

BEACONSFIELD COMMISSIONS

Judith Dean: Phase 4

Six years ago Judith Dean won the prestigious Jerwood Sculpture Prize.

Her site-specific proposal led to the installation of the bronze cast of a piece of ploughed earth, *Field*, 5m x 2m, within the manicured lawn of an ornamental garden at Ragley (home of the Marquess and Marchioness of Hertford) not far from a working agricultural field just outside the perimeter fence of the estate.

The making of this piece was, reportedly, far from easy and not cheap. It was cast in situ from a virtuoso furrow produced by a competitive ploughman using old technology. The 5m x 2m clod of earth had to be cast in sections and finished with a coloured patina. When delivered with incorrect colour, Dean arranged for further patination to happen in situ, to complete *Field* using various chemicals and a blowtorch. She believes the final result was better than her original intention.

Judith Dean has operated as an artist in a wide range of mediums. A sizeable chunk of her activity has been event based and performative and recently she has been working with moving image. But it is not just the association with a sculpture prize that has contributed to Dean's being identified as a sculptor. Many of her works have held status as objects.

The 'sculpture' commission for the stately home was pre-figured by a work commissioned for a regeneration programme in an area of urban deprivation in London Borough of Camden. *Bollards*, 2000, was a series of polished granite (*negro absoluto*) objects aping the original concrete model of the same name, but made individually with great precision, on a lathe by a specialist manufacturer on the Scottish Borders. The seven in the Camden series were variously placed in their urban environment: one replaced its counterpart in a row of concrete bollards, others were situated on church steps, beside a tree, randomly in a pedestrian precinct – with one set in grass, this last, informing the later work, *Field*, 2005.

The paradox of these works is that quotidian materiality becomes the focus of attention: the ordinary made extraordinary. In each case, situation becomes a major component of the work and its making; both pieces sculptural in their "commemorative representation" whilst reflecting "...the condition of the logical space..." to quote a seminal text.¹

The irony of these particular works lies also within their manufacture: their status as art objects reinforced by the refinement of materials and sheer expense of their making. And all – as traditional for Art – is superfluous to requirement: although in the case of the grass-located *Bollard*, the art work achieved new functionality as it was absorbed into the environment, becoming both goal post and insect habitat and pigeon toilet.

Similarly, *Tabula Rasa*², 2001, re-stages a utilitarian object in a starring role. A drop-leaf table is drilled, filled and transformed with coloured pencil. In this case it is the intricate coloured surface produced that is the focus, reminiscent of Islamic artefacts where subject is concealed in pattern. In *Closing*, 2003,³ a solo project in a disused dry cleaning shop at 153 Lambeth Walk, the shop counter was treated in a similar way. Given this run-down environment as a studio for a month, Dean decided to leave largely as she found but started

¹ Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, October Volume 8 (Spring 1979)

² exhibited *Fraternise* – the salon, Beaconsfield, London 2011

³ commissioned by Danielle Arnaud, Kennington

drilling and filling the counter. Rather than its treatment remaining an insular studio process, local youngsters and former customers to the shop, who arrived keen to recover garments, lost when the establishment unexpectedly closed, effected the transformation of the table. Dean came to understand her temporary studio as a transitional space of social exchange.

Road for the Future, 2012⁴ broadened the plane of activity still further. Having visited the site, Dean was compelled, by necessity, to work remotely on a project for a rural space, Powerstock Common. Since she had to imagine she was in Dorset, she realised that she could be anywhere and so imagined the space of the work as Rome – a city embedded in her imagination for some years. The filmic work that was produced imported multi-sourced images, invading, as it were, the space of the video and was shown on a laptop, placed on a purpose-made computer work station strapped to a tree growing on the ancient tumulus of Powerstock Common.

The works described sit comfortably within the “complex” identified by Rosalind Kraus in her essay *The Expanded Field of Sculpture*, where both landscape and architecture become part of the cultural space. So how does Phase 4 relate to Dean’s previous activity?

Since May 2013, Judith Dean has been in residence with Beaconsfield in her capacity as a Phase artist. Phase is a series of exhibitions with a retrospective element for mid-career artists with whom the organisation has a significant relationship. Dean first entered relationship with Beaconsfield in 2004 when she made a performance for the open-mic project *Moral Plinth*⁵. As a locally based artist, she was invited to contribute to *Push the Envelope* in 2006⁶ and later joined the board until 2011⁷. Working with the boot on the other foot has shifted the relationship. It has been a very different experience to occupy the organisation and according to the artist, understanding Beaconsfield’s character made residency straightforward and interestingly complex. Artists in residence are given access to all the facilities the organisation can offer with varying levels of curatorial intervention. Working in the expansive spaces available has been in Dean’s words “like being allowed to fly”. She has also talked of making a virtue of necessity.

During the period of residency, when the artist was invited to use the venue as a studio, she revisited and reconfigured previous works, using the artworks not as self-referential pieces but as raw material for something new to emerge. Predictably, for this artist whose primary material is site, the sheer scale of the premises available, combined with an extended mental space in which to explore and use that physical space, has allowed Dean to move into a new methodology.

