

TATE THAT!

New bases for old sculpture.

“And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou has polluted it.” Exodus 20:25

From the destruction of the Golden Calf, through the Reformation to the Taliban’s recent destruction of the ancient Buddhas at Bamiyan or the tipping-over of statues of Lenin after the fall of Communism, there is a long history of hitting out at three-dimensional images. You have to ask, why?

In his account of the excavations at Ur between 1922 and 1934, *Ur of the Chaldees*, Sir Leonard Woolley has some interesting things to say about the way in which artefacts are treated. One of the early discoveries, on a brick pavement exposed while clearing the area behind the Ziggurat, was a fallen statue of Entemena, Governor of Lagash, one of the cities that in the decline of Ur held suzerainty over the city. The head was missing, deliberately broken off in antiquity, but the stump was polished, as if by being continually slapped or touched by passing hands. Such touch can be talismanic. A cast of Rodin’s great sculpture *The Age of Bronze* used to be installed, along with the rest of the V&A’s collection of French nineteenth-century sculpture, in the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood. Against the rich black patina of the surface two areas of bright yellow metal stood out. These were his penis and the big toe of his advanced right foot, both gleamingly polished by the surreptitious caresses of countless passing schoolchildren.

“Nothing helps an excavator like violent destruction,” writes Woolley, delighted at discovering a layer of charred and burnt material in the foundation mounds of the buildings being excavated. His inference is that this layer presents an undisturbed rubble upon which later structures have been erected. So it turns out. In the centre of one of the excavated courtyards there are shards of inscribed black stone. Pieced together these turn out to belong to a shattered war memorial to the Babylonian king and Sumerian overlord, Hammurabi. Woolley’s detective work in the dust leads him not only to the fire but also to its cause. Sparked by an uprising in the city against their overlords – as evidenced in the smashed memorial – Babylonian troops trashed the place. Prague Spring followed by Soviet invasion.

John George Taylor, at the time British Vice-Consul at Basra, first excavated Ur in 1854. Woolley is indignant about his methods but enchanted by his discoveries. “Hidden in the brickwork at the top stage of the tower he found, at each angle of it, cylinders of baked clay on which were long inscriptions giving the history of the building.” The inscriptions describe the restoration and completion of the tower (in about 550 BCE) by Nabonidus. There is a recognizable civic pride in these inscriptions and an admirable discretion in hiding them. For the archaeologist, though, there is something else. “These inscriptions not only gave us the first information obtained about the Ziggurat itself, but identified the site, called by the Arabs al Mughair, the Mound of Pitch, as Ur ‘of the Chaldees’, the biblical home of Abraham.”

In the last phase of the excavation, Woolley describes finding within the (school) house occupied by Princess Bel-Shalti-Nannar (the sister of Bel-Shazzar, whose feast became such a subject in art), a small group of objects that have no temporal relationship to

each other. It is only on looking more closely at the clay tablet found beside them that he realizes that what he is looking at is a label and that this was a museum or at least a collection-shelf.

Thus within an account of the excavation of perhaps the oldest city in the world, there is evidence of collection, conservation, destruction and desecration. It is an extraordinarily familiar history.

Sometime in 1990, Mark Francis and Lynne Cooke, who were curating the 1991 Carnegie International, approached me and asked if I'd be interested to "do something" associated with the collection of the Carnegie Museum. They approached me as an artist who had taken part in the previous International, with work in the collection, and as someone who had recently made a solo show in the Museum. I therefore seemed well placed to produce an interface between the display of the Museum's permanent collection and the upcoming display of the Carnegie International. After several trips and explorations of the Museum store, I arrived at a selection of objects that I was interested to work with. The objects fell into three groups. The first were all made of wood – a child's chair by Gerrit Rietveld (c. 1920), a sculpture – *Structure 1945* – by Isamu Noguchi, and a Yoruba housepost by Owo-eye of Ilesha (c. 1930–50). That is to say, they were all early-to-mid twentieth-century objects, all using the same basic material but each very differently made. The second group were all nineteenth-century and were materially diverse – a silver berry spoon by the Gorham Manufacturing Company (undated), a gilt-and-lacquer centre table, attributed to Ringuet-Leprince and L. Marcotte (c. 1855–60), and a bronze cast of Carpeaux's *Genie de la Danse* (1869). The final group was a single work: David Smith's *Cubi XXIV* (1964). For each of the three groups I constructed a display stand ('island' was the term I used) of aluminium

