BRYAN ILLSLEY
PARTINGS AND PIPELINES

Bryan Illsley is so protean an artist, excelling at painting, jewellery, print-making and sculpture in wood, forged iron and ceramics, not to mention a highly idiosyncratic mode of book manufacture and design, that an exhibition of his work could take almost any form. In the present show he limits himself to just two elements. On the floor sits a large three-dimensional piece, the so-called Pipelines, consisting of four rows of ceramic cylinders resting on trestles. Apart from its shape, of which more later, its impact derives from the contrast between the textured and unglazed but still relatively smooth cylinders and the sinewy forms of the trestles, their members roughly hewn from split chestnut trimmed with an axe. Meanwhile the walls display a series of some dozen new paintings, as usual abstract in style and exhibiting a gestural freedom that is perhaps ultimately traceable to one of his most formative early experiences: handling the work of Hamada when he was a packer at the Leach Pottery over forty years ago. The canvases’ strong formal qualities do not, however, preclude a degree of symbolism. The lines drawn down them and the lost-and-found layering of the paint combine to prompt the collective title Partings - as in curtains being pulled apart or Moses dividing the Red Sea rather than leave-takings or lachrymose farewells.

Unlike Illsley’s last exhibition at the gallery, which was brightly-hued and light-hearted, the mood here is sombre. The clay pipes and their supports are of unrelieved buff, while the paintings, though incorporating touches of yellow, blue or red, are predominantly grey in tone. If music was being played, plainsong or Gregorian chants might be in order. Superficially the display suits its mid-winter (not to say mid-recession) timing, but I suspect this is accidental. Illsley’s work has always had an undertow of melancholy, and here he is merely allowing it freer expression. He is only seventy-two, ‘nothing’ by modern standards, and hopefully has many productive years ahead of him; yet there is just a hint that he is moving into what the psychiatrist Anthony Storr has called the ‘third period’ in a creative life, that late phase when an artist becomes more introspective and self-absorbed, working essentially for his own satisfaction and developing stylistic traits that even his devotees may find puzzling. The history of art, music and literature is littered with examples, Michelangelo, Beethoven and Henry James being only three of the most famous.

At first glance it might seem that Illsley has succumbed to the current fashion for installations, but Pipelines is undoubtedly an independent sculpture. He has explored this type of concept before, although seldom in such a protracted form. Indeed the implication here is that he could pursue some of his most cherished aesthetic objectives - linearity, repetition, horizontality - and extend the ‘lines’ ad infinitum. The title reinforces this impression, conjuring images of gas being carried over miles of frozen tundra or crude oil across vast expanses of torrid desert.

Yet there is a reptilian or insect-like aspect to the structure that belies the inert, mechanical nature of an actual pipeline. It reminds me a little of those Surrealist sculptures, redolent of scorpions or malignant spiders, that Giacometti was making in the early 1930s. The piece itself conveys a certain menace, especially in relation to the background ‘partings’. It is as if a monster were emerging from one of those dark primeval forests that Altdorfer, Grünewald and their like were so fond of painting. Perhaps the knowledge that two decades ago Illsley created a ‘real’ monster as part of the Chilterns Sculpture Trail in Forestry Commission woodland, lends colour to this conceit. Even the title of the older piece, Raised Ash Line, is anticipatory, while showing once again how important the idea of linearity is to the artist’s vision. Ultimately, however, I cannot be too disturbed by Pipelines when it seems so ready to shed its threatening persona and morph into something altogether more engaging - a genial, smile-inducing centipede, perhaps, or a daddy-longlegs. Illsley has always had a Shakespearian sense of the intimate relationship between humour and existential angst.
The truth is that his subtle and allusive work is capable of multiple interpretations. He even encourages speculation with his quirky and often tongue-in-cheek titles (neither Pipelines nor Partings are among the most eccentric). But this is all a matter of iconography; on another level he says things that are anything but equivocal.

As those familiar with his work will know, Illsley is convinced that art can be made out of the humblest materials. Indeed, he actually prefers them, finding them a spur to his imagination, while anything too opulent is shunned with a vehemence to which genuine disgust, ingrained puritanism, and sheer bloody-mindedness are all perhaps contributors. Hence the recycled objets trouvés that figure so largely in his sculptures, his use of un-seasoned, un-dressed wood, his taste for home-stretched canvases, cheap kitchen paper, odd stubs of pencil, and brushes he has made himself out of bristles and sticks. Even technical skill is a suspect commodity. ‘People like skill because it makes them feel comfortable’ is his shrewd, dismissive comment.

Obviously the definition of skill here is debatable (who, in a sense, is more skilful than Illsley himself?), but the general drift of his thinking is not in doubt. This is an art so stripped of pretension that for all its humour and irony, even a certain jauntiness, it speaks of spiritual poverty. It lets go, renounces power, and by celebrating incapacity asks searching questions about the nature of success. It is no accident that illness has played a large part in Illsley’s development. ‘Illness’, he has said, ‘has attended all my liberations’.

This is not, of course, untrodden ground. Picasso’s sculptures incorporate discarded objects, and the so-called Arte Povera movement in Italy in the late 1960s made a virtue of using everyday materials. But the aspirations here were different. Picasso’s recycling is little more than a brilliant sleight of hand, a conjuring trick that transforms a child’s toy car into the head of a baboon, an old wicker basket into the ribcage of a goat. Arte Povera was concerned with political radicalism and with challenging received notions of the relationship between art and the viewer. Illsley’s aesthetic philosophy has more profound implications, reproaching us for our egocentricity, worship of achievement, heartless efficiency, conspicuous consumption, and a sense of perfection based on bogus priorities.

These are complex ideas, inadequately expressed, and should no doubt be seen in a wider cultural context. A fuller analysis would refer to the way of rejection so central to Western and Eastern mystical traditions. Keats’s famous ‘negative capability’, his argument that poetry should spring from a passive receptiveness (‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts’) rather than the subjective imposing of an intellectual concept, would also clamour for attention. My favourite contribution would be the treatment of the subject in Charles Williams’s unfinished Arthuriad. As a focus for the values in question he evokes the sympathetic figure of Sir Dinadan, the knight who doesn’t win the jousts or the ladies but understands the paradox that at the deepest level success may lie in failure, or, as he puts it, ‘the missing is often the catching’.

John Ruskin believed that artists should exercise a prophetic role and use their heads and hands to declare great moral truths, and I would like to say that Illsley seems to me to be doing precisely this. I say ‘would like’ not because I doubt the claim for a moment but from fear of seeming to crack a nut with a sledgehammer if I apply the sonorous rhetoric of the great Victorian panjandrum to an art so self-effacing and wholly lacking in pretence. That anomaly I shall have to leave hanging in the air. Meanwhile the exhibition is there to speak for itself, both as a showcase for beautiful and enigmatic works and, in its own inimitable way, a devastating critique of some of our most insidious social and aesthetic mores.

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