

FOR WANT OF A NAIL.

I'm going to tell you a story . . .

When I was first invited to go to Venice, I had no idea what I was going to do. I had seen some images of the previous exhibitions and of the spaces in the ex-Birreria, but it was on my first visit with Heather and Ivan and Merlin that I had the opportunity to see the Capannone 1.

The space was, and is, very dusty. It's a fabulous space – seven metres high by twenty-seven metres long by six metres wide: I can tell you that because I measured it last time. It has daylight coming in from one end, through a small window above the door.

The more time I spent in there looking around, the more time I spent looking at the walls and thinking, “There's a lot of nails in there.” I got a bit obsessed by the nails. I did find out why afterwards: the room was a storage space, a cold store, and the nails were used to fix cork to the walls as insulation. It was a cork-lined room. That in itself already has strong associations for me with Proust, who wrote in a cork-lined room in order to minimize distraction but to encourage memory.

I didn't have any idea then how the spaces would be distributed among the exhibiting artists, but I said, whatever happened, don't clean the space too much and don't take the nails out of the walls. It had occurred to me that maybe it would be interesting to hang something from the nails.

So it was a fairly formal thing, being intrigued by this wall that was studded with nails . . .

When we went back again in January to look at it more closely, my ideas had advanced a bit: I had started making things that might hang on nails to go on the walls. I began to think about using the walls as if they were the floor.

Just prior to going to Venice I had been in Newcastle and had stumbled across a shipyard there, a tiny boat builders' that was incredibly well organised. Everything was hung on the walls, so I guess there was something already in my head about clearing the floor and using the walls, making the floor function in a different way.

Going back and looking at the nails again, I saw that they're actually a bit rusty. They've been in the walls for over a hundred years or so. But the walls also have a regular studding of holes, some with wood in, that was used to support the nails. I began to look at those and thought that perhaps I could put the nails back. And then it occurred to me that I had already found a nail that I was interested in . . .

Walking along the beach in Newcastle, I had found a bit of wood with a nail sticking out of it, which is ordinary enough, but this nail was like a church nail: long with a big head, and I thought, this is the kind of nail I want in the walls. Something that raises all sorts of associations with the way in which the nail might be used as an image in art history, or the way in which it enters our consciousness. Not just something that can be used to hang something on, like a coat, but also something that pins something down, that 'nails it', so to speak.

Although the nail I found is steel, I'm having my nails cast in bronze, which seems to enrich the language of whatever they might do. The nail then also becomes a possible form of transportation: the attachment to the nail becomes the means of changing

the condition of things that are attached to it so that they're not just hung but become representations, denotational in some way.

I'm making 150 bronze nails. I was interested in quantity. If there were a few nails, then that would be one thing, but by making so many they go over the edge or cross the terrain between functionality, utility and lack of utility.

So then I started to think about hanging things on nails and what that might entail . . . what are the possibilities? And this is where my story comes in . . . if I hadn't been on the beach in Newcastle and found a nail then maybe I wouldn't be thinking about it in the same way, with Venice in mind.

But on the beach I also found a fish, or rather, a piece of driftwood that looked remarkably like a fish. Somehow the fact that the two things were connected allowed the practical nail on the wall (that you hang your coat on) to become something on which to peg ideas, to peg different kinds of representations.

There's also the space; this incredibly cinematic space with a single light-source coming from above and behind you as you enter through the door. There's a theatricality quality to the space and trying to get the walls to work seems to fit with that.

So, beachcombing, number, and the fact that the bronze nail hasn't had a lot of use since the early middle ages, if not Roman times, apart from in artworks, are the points of departure for my work in Venice.