

BARBARA NICHOLLS

BORDERS, CODES & CROSSINGS

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"¹

TS Eliot

What is intriguing about Barbara Nicholls' work is its ability to be read across different artistic categories and referential contexts. This richness owes much to how Nicholls employs a multiplicity of resources and points of departure, providing for the viewer a diverse, engaging, allusive range of meanings and effects. The artist's works allude to many different things, amongst which are created flowers, torn and folded fabrics, maps, codes, borders, crossings, archaeological fragments and ruptured forms. One might extend the list, one's imagination driven to overdrive, or in any case unable to settle upon a single, tightly contained referent or sharply delimited meaning.

To find an appropriate way of classifying Nicholls' practice makes is challenging. Much of this recent work appears to evade categorisation and even those pieces that seem to fit into predetermined types of artwork are revealed, upon later inspection, as deceptive. In this latter grouping, for example, are a number of 'paintings' that turn out not to be paintings at all in the usual sense of the term. Paint may have played some part in the fabrication but so has a glut of substances and techniques not strictly linked to painting as an act of accumulation and overlay. Processes such as routing or cutting into the surface of the support, sanding, scratching and patching up the troughs made by the router also play their part. Three dimensional forms in wood, paper or card have been added, and in some cases placed so that they project from the surface, the whole piece being thus located somewhere between painting and sculpture.

One thinks of the expression 'artifice' rather than 'art', and this is fitting at a time when the art world is increasingly becoming part of the entertainment or service industries, art as a separate sphere being negatively reinvented as mere frippery or distraction. In her working and reworking of the discrete elements in her output, Nicholls foregrounds both the multiple stages of the action of making and the passing of time, the work-time coefficient, as it were, of the artistic act. Making visible how something has been put together involves a Brechtian disruption of the artist's supposed magic touch. This consciously reflexive approach is one in which the cliché of art as magic, as the easy projection of genius-artists, is most assiduously disavowed.

If Nicholls' work is neither painting nor sculpture, one might yet designate it as 'assemblage' or 'collage' or as 'relief'. These terms are again misleading; the work touches on aspects of all of these yet the artist operates across and around such artistic modes. Perhaps the most useful framework here would be to recognise and respect what is in fact a heterogeneous practice that is established in between other clearly delineated forms. 'Interdisciplinarity', writes Roland Barthes, 'is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down'.² This compound term may be a clumsy one but it

helpfully serves to summarise practices that draw on numerous materials and technical means so as to formulate a hitherto undesignated object or work, one 'obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories' (Barthes). This seems to me to perfectly fit Nicholls' practice.

Another phrase borrowed from Barthes also reads as though it had been conceived so as to précis this artist's approach, which may be regarded as that of 'a playing; the generation of the perpetual signifier...a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations.' For Nicholls' way of working is indeed a kind of narrative of multiple tasks applied to disparate structures. The project of work is open, exploratory or heuristic, but the achieved results are as much the product of intelligent decision making as they are of techniques carried out or tested in situ. Much of Nicholls' output is art at one remove from 'art'. These works can be thought of as propositions and not as fixed and finished things. Although they have the demeanour of 'works in progress' and are thereby open to conceptual or mental actions of rearrangement, each piece has in fact reached its optimum state of resolution. This balance, between a condition implying malleability and transformation, and one that sees the work as having been taken to a moment of productive stasis is, one suspects, very difficult to achieve.

What makes Nicholls' work so generously open-ended is, to a degree, the way that she has brought together such a mix of liquids, paints, papers, boards and sundry fragments, unafraid to use them all at once. This combinatory, ludic and material assembling and disassembling – that last term being imbued with just the right weight of ambiguity with respect to its present usage – is only, it should be noted, part of the picture. Considerable weight should also be given to other resources of which Nicholls' practice is put together. These are the intellectual, historical or referential components from which the artist has produced this body of work. Once again such elements have about them a sense of intelligent eclecticism. In his book on that most perceptive philosopher of ruin and redemption, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Missac has observed that 'Originating in the category of the saturnine, ruins are closely connected with allegory, which they situate outside beauty...ruins and an abandoned construction site both have the air of a villa that has been burglarised, the air Cocteau attributed to the Roman Forum...'³ Such remarks on allegory and ruin are not a little pertinent to Nicholls' compacted accumulations, for her works suggest that the loss and, importantly, the retrieval of reference, sense and meaning has, as with the physical stuff out of which the works have been made, undergone a process of reclamation and reconstitution. Allegory, unlike symbolism, directs one to a range of open conditions, to historically-determined parallels and to cultural positions void of fixity and direct (but thereby dead) inference. The general form of what Nicholls presents to us in *Borders, Codes & Crossings* is allegorical through and through, suggesting productive connections with disciplines such as archaeology, cartography, the navigating of strange geographies and labyrinthine trails. The histories and correspondences thrown up by this practice may be fabulous fictions or sharply delineated transpositions of actual states but, in the end, what Nicholls has fabricated are machines with which to make meanings. These latter are pointed to, implied rather than asserted, marked out and charged up, but never dryly laid out.

There is a level at which the formal structures and arrangements, out of which the works are composed, run in tandem with what one sees in or on the works themselves. This is, for the most part, less to do with making images than with types of activities: cutting into a solid surface or carefully sanding down projecting particles of wood call up acts of examination employed by

archaeologists or criminal investigators looking for clues. The devil, to coin a phrase, is in the detail but the currency must ultimately be within the results of these actions, laborious work being no guarantee of aesthetic or artistic success. If the results of a process such as fixing thin coloured string between stacked bands of painted card reminds the viewer of a segment torn from a disintegrating building, such troubled architecture may indeed be one source for what the artist has made. But Nicholls' concern is not verisimilitude, and we should not attempt to judge her on such comparisons. One has to take Nicholls' practice on its own terms, recognise that the range of allusions made are ways into the work, not 'truths' that are being uncovered or pinned down. It is with regard to its own very distinct, frenetic and febrile achievements that this complicated and engaging work must be considered and assessed.

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1. TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, included in TSE, *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, Faber, 1936 and subsequent editions, p.77.
2. This and the following quotations from Roland Barthes are from his essay *From Work to Text*, included in RB, *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, 1977.
3. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, MIT, 1995, p.168.