

# The Saturday Paper

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**THE INFLUENCE**

For artist Diego Ramirez, John Milton's charismatic Satan – the central character in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* – is a deeply resonant figure. *By Kate Holden.*

## Diego Ramirez



William Blake's *Satan Arousing the Rebel Angels* (1808), which was inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Diego Ramirez (below). CREDIT: PRINT COLLECTOR / GETTY IMAGES (ABOVE), KARL HALLIDAY (BELOW)

Diego Ramirez is a Melbourne-based artist, writer, gallerist, assessor and facilitator who directs SEVENTH Gallery and whose works have been shown at, among others, ACMI, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, West Space, Gertrude Contemporary and sites in Taipei, Milan, Los Angeles, Tijuana and Hong Kong. In text, installation, video or performance, his work circulates around the idea of the Fall as a melancholic, melodramatic or supernatural expression of political and environmental dynamics. *Vampires of the Earth*, an exhibition inspired by the social media surounding petroleum company Pemex's fire in the Gulf of Mexico in 2021, will be showing at MARS Gallery in Melbourne, from April 27 to May 20.

**Kate Holden** is the author of *The Winter Road*, winner of the 2021 Walkley Book Award and the 2022 NSW Premier's Literary Awards Douglas Stewart Prize for Nonfiction.

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Ramirez chose to speak about English writer John Milton's epic 1667 poem, *Paradise Lost*.

**Tell me about your work, and how Milton fits into it.**

I spent a period of experimentation bouncing around themes of otherness and institutional critique. There was a lack of focus in the work. Then I came to this idea of the Fall, which can be a narrative device when a character experiences a fall from grace. It's also a Christian concept: Satan fell from heaven. I don't really work with a moralistic idea of the Fall; I'm interested in the kinds of relationships that unfold within the notion. Much of my work takes place in galleries and mostly I use relics associated with darkness. Which is quite pertinent to something like *Paradise Lost*.

**Why did you first read the poem?**

I was researching the lure of Satan and trying to understand where different aspects of depictions of the Devil come from. Something I couldn't find in the sources was the emotional and psychological aspect of what it meant for Satan to fall. Growing up, I always heard this idea that Lucifer – which is the name of Satan before the Fall; he was the angel Lucifer – felt envy for humans and rebelled against God. He never stood a chance. He fell and now he's consumed by bitterness and defeat. I was searching and searching, and *Paradise Lost* kept coming up. I wouldn't blame anyone who hasn't read it, because it's such a pain in the ass!

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I think anyone who has ever been involved in anything that requires a group of people to come together has met someone who is on a quest to acquire power. It's just inevitable. *Paradise Lost* really documents, in the figure of Satan, the inner dialogue of someone who is on that journey and how they manipulate others to get there. He was at one point the best angel, a virtuous figure. So Satan manipulates a legion of angels to rebel ... and once he has lost everything, he has to do this incredibly petty thing, which is to fuck with Adam and Eve, right? It's incredibly petty. So the figure of Satan is huge but he's also really small.

