and he was sacrificed in the same way that Christ was. Stephen was British and innocent and there was no reason for that attack and that was what I was trying to say."

Marco Ammannati has no idea what will be the reaction to his installation in the East London Mosque. He was prevented from finishing it after an anti-Islam protester broke into the mosque with a sword and police closed the building for 24 hours for security reasons. "We should have been working all through Saturday night but we will have to finish it off at the start of the week now," he said.

Everyone who has taken part in the exhibition was keen for it to be extended to other places of worship.

Paul Lowe, a spokesman for the project, said: "The church used to be the patron of the arts and a lot of work on show at Tate Britain, for example, were originally created for a church and often lose something in a neutral gallery space. This is about trying to rekindle that relationship between the two."

Of course there will always be those who would rather steer clear of that relationship altogether.

The congregation of St Mary's said they did not want the work of Damien Hirst adorning their walls and opted instead for Tracey Emin, whose previous works include the urine-stained bed covered with condoms and ash.