tread plate for the first, laminated and carved wood for the second, and vinyl flooring for the third. I titled these ‘islands’ as if they were independent works. The inscription ‘Facts Not Opinions’ is the legend carved over the entrance to what is now the Kirkaldy Testing Museum in South London. As I wrote at the time, “This confident assertion has always impressed me. In many ways it aphoristically describes a function that the things I have called ‘islands’ might have. Material, labour, skill, productivity, belief, history, discourse and desire are amongst the components of that function.”

My experience of this interaction with the Carnegie collection was perhaps behind the invitation by Tate Britain to co-curate, with Phillip Lindley, an exhibition of medieval sculpture, scheduled to open at the same time as the newly remodelled Tate building on Millbank. Certainly, in the display I have devised, the use of materials has something in common with that earlier display.

Another point of reference has been my memory of the reinstallation of the Egyptian galleries at the British Museum at the end of the 1970s. The galleries were kept open during the reinstallation, and many of the objects were temporarily propped up, the great arm of Ramesses II. for example, was supported by a pile of sandbags and a very hefty timber banker. Both this kind of propping up and the equipment associated with moving the stone artefacts spoke eloquently of weight and mass, an eloquence that is somehow absent in a more permanent display. The revivification of materiality, I thought, also returned the objects to a more active or at least more present, existence in the world. One of the things I have been conscious of trying to do at Tate Britain is to reintroduce, through the use of particular supports, this aspect of the physical existence of the objects on display, showing that they are solid and have weight. I hoped that a grasp of materiality would lead us to empathize in some way with the object, or at least

come to the recognition that they belong to a world that has connections with our own. Perhaps an anecdote will convey what I mean here. In the early 1970s my mother was very ill and, though a student in London, I made quite frequent visits to my parents' house. As an active twenty-year-old I was restless and always looking for jobs to do, partially I suppose so that I could feel useful. Anyway, for whatever reason, sometime in 1970 or '71 I was digging in the vegetable patch, turning it over and removing the shards of white convolvulus root that turned up, squashing leatherjackets and wire worms. Whilst bending down to inspect a newly turned sod, my eye was caught by a piece of stone. On picking it up I found that it was a worked flint, the point broken off, but nevertheless clearly shaped. The feeling of contact, that somebody else had dropped this some 3,000 years before, was extraordinary, like a jolt of electricity.

The display opens with a freestanding wall that supports the Madonna and Child (from Winchester). It will be the first thing you see if you enter Tate Britain from Millbank and is an outstanding and beautiful image to encounter. It is at the beginning in part because Marian imagery was ubiquitous before the Reformation. The first iconoclastic attacks included the Marian shrines, so its position in the display reflects the centrality of this imagery. There is also a sense in which the body and life of Christ is figured in the display, with the Virgin and Child at one end, and the Crucifixion and genealogy at the other. Two iconic saints – George and Christopher – are in the middle. Coming into the display around the wall holding the Virgin, one sees the alabaster panel of the Assumption and the Charwelton tomb, two objects connected by material but disconnected by ideology. Although the supporting angels around the Virgin and the angels supporting the coat of arms have something in common, it is what they hold up that has changed. The alabaster tomb, of Sir Thomas Andrew and his two wives, is both the only complete tomb and the most recent object in the exhibition. It is complete

