

“What Passing-Bells.....”

The subject of Barbara Nicholls’ exhibition is war and memories of war, not perceived head-on but obliquely and from distances beyond her own life time. The work engages with a reparative archaeological process in which she uses her material literally to stitch together fragments of memory and to represent war in a range of material analogies.

In tradition seers have expressed war in images of darkening skies, gathering clouds distant thunder and lightening flashes from the gods or they have tried to peer into the darkness beyond their astronomical charts to divine those malformations and suppurations of energy that might warn us of future calamities. But when major calamities such as great wars do come they come blindingly as huge white light, sublime and beyond our powers with word or image. If we hold, before this unseeable light, the prisms of human sensibility and intellect, we can perceive some aspects of meaning however distorted in the refractions. Nicholls offers us one such aspect, sensitively but robustly perceived.

We are all aware of the heroic and romantic foreground of war, the experimental field of a thousand novels and the many ‘history paintings’ in our culture; the dashing major; the handsome young subaltern, the plucky ‘Tommy’ whistling to the Front; the unfurling standard, the captain’s ‘whistle’ and the wild attack “over the top” . Behind this romantic foreground we recoil from the terrible stains of the ‘Abject’: the stinking merciless putrefaction, the pulse of purple blood; the dead surprised faces of boys; the mire of the abattoir, the lines of dead and the busted sphincter; the sewn elbow and the empty trouser leg. All this is carried in the bitter ironies of poets like Wilfred Owen who ask us to compare the religious liturgies of our civilisations with the baser rituals of the abattoir in the line that Nicholls takes as the title for her exhibition:

“What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?”

However, her concerns are not the bitter paradoxes of the ironic, rather the reparative powers of what I could call the ‘post ironic’. After a time, and that time was before the artist’s lifetime, ironies become cold and lifeless in the ground because we move on in our history and the new ironies emerge in response to different political worlds. The abject is also filtered out of the soil by time, rain and happy harvests, and what is left are mere traces from the artist’s archaeological trowel. Memories remain still in the recorded voices of veterans; the enduring disciplines and exactitudes of armies; in the flotsam and jetsam still heard in the earth waiting to be gathered up and sewn together in a quieter and more respectful memorial.

Nicholls’ processes produce powerful work which plays with remnants and bits of memorabilia and the idea of forgotten landscapes now marked by gentler ploughs and more creative industries. I think it would be wrong to over-theorise this work; to try to construct some reductive explanatory tool because the work is various and offers us

aspects of aesthetic perception which brook no common denominator. We realise memories of great calamities are often incomprehensible and vague or where they are exact are merely routine and descriptive. The memories of the veterans she records are touchingly human islands of exactitude, detail and humanity of feeling floating in great oceans of the imagined and the half-forgotten. So what is shown here varies in both scope and intensity; there is light and dark, tenderness of heart and bleaker hints of the abject.

There is also in parts a strong femininity, not feminist in any political sense, but the ability to see in visual metaphor the ache of female loss and pride expressed in her reparative forms. In the memorial roundels we see womans' reconstructions of the memory of love not unlike the little shrines one finds in Spanish cemeteries.

There is a powerful sense of healing and repair, rather like some of Louise Bourgeois' work but less personal and self reverential; the signal here is more powerful and universal. In other pieces she plays with the idea of a ribbon army, a wandering floor-standing sculptural line, gaily coloured as a metal ribbon. Here there is a hint of ironic humour but also the terrible perception that the line is made up of men; in Wilfred Owen's own words:

**“Men, gaps for filling:
Losses, who might have fought
Longer; but no one bothers”.**

Again in the large “Trench Dreams” piece we are given striking jagged scars of trench forms, almost Vorticist in energy, but the scars of an old dead war. What is startling here and so imaginative is the way she has stitched into these scars the traces of flesh, the DNA that still remains under the fields of the Somme and Normandy. In the large ‘Forcefield’ work we are given a landscape of constructed tent canvas and linen in which the pastures and the plants of peacetime are peeled and flayed away to reveal a grid of lost cartographies and calibrations of a war zone.

In the finely produced black and white photographs the artist again turns away from Medusa's gaze, only to engage it in the reflective shield of metaphor; a metaphor of petrification; an old worked-out quarry, the arena for dead piles of sandstone off-cuts, useless bones abandoned in the past by the masons selecting the building blocks of our future. She moves in a more cosmic mode in the sky piece in which the unreadable stars which fired the ancients become more like the holes in a blanket, leaden loops of guy-rope; the great tent of the sky becomes literally that; a tent contrasting silk and lead, the reality of the dreaming soldier guyed fast to an earthy hell. The ‘passing-bells’ that Nicholls offers are carefully constructed and respectful reparations. All wounds are healed and passions spent and control is ritualised in art to articulate in some degree the Sublime and what is beyond saying. We are also made aware that the stitches of discipline and control, however firm, will again unravel, decay and be buried in the eruptions of some future cataclysm. It is this discipline and order, the Apollonian impulses of creativity in the teeth of the uncontrollable Furies that her work celebrates and which define humanity. The way she uses simple lusty and earthy materials, rope tenting canvas sacking guy-ropes and eyelets to express profound relationships, owes something to Arte Povera, though to me, more earnest and diligently worked.

Finally I believe Nicholls intuitively realises that art, like religion, cannot remain imbedded in abjection even though to 'stuff' we must return and this is an area of fascination for many contemporary artists. I think she knows that the achievements of culture provide 'ladders' for us to climb out of our base materiality. We may climb the ladder of romance, heroism, the critical and ironical intellect, the rungs of humour or the dangerous heights of the sublime; we may even climb the ladder of intellectualised abjection from which we drive back into our own dung. The ladder we are given here is one of respectful remembrance, of 'stuff' transformed and purified by time and reconstructed by an aesthetic archaeology; 'passing-bells' for brave and fearful men caught helpless in the furies. However, stuff and material remain always and in the end our efforts to transcend them must both fail and endlessly continue and that is what marks the human spirit. I feel the artist would agree with Yeats:

“.....Now that my ladder's gone'
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”

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