

EDEL ASSANTI

Materials, Meaning and Monuments – Elizabeth Nielson

Written by Elizabeth Neilson and published in 2009.

Jodie Carey is concerned with an everyday, incomprehensible occurrence. The environments and combinations of elements she composes are monuments to an inevitable process. They are structures for remembering what so many of us choose to forget - that we are mortal, and for all our posturing and civilising ways, we are all destined for the same end. As far as we are aware, human beings are the only species that remain conscious of the inevitability of death and therefore have the capacity not just to acknowledge its possibility but to simultaneously ignore it. It is this very conundrum that makes us human and lies at the heart of Carey's practice.

Throughout the history of western art and literature humans have sought ways of understanding and of coping with the duality of life and death. Each culture has developed its own way of managing not just the practical disposal of physical remains but emotionally and communally the metaphysical incarnations of death, via rituals for bereavement and monuments for mourning and remembering. Carey's practice addresses the British traditions and rituals surrounding the death of a loved one. She highlights the interrelationships between beauty and repulsion, the absurd and the sombre, the banal and the unique in such a way as the humour of the human condition can be exposed whilst allowing us to see the beauty and significance of the personal anguish at hand.

The visceral experience of Carey's work, whether visual, physical, olfactory or emotional is related to both its conceptual content and its composition. On encountering the work one is met with a spectacular duality of materials and form. Her stock mediums: plaster, used newspapers, human hair, dust, feathers, animal bones, sugar, blood, fat and found ready-mades all come with their own plethora of art historical references, empirical associations and meanings. These unaesthetic, organic materials are not historically considered appropriate for art, let alone monumental sculptures and it is clear from such defiant choices that any examination of the artist's work must begin with these materials and their significance. The coupling of beauty and ugliness is central to these choices and creates a tension between Life and Death – Eros and Thanatos – attraction and repulsion. The viewer is pulled in close towards the work, fascinated by the form and the artistry, then pushed back by the sudden realization of the material. Animal skeletons are left with flesh clinging to them, feathers are smeared with blood and faecal matter, icing is matted with hair.

The trio of chandeliers that constitute *In The Eyes of Others* contain 9,000 hand-cast plaster bones. Each one weighs approximately one tonne, making their suspension an immense physical feat and undertaking. Carey has worked with trinities of chandeliers earlier in her practice - *Untitled Chandeliers* (2007) is similarly scaled but

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this time constructed from dust which was collected from vacuum cleaners and manually rolled into centimetre round balls suspended from wire frames. They are horrifying dreadlocks of dust and matter. For her installation at Towner, Carey has moved away from the precarious organic matter and focused on the monumental use of plaster, a fragile and brittle material most often employed for sculptural sketches rather than the finished work. Around the trinity of chandelier sculptures are piled boxes of yellowing discarded newspapers, crumpled and creased through use, their content voiced by inch high headlines.

Like the space in which these works are exhibited, the newspaper is the carrier of everyday moral tales and teachings. The contemporary art gallery, as Brian O'Doherty asserts in his 1976 essay, *Inside the White Cube*, has taken on the sanctity of the church, mimicking the architectural effects, effectively keeping the real world out and allowing a hermetically sealed environment in which an art work can exert its message un-impinged by the chaos of the outside world. Arguably, over the centuries in the western world, culture has replaced religion as the controlling force; western 'civilisation' is demarcated by the importance given to art and literature over folklore and craft. The communication of moral dilemmas is now shown in the public art gallery or through the media rather than in the house of a god. The newspaper, in its declining printed form, has taken on the moral rectitude of the church; asserting clear moral positions and insights that are the antithesis of its impartial role to provide news. The Daily Mail, a paper which Carey makes free use of in her work, whether painted with blood before being cut and curled into funereal floral displays, strewn throughout the space or stacked in boxes as high as the ceiling, holds an experience that is both communal and individual at its core. The same news is read by tens of thousands of people, but they read it alone whilst they go about their life, their outlook and position in the world mediated by the voice of the editor. Today these printed papers disseminate many of the most harrowing images of death that we experience. The still image is somehow more acceptable than the moving when it comes to the depiction of human devastation; from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany via the killing fields of Cambodia to the more recent terrorist attacks, the images of exposed bodies, bones and mass graves are at once utterly shocking yet distant from the western individual viewing the super-real suffering from the comfort of their daily ritual. The newspaper is an inherently disposable medium inciting an emotional response before being discarded or recycled.