partly because it was made after the first waves of the Reformation and so was not subject to the same kind of destruction and partly because it comes from a very small parish church, protected by a powerful family. The base and side panels are made from reclaimed material – there are remains of inscriptions on the inside faces. It's quite decorative. The wooden rail surrounds it as a protective barrier but is also sculptural, paralleling the role of aluminium or terracotta in other parts of the display. The guardrail radiates from around the tomb like a splash from a thrown stone. A similar rail is used around the giant figure of St. Christopher from Norton Priory. The figure of St. Christopher is carved from a sliver of red sandstone. In order to represent water, the sculptor has had to show it tipped up behind the saint's feet. It is therefore both a low relief and a three-dimensional piece at the same time. Look at the way the fish bend around St. Christopher's carved leg. The sculpture was selected because it has enormous presence as a physical object, but also because it is a familiar image. At the centre of the display you have two of our most familiar saints: St. Christopher and St George. The St. George from Eton stands three metres high on a black, steel column that rises out of a black ellipse like Excalibur from the lake. It's also a somewhat idolatrous presentation – if one thinks of medieval representations of antiquity or of idolatry, the image is often atop a free standing column. One interesting thing about it, is the way the sword behind his back is presented. The illusion is complete from the front, but from the back you can see that the rest of the sword isn't there; the work is intended to be seen frontally and from below. It is displayed at this height to suggest its original location, where it is much higher, but also so that the architecture of the Duveen Galleries becomes a frame for the object. Both the St. George and the St. Christopher are in the central octagon of the Duveens. A boss from York Minster is mounted on an arched truss, braced, like Samson in the Temple, between the four columns at the end of the South Duveen. I wanted to include this timber boss, the only non-figurative work in

the display, to show that the use of imagery in the pre-Reformation period was far more widespread than you would find in a later building; sculpture could be located on the ceiling. Very few sculptors would put their works on a ceiling now, but in a Gothic Church the imagery covered much of the space. I also wanted an item in the display that showed this inverted relationship to gravity: a heavy object hung upside down.

There are six recumbent figures in the display. Each of the six is on a plinth, which has a kind of skirt around it, between the plinth and the figure is a ‘mattress’ of different material – aluminium, terracotta, wood. The two knights from Furness Abbey are in full armour, and appear to be standing up but lying down. It’s clear that these knights are really walking – they’re stepping out – so really they’re standing up but they happen to be lying down on the ground. The three armoured figures in the exhibition are all displayed on aluminium mattresses. The use of the bright metal is a material reference to their armour, though the texture is like woven cloth. The reflective brightness also refers to the figures looking to their resurrection. The third aluminium mattress is under the double effigy from Careby in Lincolnshire. This representation of two recumbent figures makes almost no concessions to horizontality: you could stand it up and it would function perfectly well, whereas lying down it looks strange. The figures seem to be in bed, but fully dressed. The bedcover makes them appear bodiless: the block is plain, almost austere. The bottom half has no decoration or foot supports, but is just a simple fluted surface, slightly bowed. Both figures are carved out of a single block, rather than assembled from two different pieces. It’s an extraordinary solution to a two-figure problem. Two of the other mattresses are made of terracotta bricks, one under the Torrigiano effigy of Dr. Yonge (itself made of glazed ceramic) and the other under the figure of Thomas de Redying, a country priest. These two effigies have interesting formal connections, though both artists independently arrive at a similar formulation –

the one in a rural context, the other in a metropolitan environment. The effigy from Little Steeping is a kind of vernacular oddity. The way in which the figure is represented is a departure from tradition; there's no context for it, no history for it – somebody just decided to do it that way. The figure is clearly dead, and funnily enough because he's dead he's closer to us. Armoured figures lying on the ground, waiting for resurrection, seem to have very little to do with us, whereas you can comprehend a tomb figure of a dead body. And look at the elegant way his closed eyes are carved. In contrast, the Torrigiano effigy of Dr. Yonge is a piece of sophisticated sculpture by an urbane and cosmopolitan artist. The head and the hands (and perhaps the hat) are life-cast, the rest of the figure, in its rich but austere gown, is modelled. At one level this is expeditious, relying on the faithfulness of casting to reproduce physiognomy.

Sophistication lies in uniting these elements into an expressive whole. The terracotta blocks supporting both figures are a rich absorbent orange-red, contrasting with the bright reflectivity under the armoured knights and echoing the material of the Torrigiano sculpture. A head from Winchester is mounted on a wall near the north end of the South Duveen. This small head of a man in a skull cap, is bursting with energy; its situation, close to the effigies of Dr. Yonge and Thomas de Redying, allows a sense of the portrait of an actual individual, in life as against death, into the display.

