

# Valerie Reardon

The Honiton festival, which began in 1994, is a biennial event that brings international contemporary art to the heart of Devon countryside. Traditionally sited in St. Michael's Church, a largely disused but pristine Norman Building set high on a hill overlooking Honiton, this year the exhibition's reach was extended to include the town's Thelma Hulbert gallery and Spacex Gallery in Exeter.

Curator, Ineke van der Wal selected work by eight Dutch and Flemish artists who share a common concern with the passage of time, but the exigencies of a considerably expanded exhibition space at times stretched that connection beyond any breaking point. The curatorial strategy of mixing what was described as site-specific interventions in three very disparate venues made it sometimes difficult to make sense of the show as a whole and apart from a single video piece by Fiona Tan (*Linnaeus Clock*, 1998) each artist had work in more than one place which in some cases were like variations on the theme that could have been fruitfully edited out. Tan's elegant and thoughtful piece, better suited for a darkened gallery than the church, was structured around time-lapse images of poppies and combined archive footage with self-portraiture to build a visual narratives of love, loss, time and memory.

The most successful site in terms of the peaceful cohabitation of art works and their relationship to the surrounding space was the churchyard in front of St. Michael's in which Maria Roosen's rectilinear plantings of forget-me-nuts, understated in the long grass, were scattered among the ancient gravestones. Nico Parleviet's cluster of 24 silver sound bags entitled *Night -Watch*, initially appeared out of place until approached when they began, almost imperceptibly, to inflate and deflate while emitting sonorous tones based on a Schoenberg piano concerto. In the centre of the grounds Berlinde de Bruyckere had wrapped the boughs of a huge, ancient yew tree in folded, worn, blankets tightly stitched into place. Looking up into the dark arc of the tree, the unexpected sight of the colored and patterned blankets tracing the yew's intricate architecture seemed to make a reference to warmth and shelter. Inevitably, however, old blankets can also signify human dispossession and it is this later association that de Bruyckere made literal with a standing sculpture inside the church of a female figure standing on an upturned galvanized washbasin. With only a pair of sturdy while waxen legs visible, the head and the shoulders were bowed down under the weight of a layer of blankets covering it to the knees. Perhaps the piece was meant to refer to the periodic affliction called 'duvet diving' but the combination of figuration and the semiotics of threadbare blankets made it the worst kind of 'weeping into the artwork' as social protest. In contrast to this, three watercolour

Head and torso drawings by de Bruyckere at the Hulbert gallery were stunning in their loose simplicity. Entitled *Death*, they managed to convey the abject horizontality of death while viewed on the vertical plane. This was achieved by the gesture of the head, slightly tipped back, and the way in which the features in each image seemed to be emptied out of the face.

Also at the Hulbert gallery and St. Michael's were paintings by Bettie van Haaster who restricted her palette to black, white, green, and yellow. Unframed and mostly under a square foot overall, the surfaces were thick with built-up paint that was worked into with various repetitive marks describing areas and subsections as if an aerial view. The often crowded delineation of space inscribed into the thick and almost viscous surface suggested a play between urban claustrophobia and the plenitude of landscape. The element of time alluded to in the show's title no doubt refers to the way in which the foreground shifts in the

ambient light, but such subtleties were precluded by a fascination for mark-making as a symptom of anxious introversion.

Peter Buggenhout's abstract organic sculptures, made from elaborate processes involving cow and horse guts, are fearsome objects both fascinating and disgusting. The large pieces on show at Spacex and St Michael's smell like an abattoir and their surfaces sweat in the heat. Their presence as things is almost overpowering and the analogy is to the monstrous body, misshapen and deformed. The skin that covers them is stretched and wrinkled with intermittent patches of a white, almost fungal bloom. Small eruptions reveal innocuous bits of string and cotton wool thankfully mitigating the more nightmarish sensations.

At Spacex a bunch of pendulous glass breasts by Maria Roosen hang suspended from a gymnast's wooden hoop like a decapitated Hindu goddess. An oversized charm bracelet is string across the wall opposite two snowmen (one collapsed) with glass carrot noses. The wit of a one liner is overridden by earnestness as for instance in the church where Roosen draped a 10 metre long rosary made out of glass eye balls over the altar.

Fortunately two installations by Keiko Sato allowed some space for the viewers to make meaning. At spacex a tense web of builder's scrim was fixed with large dabs of plaster to the floor, walls, and ceilings making a hectic skyway that criss-crossed the space seemingly at random. Bits of what looked like computer circuitry and hair were inserted into the waves of the scrim but also littered the floor creating a sense of dystopic anomie - the technological world as inherently dysfunctional, always broken and out of date. Sato's apocalyptic sensibility was also in evidence in a large floor piece spread out amidst the columns of the nave at St Michael's. Small piles of crumbling red and pink bricks and lumps of asphalt and broken stonework were unified by a scattering of earth, brick dust and grey paper pulp that seemed to map the aftermath of a disaster. Shards of white domestic sanitary ware threatened to church underfoot and there were occasional glimpses through the debris of photographs torn from newspapers showing cities and Japanese schoolgirls. Of course Hiroshima springs to mind but that devastation did not take much time at all. What take the time is the memory work, the re-forming and re-presenting of the losses of the past in order to make them manageable and to allow us to be able to enjoy life on a sunny day in Devon.