Alluring Objects

An artistic approach to materials science

By Deborah Dixon

Following the exhibition of her installation Cold Dark Matter (An Exploded View) in 1991, Cornelia Parker became a key figure in a new sort of cross-disciplinary collaboration between science and art. These collaborations combine the sense of wonder and excitement experienced by scientists when new materials emerge with an artist’s interpretations of the possibilities these new materials create.

Cold Dark Matter— which forms the nucleus of Parker’s latest Retrospective— was formed by blowing up a garden shed. The resulting fragments have been sorted and choreographed into a new formation that has an extraordinary presence. The title of the piece evokes the Big Bang, and the shadows cast by the fragments seem to reference the vast, insensible mass of dark matter thought to permeate the universe. Closer observation reveals the mundane, everyday objects that have been caught up in this choreography – a shredded hot water bottle, a still folded deck chair, gardening tools. Torn from their usual usage, they seem to flock with new energy.

This emphasis on material transformation has been taken a step further in subsequent pieces. Some of these are playful: for example, Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon (2007) stretches this dainty object into a wire the height of Niagara Falls, while Composition with Horns (Double Flat) (2005) consists of sixteen instruments crushed by an industrial press and suspended inches above the floor. However, there is no doubting Parker’s preoccupation with objects that highlight the linkages between the state and violence and suffering. A filmed interview with Noam Chomsky (2007) on the banalization of violence and cruelty, for example, is followed up by a series of needlework samplers (2015) produced by inmates of Her Majesty’s Prisons, each of which are inscribed with dictionary definitions of war and peace, life and death, light and dark and so on. A specially commissioned installation, War Room (2015), uses the perforated reams of red paper from which war memorial poppies are cut to swath an entire gallery wing. There is no sentimentality here, but rather a reference to the manner in which remembrance has itself become an unreflective, readily industrialized, habit.

The performance that opened the exhibition was a collaboration between Parker and Sir Konstantin Novoselov, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2010 for his co-discovery of graphene. For the piece, Novoselov extracted graphite crystals from pencil traces on a drawing by the Romantic painter and poet William Blake and used these to produce a sample of graphene. The graphene was used to create a field effect transistor that formed the basis of a humidity-sensitive sensor. When Novoselov breathed on the sensor (Breath of a Physicist, 2015), a fireworks display, choreographed by Parker, was initiated (Blakean Abstract, 2015). The emphasis here is on a constant material transformation that defies our efforts to fix the nature and meaning of objects. What such a bravura spectacle also celebrates, of course, is the potential not only for a meeting of minds between artists and scientists, but of a more visceral mingling of bodies at work.

Cornelia Parker
Mary Griffiths, Curator
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