Four figures from York, two from the Minster and two from St. Mary's Abbey, stand together, each at a height of 160 centimetres. The unit on which they stand is stepped on one side as if it were a portal and angled on the other as if it were a façade. These sculptures were selected for the exhibition both because of their quality and because these standing figures are obviously architectural fragments. The design of the central column was an attempt to find a way to show them as part of a larger piece of architecture. The St. Mary's figures are displayed on the stepped side of the column;

this is a shorthand way of suggesting an interior context for these figures. With massive upper-body weight Moses thrusts himself forward like a pit bull terrier, carrying the tablets of law. In contrast, the Apostle, carrying a wonderful book like a rock, is more distant, less weighted. The heavily weathered figures from York Minster on the angled faces of the column have been conserved in a quite straightforward way: they sit on massive stone blocks with a column of stainless steel at their backs. I am interested in the way this conservation has affected their qualities as objects, and how this mediates between what I've been doing and the objects. The fact that the St Mary's figures seem to be complete doesn't mean they haven't been interfered with; it's just that the interference isn't so obvious, so what's hidden in them is shown up by what's exposed here.

A Torso of the Risen Christ, from Winchester, is on a table with an alabaster retable panel, depicting the Resurrection, from Northampton. In this panel Christ steps over the figure of a prone knight that has some resonance with the two Furness Abbey knights. The table has a backboard, as if the tablecloth had been pulled up, a reference to the iconography of St. Veronica's veil – the handkerchief given to Christ to mop his face on the Via Dolorosa and which took a miraculous image. The Torso is pinned to the backboard so that the image in the alabaster makes evident what is missing in the Torso. In the opposite bay there is a fragment of a lavabo from Much Wenlock Priory. This fragment was selected partly to indicate some of the likely subjects of the sculptural universe of the pre-Reformation period. Imagery was present in all aspects of daily life, particularly in the monastery. This piece of Romanesque carving is a small part of a much larger whole: it is one panel from an elaborate eight-sided lavabo. It was also functional object – a wash basin – that would have been in daily use by the monks in the Abbey.

The sensational Jesse figure, from Abergavenny, is at the far end of the North Duveen. Chosen because of its particular quality and size, there would have been a whole tree sprouting from the loins of this figure, with the entire genealogy of Christ displayed in its branches. Carved, with a particularly strong and confident sensitivity to line and scale, from a single enormous piece of oak, it sits on a mattress made of richly grained Douglas fir.

In the bay on one side is a stone (polychromed) figure from the tree of Jesse in St. Cuthbert's, Wells, and the fragments of a wooden crucifix from South Cerney, now in the British Museum. This delicate carving is the earliest object in the show and a rare survivor. The head and the foot are displayed the correct distance apart so that the missing body is inferred. The poignancy of this loss is emblematic for the display as a whole. Very stringent environmental conditions have to be met for this work, so it is displayed inside a climate-controlled box, a very daunting object. I'm interested in the severity of the box in relationship to its contents: it evokes in some sense the fragility of the image, and in a way it displays the museum inside the museum. Facing this, and also in a climate-controlled box, is a figure from the Tree of Jesse at St. Cuthbert's in Wells. From the smashed remains of a Tree of Jesse, we chose a matching head and body that have quite a lot of polychromy on them. This colouring is absent from most of the other figures that have been chosen for the exhibition. The Jesse figure did not survive: it was virtually erased from the wall, an erasure so intense that it makes the figure evident by its absence – like Rauschenberg rubbing out De Kooning's drawing. There is a connection between the representation of Christ and the genealogy that the Jesse motif displays. Visitors using the new entrance will arrive into this constellation. The bay opposite is used for a small statuette of a female saint (Helen?) from Forde

Abbey. This small, half-life-size figure, is very delicate and pretty. Stylistically she has something in common with the Winchester Madonna, although this is a cruder representation. The figure is shown on top of a conical, black, steel stand, which is spread out like a skirt around her and acts as a counterpoint to the elevated figure of the armoured St. George. The rudimentary carving at the back of each of these two images of saints evidences practical decision-making and clarity about the difference between the image and its object. What you see is what you get. On the other hand, the figures of Sir Thomas Andrew and his two wives have been elaborately painted and polychromed even in the parts hidden from view. Upon dismantling the tomb chest, this colour, pristine in all its richness, was revealed to those of us lucky enough to be there. There is something in this about work under a Protestant dispensation and about satisfying the demands of an all-seeing God, with whom you are in direct contact.