

Exhibition Guide

Cornelia Parker *Never Endings*

26 September – 18 November 2007

First and Second Floor Galleries

Cornelia Parker's association with Ikon is longstanding. In 1983, as an emerging artist, she took part in a group exhibition, *Sculpture by Women*, and five years later presented her acclaimed installation *Thirty Pieces of Silver* at the gallery's old premises on Birmingham's John Bright Street. In 2000, she was commissioned by Ikon to produce *Meteorite Lands in Birmingham's Bullring*, a fireworks display that marked the arrival of the new millennium with the explosion of an extraterrestrial object. Now she returns to present *Never Endings*, her first survey of new and recent work in the UK since 1998. Characteristically ambitious in both form and content, it consists of installation, sculpture, photography, sound and video.

On entering the First Floor Galleries, visitors encounter *Endless Column III*. Introducing the theme of the exhibition, this work makes reference to the *Endless Column* of Constantin Brancusi, a seminal work in the history of modernist sculpture. Instead of producing an upright totem we see a horizontal row of fourteen crushed, silver-plated objects. Flattened by a 250 ton industrial press and now hovering 11 centimetres above the ground, the once proud and confident shapes have been transformed into a floating line drawn across the space. Whilst gravity was harnessed to create the work itself, *Endless Column III* seems to resist this fundamental force.

Such an engagement with natural phenomena is central to Parker's practice. Moving through the gallery, visitors encounter a series of works that at once challenge assumptions about the extent to which matter can be manipulated, giving rise to a wealth of possible meanings. In *Pulled Tooth Drawing*, reclaimed dental gold has been drawn into wire, as have the bullets in *Bullet Drawings* so that objects with a clear function become basic materials again. In both *Measuring Liberty with a Dollar* and *Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon* the length of the resulting wire is the height of the statue and the waterfall respectively. In this way, Parker does not simply deconstruct things in order to present them in a different light but instead,

plays with our collective consciousness of key landmarks or events. The universal ideal of freedom inherent in the *Statue of Liberty* is thrown into stark relief by the malleability of a silver dollar, a unit of the currency of the world's most powerful nation. The notion of measuring liberty, and likewise attempting to measure the enormity of Niagara Falls against an everyday teaspoon, is both poignant and knowingly absurd.

The traces of an actual event are often vital to the resonance of Parker's work. In *Shared Fate (Oliver)*, an *Oliver Twist* doll has been sliced in two by the guillotine that chopped off Marie Antoinette's head, the cartoon-like gesture of the act jarring with the gruesome violence of the blade. The smudged marks on the handkerchiefs that make up *Stolen Thunder* were created when the fabric was rubbed against the tarnished metallic belongings of various historical figures – Charles Dickens' knife, Horatio Nelson's candlestick, the inside of a suit of armour belonging to Henry VIII. Just as the perception of a religious artefact is transformed by belief in its reality, Parker's treatment of the objects she selects often plays off the possibility of cliché that characterises cultural memorabilia.

Other objects that Parker chooses – 'found' or 'readymade' – are relatively untouched. *Blue Shift* features the actual dress worn by Mia Farrow in the film *Rosemary's Baby*, seen here as a ghostly silhouette. *Shadow of a Doubt* levitates wood reclaimed from a ghost town in Texas. *Embryo Firearms* consists of two Colt 45 guns, showing the objects taken from the production line, just before they would be officially classified as weapons. The titles of these works are followed by the artist's brief description, balancing the poetic with the pragmatic, thereby emphasising the reality of something that captures our imagination.

Parker's shows us inert things that have a secret life, all sorts of embodied narratives. In *Subconscious of a Monument*, we see suspended clods of earth extracted from underneath the Leaning Tower of Pisa during conservation work undertaken to prevent the building from collapsing. Our mental images of a fine piece of architecture contrast dramatically with a room full of everyday dirt. Similarly, upstairs, *Heart of Darkness* comprises countless bits of burnt timber, the charred remains of a devastating forest fire that happened in Florida in 2004. Started by the US Forestry Department as a routine 'controlled burn', it quickly began to rage out of control, to the extent that the resulting wildfire is remembered as the 'Impassable One'. Now a three-dimensional drawing, a suspended cube of charcoal, the work is a quiet resurrection, its delicate nature at odds with the violent event that created it.

Impending environmental disaster is something that particularly concerns this artist. In contrast to previous work that explores how we are all subject to unstoppable

natural forces, Parker now focuses her attention on the destruction wrought by humankind – a ‘quieter apocalypse... the chance that the planet may not be able to sustain human life by the end of this century’.

It is this idea of an apocalypse that prompted Parker to request an interview with the American philosopher Noam Chomsky. The result is exhibited here as *Chomskian Abstract*, a conversation transformed into a soliloquy – as Parker’s questions are edited out – concerned with ecology in the light of various observations on the nature of democracy, consumerism, individual responsibility and the exploitation of fear in a post-Cold War world.

As Parker’s questions are removed from *Chomskian Abstract*, so too is the subject of *Killing Time*. This video is an assemblage of filmed footage the artist took on four consecutive days at an unspecified location in the American landscape. We witness a group of tourists waiting, watching with cameras ready to capture a breathtaking event. They are expectant in this situation, full of anticipation, talking about something they are sure is imminent. It could be feeding-time at the zoo or some astronomical lift-off – it could be the end of the world.

Brontëan Abstracts, in the last gallery on the second floor, is the outcome of Cornelia Parker’s time spent at the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, West Yorkshire. Her forensic interest in the stuff of the Brontës’ lives is clear – photographs taken through an electron microscope capture, in acute detail, the distressed surfaces of the nibs of the Brontës’ quill pens and their hair, the incidental traces of their needlework. There are other magnified images of words deleted and amended from Charlotte’s original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*.

Nearby we have the opportunity to view a video interview with a 90 year old woman, Phyllis, who claims to be a descendent of Branwell Brontë and to hear the commentary of two psychics as they proceed through the rooms of the Brontë family home. The vibrations they pick up seem to substantiate Phyllis’s claim.

How close can we get to the stories of the Brontë family is the question Parker is asking. In this, as in all areas of her enquiry, she suggests that the search is never-ending.