

David Cotterrell: Observer Review : The Old Tombs are the Best

Observer Review

Date: 31st August 2003

Siting a contemporary artshow in a graveyard is an intriguing way of exploring notions of ancestry and death. The hip London gallery owner Danielle Arnaud has invited 24 artists to create new work inspired by the histories of the 26,000 bodies buried at the deconsecrated church of St Mary at Lambeth (now London's Museum of Garden History, next to Lambeth Palace). Dubbed God's Acre, the church boasts dozens of dead celebrities, from Captain William Bligh of the Bounty to the gardener John Tradescant and the man who invented the panoramic camera.

Exhumed is beautiful, provocative and ever so slightly bonkers. Around the nave, altar and knot garden of the church you'll find giant sugar letters, decorated stag antlers, a still-life vanitas made from dead insects (including the death's-head hawk moth beloved of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*), even a breadfruit tree growing under a modern propagator.

Pieces retrace, physically and theoretically, the steps of the dead - and the larger narratives of science, art, technology and political change over the past 900 years. So the breadfruit reminds us that Bligh transported the crop from Tahiti to Jamaica to feed his slaves - offering a subtle indictment of eighteenth century British colonialism.

Several artists work with the very area of identity, whether lost, denied or subsumed. Stand in front of Pascal Dubois' slide projection piece, *In Ex In*, and you'll have Archbishop Parker's vital organs projected on to your clothes (as Elizabeth I's archbishop, his body is buried at Lambeth Palace, but his heart and bowels are below your feet).

Commemorating two men killed by lightning, Phil Coy's *The Marriage of 'Heaven and Hell* offers visitors the chance to be dispatched by lightning conductor, while Sophie Lascelles's *Angela Carter*-esque ghost story (a cartoon projection of a woman killed in a circus fire) thrills visiting school children. She burnt to death because she ran back to the tent to retrieve the takings.

Of course there is a strong element of tease to the show from Cleo Broda's fantasy 1940s botanical illustrations for a genetically modified plant to Suky Best's fictitious embroidery piece for Anne Boleyn's mother.

Oona Grimes contributes a colouring book for Bligh, where the Mutiny on the Bounty becomes a Simpsons style cartoon, while Peter Dukes's digital video, *An Estranged*, deals with anonymity as the work morphs into hundreds of different faces/genders/races over two minutes.

Mindful that women are only ever described as tender and affectionate adjuncts of their husbands or fathers on their graves, Sophie Horton has transformed a tomb into a bed with a kitch pink bedhead. Liza Z. Morgan's bright red plant labels among the rose bushes chart the mental breakdown of John Tradescant, the Younger's wife, Hester, and her final death by drowning.

Orla Barry's sound and floral installation, *Mulberry, Roses and Rosemary* a woman reprimanding her husband for visiting her grave too often. Is she trying to protect him - or simply bored of his tears? (Significantly, the piece was inspired by Earl Spencer's Althorp memorial to Princess Diana.)

Several artists went to painful - and bizarre extremes to make their work. The photographer Tom Humphreys was locked in the slug-ridden Slade Family Tomb. David Cotterrell, meanwhile, filmed himself lying on the grass at Waterloo for 11 hours to make his real-time film,

Field, commemorating the life of a young infantryman killed at the battle. Then there is Shane Waltener's extraordinary suspended gossamer spider's web crocheted from 26,000 knots (one to signify each body in the churchyard).

A fascination with death and the trappings of the tomb runs like a corporeal refrain throughout this show. And yet curiously it's not ghoulish. Anyone in mourning - or wondering how to attempt a modern-day war requiem, post Iraq - may relish the breaking down of taboos.

Certainly the Museum of Garden History is used to surreal interventions. Although the deconsecrated church is no longer officially allowed to bury people, the staff often find the ashes of loved ones discreetly tipped into the garden. So one senses the artworks may feel very at home.

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