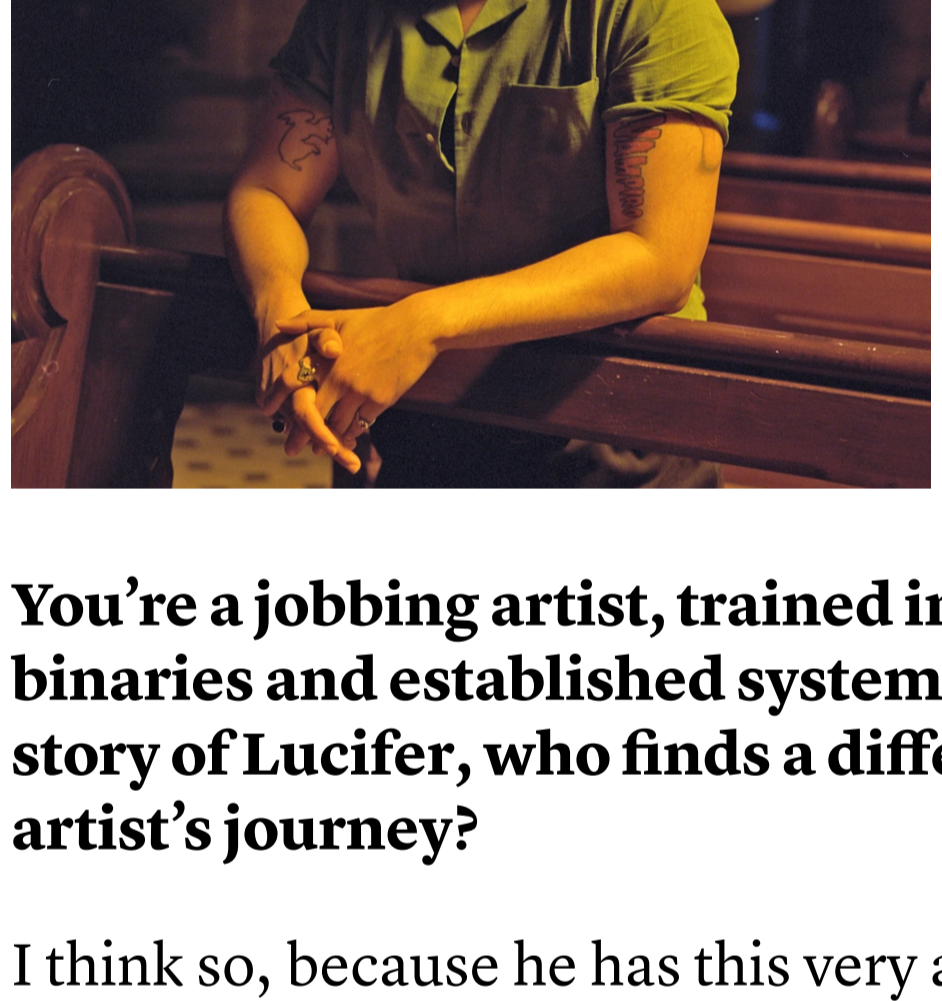
John Milton lived during the reign of Charles I. Charles was beheaded and Cromwell took over and created a sort of concentrated democracy which then became just another autocratic institution. So Charles II came back to the monarchy. John Milton was left in this place where he'd made all these pamphlets advocating for the assassination of Charles I. Milton was pardoned. But you imagine that, being involved with the revolution, he encountered a lot of corruption and disappointment – because it didn't work. They beheaded the king, instigated a Puritan government and then the same thing happened again. So you're talking about an old, destitute man, writing his last work: and it's *Paradise Lost*.

**Is this, then, a cautionary story against positive narratives of the power of dissent?**

This book was written at a time when you couldn't criticise the things that Milton is criticising. It's a successful tale of dissent because he got away with it. He participated in the beheading of a king and he got pardoned and then wrote this incredibly subversive book. God is depicted as a monarch and Satan is not a democrat but is definitely a parliamentarian. Milton created a kind of fan fiction of the Bible at a time when the Bible was an important text. And placed Satan as the hero of the story.

**Do you find Satan sympathetic?**

He has very high qualities and very low qualities: he is a hero in many respects, and embodies important notions about freedom and liberation in the West. But at the same time the most complex thing about Satan in that book is that he expresses the pain of standing for one's beliefs. He speaks about the pain of bullying. It becomes the thing of, it's "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven". And he makes a point: now he's king of this underworld but there's the pain of having lost what he had. That ambivalence and ambiguity is really productive and stands outside of binary conceptions of what's good and bad.



**You're a jobbing artist, trained in institutions, working against binaries and established systems, so what do you take from the story of Lucifer, who finds a different way? Is that also an artist's journey?**

I think so, because he has this very ambivalent relationship to institutions. He both promotes heaven and hates heaven; he knows that he's lost, but he portrays something different. It's a never-ending push and pull. Like a lot of artists, they're attracted to an institution. They want to work with it, they want to work against it, they want to work for it. Making an object that can hold the discomfort, it's an interesting mechanism that I learned from *Paradise Lost*.

**Does *Vampires of the Earth* continue an interest in these antiheroes as expressions of useful dissent?**

Satan and the vampire have things in common: they're both romantic heroes. Vampires have this thing they call the "dark gift". They're immortal, they're very powerful. But then with that comes the pain of everyone dying around them. So dissent, it's a gift and a curse.

They're also both very extractive. Lucifer extracts a lot from heaven, he literally brought down a legion of angels. A vampiric, a dynamic where they're feeding on someone else. That's what humans do. We're always taking resources, exploiting whatever we encounter.

There's extraction of natural resources but there's also extraction of emotional resources by positioning yourself as a virtuous person, by engaging in an emotional dialogue which you're not interested in participating in. It's connected to *Paradise Lost*, because that's what Satan does, he relies on speeches that give him a veneer of righteousness but really he's just on a self-serving mission. It's the same with energy companies. It's never ending. Then I come in, and make a show about it... One cannot say "that's bad and I'm good", because it's a continuum. So that is the basis of the show: a tear of blood that's dripping, and a tear of oil that's dripping.

It's a question of judgement. Are demons really that bad? In *Paradise Lost*, God is a bit of a tyrant. What are you going to do? Why is this system in place when there could be something different? Unfortunately Satan was self-serving – but there are two sides to the story.

This article was first published in the print edition of *The Saturday Paper* on April 22, 2023 as "Diego Ramirez".

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