

EXHIBITION

Alluring Objects

An artistic approach to materials science

By Deborah Dixon

Cornelia Parker

Mary Griffiths, Curator

The Whitworth, Manchester

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1 Following the exhibition of her installation
2 *Cold Dark Matter (An Exploded View)* in 1991,
3 Cornelia Parker became a key figure in a new
4 sort of cross-disciplinary collaboration be-
5 tween science and art. These collaborations
6 combine the sense of wonder and excitement
7 experienced by scientists when new materials
8 emerge with an artist's interpretations of the
9 possibilities these new materials create.

10 *Cold Dark Matter*—which forms the nu-
11 cleus of Parker's latest Retrospective—was
12 formed by blowing up a garden shed. The re-
13 sulting fragments have been sorted and cho-
14 reographed into a new formation that has an
15 extraordinary presence. The title of the piece
16 evokes the Big Bang, and the shadows cast by
17 the fragments seem to reference the vast, in-
18 sensible mass of dark matter thought to per-
19 meate the universe. Closer observation re-
20 veals the mundane, everyday objects that
21 have been caught up in this choreography – a
22 shredded hot water bottle, a still folded deck
23 chair, gardening tools. Torn from their usual
24 usage, they seem to flock with new energy.

25 This emphasis on material transformation
26 has been taken a step further in subsequent
27 pieces. Some of these are playful: for exam-
28 ple, *Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon*
29 (2007) stretches this dainty object into a wire
30 the height of Niagara Falls, while *Composition*
31 *with Horns (Double Flat)* (2005) consists of
32 sixteen instruments crushed by an industrial
33 press and suspended inches above the floor.
34 However, there is no doubting Parker's pre-
35 occupation with objects that highlight the
36 linkages between the state and violence and
37 suffering. A filmed interview with Noam
38 Chomsky (2007) on the banalization of vio-
39 lence and cruelty, for example, is followed up
40 by a series of needlework samplers (2015)
41 produced by inmates of Her Majesty's Pris-
42 ons, each of which are inscribed with diction-
43 ary definitions of war and peace, life and
44 death, light and dark and so on. A specially
45 commissioned installation, *War Room* (2015),
46 uses the perforated reams of red paper from
47 which war memorial poppies are cut to
48 swathe an entire gallery wing. There is no
49 sentimentality here, but rather a reference to
50 the manner in which remembrance has itself
51 become an unreflective, readily industrial-

ized, habit.

The performance that opened the exhibi-
tion 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 extract-
ed 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 firework dis-
play, 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 mean-
ing 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.

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