The actual experience of death is not something one can know but rather something that one can empathise with. In *The Daily Mail* (2005), Carey's graduating show from Goldsmiths in 2005, enormous memorial bouquets of handmade flowers, reminiscent of those found in churches, flourish in their fragile state. Each sepia toned petal and leaf meticulously crafted from the pages of the name checked paper is coated in ritualistic fluids; tea, coffee or more ominously, blood, seemingly on the cusp of

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disintegrating into dust at the slightest touch. Later works incorporate fat on baking parchment, creating translucent blooms, heady with the scent of animal bi-product. Her *Memento Mori*'s seethe with references, they are both the fat and blood that make up the flesh of the unseen and unknown departed, and the obituary to anonymous lost lives. They conjure the cup of morning coffee over which the paper is read and news communicated, or the incessant kettle boiling of a British wake where tea is synonymous with sympathy. The newsprint paper itself signifies a demographic stereotype - the mythic 'Middle England' with a right wing political inclination and propensity for celebrity gossip. Public and private behaviours are craftily intertwined, the personal and political - staples of Feminist art practice - reworked to become a never-land of the two. Non-judgemental and open to subjective interpretation, the work treads a line that allows the viewer to complete them prompting "a chemical reaction in the psyche of the visitor."¹

The monument has both the purpose to recall past actions and to enforce a certain behaviour on the visitor. Etymologically derived from the Latin *monere*, meaning to remind or warn, monuments are often produced to commemorate an event, a person of societal importance or a pre-existing site that has become venerated by a particular social group. Altering an items size, making it monumental, raises its importance or diminishes the importance of the viewer. *Untitled Monument (2007)*, an enormous tiered construction of three thousand hand-cast and sanded plaster bones, is reminiscent of a gigantic wedding cake or a novelty tomb for a celebrity pooch. Standing three meters high and almost the same in diameter, it occupies the space with a monumental presence. Whilst the bones, (cartoon-like in their repetition and monochrome whiteness) make fun of themselves, the humour is short-lived. Trailing over its balconies are tendrils of sugar- paste foliage and flowers; weaving life and death, weddings and funerals, celebration and mourning with such empathetic subtlety and unwavering technical ability as to make the joke serious. In the companion work *Untitled Shield (2007)* the same white bones are this time iced, decorated with a novice hand in the marbled brown and white pattern one would find on a supermarket mille-feuille.

In *Untitled Installation (2007)* a series of five cenotaphs brusquely divide a gallery space. The two and a half meter high slabs, their commemorative function unclear, are constructed from cooking lard, a product less used by today's health conscious middle classes. Mounted upon them, hanging weightlessly like ghosts, are enormous arrangements of dry thin paper flowers. These wreath-like creations evoke the enduring Still Life genre, which has often sought to capture a fleeting moment that embodies the human experience.

Specifically Carey work references the *Vanitas* paintings from the 17th century onwards, which are replete with images of bombastic flower arrangements

¹ Joseph Beuys, from Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys We Go This Way*, Violette Editions, 1998, p301

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overflowing onto ornate tables, seemingly lustrous. Closer inspection reveals flora frequently browning at the edges, insects crawling in their leaves, and burrowing into sensual blooms, petals falling forlornly onto pristine marble surfaces. If understood through a Christian lens, the *Memento Mori* serves to emphasize the emptiness and fleetingness of earthly pleasures, material luxuries and social achievements. Images of recently snuffed out candles, plates of decaying food and vases of rotting flowers are an invitation to focus one's thoughts on the importance of living (in religious terms) a pure and godly life. But in secular circles, the message is more idealistic; to value what life offers while one can, because there is no guarantee of anything 'on the other side'. Carey's sculptural assemblages are concerned with the issue that can take a lifetime to accept; that we will all one day return to whence we came. Sadly in western society the reality of death is more often than not understood as a tragedy, a catastrophe that decimates and unhinges rather than a rationalising force that helps us makes sense of our lives. Carey's work makes no attempt to understand or explain the mysteries of death and the afterlife, rather it exposes the matters of everyday life but a question lingers in the ether - is there a life after death? We, the witnesses that carry on, are living prove that there is.