

THIS IS WHAT ART CAN DO: Justin Carter in Bellahouston by Johnny Rodger

 Johnny Rodger

Justin Carter's recent show '*between objects and things*' at the Studio Pavilion Gallery in Bellahouston Park, reviewed by Johnny Rodger

Art exists to explore and test what it is, or what it might be, to be human in this world. For a long time, popular opinion was that art consisted entirely of painting, but of course, there are numberless media – poetry, performance, music, sculpture, installation, prose, architecture, to name but a few – which as art bring the viewer, the listener or somehow user into relation with some special aspect of the human condition. I find the best art does that in a unique way every time, which seems to imprint something into our sensibility and sometimes also our intellect, that changes our standpoint, our awareness, our outlook – our life, in effect.

The wonderful thing about that infinite number of media is what it means for the range of everyday forms, methods and processes that are ready to hand for the artist, and how those arguably give art an edge over operations in other fields concerned similarly with the human condition, namely science and religion.

Nor does art necessarily need great infrastructure – complex buildings, lengthy education programmes – or funding to establish its presence and its progress. Indeed, one of the most exquisite iterations of that edge can be seen, made from the simplest materials – paper and ink – in the humblest of buildings – an old agricultural outhouse – currently on show in Justin Carter's *between objects and things* at the heritage centre in the courtyard next to the Studio Pavilion Gallery in Bellahouston Park. In this show you might go as far as to assert that, tiny, handmade, simple and delicate though its objects are, it boldly takes part in the above argument to the extent that it at once transcends and resolves one great debate of our time. Namely the impasse between the creationists and the evolutionists over the beginnings of life on our planet. It's a big claim to make for it, yet if the creationists believe supernatural forces and otherworldly spiritual power provoke life into the world, where the evolutionists see long slow concentrated processes with rational explanations overlapping and working together, then art can play the heretic to such dualism. As seen through this exemplary show, it can also work patiently through a dense serial and parallel set of processes, and at the same time conjure up – apparently out of nothing – a unique and most unexpected product which somehow manifests as more than the sum of its inputs.

THESE WORDS USED TO BE SCULPTURE

How does it do that? The object of Carter's work neither belongs to him, nor was it created by him. It is an abstract steel sculpture, *Paul's Turn* made by the artist Anthony Caro in 1971 in his son's name (Paul Caro, born 1958). The sculpture had sat outside in the sculpture courtyard at the Hunterian Museum at Glasgow University since 1982. Carter had visited the sculpture there on numerous occasions and observed that the outdoor conditions – Glasgow weather! – were causing some fairly serious rust on the piece.

Caro was well known for doing away with the plinth in his sculptural work, he preferred his works to be indoors, and was not particularly interested in his works' environments, nor had he planned nor, indeed, even envisioned that the work here would inevitably change if, as a steel piece – it were left outside in that particular environment. Carter noticed on successive visits that the rust from the sculpture was washing into the ground around it and staining that ground. Carter remarks that iron oxide – rust – is a compound which is also a major constituent part of blood. He refers to the sculpture as 'bleeding' into the ground, and he started to gather flakes and chips of fallen rust – which he calls 'scabs' – as they had fallen from the work.

In the meanwhile, Anthony Caro died in 2013 – though his son is still alive. Carter ground up some of the rust flakes and made an ink from them (he later used this ink to make some of the pieces in this show) and he wrote a letter with it to the Anthony Caro Foundation explaining the deteriorating condition of the sculpture. As such, and by his own conception, he had written to them in blood, the blood of the work that was dedicated by Caro to his son. Was that then, some kind of proof, like a letter from a kidnapper or blackmailer, a blood-libel shibboleth? Did the trustees of the foundation wonder at the status of this letter? Was somebody holding the work to weird critical ransom? The Foundation did not reply to that letter. After a while the sculpture was removed by the Foundation – for repair, it is said – but it never returns. The site at the Hunterian is now empty, the work/object is absent.

As such Carter meets this work of Caro's in a number of particular conditions: firstly, hidden away (in a difficult to access and little visited sculpture courtyard); in deterioration, haemorrhaging into its surroundings; unacknowledged, forgotten and perhaps even disinherited, but certainly poorly-maintained, ignored, abandoned and, finally, in complete absence. These conditions all affect its status, its very being as a thing, as a work of art, as an object; and it is that ontological status which Carter investigates and exposes here via a multiplicity of individual and connected processes.



One particular work in the show encapsulates – for this reviewer – art’s synthetic powers over the antithetical relations of creation and evolution as set out above. This work is formed as a result of application and working through of numerous complex processes, and a magical moment where something totally unexpected and almost inconceivable in its own peculiar ontological status is created. The work has its genesis in a serendipitous observation and discovery by Carter. While in the printing room preparing the printing of the upper-case poster with the rust/blood ink ‘THESE WORDS USED TO BE SCULPTURE’ (an interesting and provocative ontological note in itself...), Carter noticed that the small metal structures used by the printer to separate the individual lines of the text, were in fact shaped like the full size architectural steel ‘T’ and ‘H’ beams which Caro used in his sculpture.

Of course, Carter immediately exploited this gift, by building a miniature thumbnail model – a tiny reproduction of the original sculpture in these unrusted components. He then photographed the tiny structure – literally the model of Caro’s ‘son’ – and the photograph was in turn converted via the acid process into a metal etching plate. Finally, via application of the rust ink to the plate and printing on paper a photoetching was produced.

What then is the ontological state of this photoetching? Take the photograph -the ghost of the model of the son, made of shadows and light – it is turned to an embodied three dimensions in the womb of solid blank metal plate, and then this inorganic form is brought to life via a transfusion of blood from the parent object.

Is that just metaphorical? Yes. But is it a form of filiation too? Yes. It also involves budding (reproduction via peeling off from an original), oxidisation, dilution, acid burning, compounding, imaging, writing, excretion, printing, cloning, displaying ... all of these, with some luck and opportunism, and a touch of incomprehensible magic. Carter’s production is a progeny by alchemy, rather than a scientific IVF, not so much a test-tube baby as a palette-knife wean. Is that all heretical too? Yes, because this is what art can do. – Write this in blood – MUST SEE.

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