Over the period, a variety of objects and images have occupied the floor of the Upper Space: the shop counter doing service as furniture, a postcard collection, A4 printouts from a range of previous projects, a gate eventually fixed incongruously high up on a wall... Now the plethora of imagery has achieved a recurring form, that of the A4 or A5 digital print sourced from the internet (Dean first started to use found objects from virtual space in 2003⁸) and the landscape has moved from ground plane to conventional picture plane – the walls.

The groups of images occupying the walls of the Upper Space (Pitch 1) and now the floor of the Arch Space (Pitch 2) are arranged thematically: troops spies, suffragettes, country

⁴ commissioned by unincorporated collaborations, Powerstock Common, Dorset

⁵ *Clapping, Moral Plinth*, 2004, Beaconsfield, London

⁶ Dean exhibited a single *Bollard* was exhibited as part of *Push the Envelope*, 2006, a symposium that focused on the role of local art initiatives in the regeneration of Vauxhall.

⁷ During her service to the board over six years, Dean had intimate knowledge of the workings of the mechanism of the organisation, contributing to debates about Beaconsfield’s research function, contractual arrangements and joining the curatorial team for the fundraising exhibition *Fraternise – the salon*.

⁸ *Provisional*, 2003, Market Gallery, Glasgow

estates, flying creatures... These themes seem at once random and significant for their underlying content (and indeed reflect long-term interests) but for the short-sighted, the detail of each image is irrelevant to the overall impression of a series of pixelated images – the bigger picture – the walls resembling a number of giant computer screens, the checkerboard effect echoing the tiled ceiling and windowpanes of the old schoolroom.

Each image is printed from a domestic printer onto high quality paper – Hahnemuhle Photo rag – either on 188gsm or 308 gsm. The images are mounted according to the contingencies of the image group and its site: thus mounted either on wood, Dufraylite or perspex. Marble was considered as a possible ground for floor pieces. This oscillation between surfaces somehow allows a system that can be simultaneously broken down or built up (many images are also installed using a single screw to be rotational) and the system is flexible enough to extend beyond Phase 4.

Multiple criteria were employed for taking images from the web, the images united by freedom from copyright through Wikimedia Commons⁹. Dean also drew on her pre-existing image bank, sometimes taking new photos for specific works. At some point considerations of monochrome or colour come into play and the sifting of images continues. Some images have made their way into the social space of the Ragged Canteen and find a function as laminated place mats. The *Portable Computer Workstation* of Powerstock Common now holds menus and a miniature bollard, produced on a 3D printer, has also invaded this space, not unlike a salt cellar. The Ragged Canteen is usually animated by moving image on two screens. In this instance the artist has chosen to quieten the screens by installing ‘blank’ white video loops with a switched-off screen in the foyer, in an attempt to create more space and allowing focussed attention on a sound work in the stairwell.

Judith Dean’s operations in the expanded field of social space, reads more like a Poussin than a Rodin: the workings of the mind of a painter rather than a sculptor – and it was in the subject area of painting that Dean studied. It is no coincidence that the narrative in all the works discussed is predominantly embedded in the extended plane of the piece rather than in its materiality as an object. A critical subject of *Bollards* is the space defined, more than the objects used to delineate that space. The true subject of *Field* is the manicured lawn in which it sits – the cultivated landscape. The landscape of Powerstock Common appears to be very literally the subject of the work, having attention drawn to its physical boundaries by the difference of the cultural object imposed within it and the territory it claims.

With Phase 4 Dean moves effortlessly into Krauss’ speculative category of expanded painting where tensions will reside between issues of “uniqueness” and “reproducibility”.

Down at the back end of the railway arch we find a simultaneous reference to the past and a look to the future in *Ode to the Shrunken Head of Sculpture*, 2013, where the inverted shop counter offers seating and digital prints displayed within refer to a possible text yet to be written by the artist. Like chameleons on the distressed brick wall of the Arch, hang a series of amorphous painted surfaces (cast from a piece of lava brought from Iceland as ballast in the late 18th century), survivors of an earlier installation¹⁰ and now integrated in a new context alongside *Chainsaw Massacre*, a sound loop to compete with the intermittent rumble of trains above. Ultimately, Dean’s subject is context.

Dean’s ‘significant relationship’ with her host organisation is perhaps cemented by a shared interest in diversity, which, for both parties, makes total sense. To quote Krauss again: “But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from

⁹ Wikimedia Commons (or simply Commons) is an online repository of free-use images, sound, and other media files.[2] It is a project of the Wikimedia Foundation.

¹⁰ *Pertaining to Things Natural*, 2012, Chelsea Physic Garden, London

another... practice is not defined in relation to a given medium but in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms for which any medium... might be used”.

And in that case, David Crawforth¹¹ is probably right when he says Dean’s work talks more directly (if you’re prepared to listen) than an academic interpretation of fine art traditions might allow, and has more in common with Theatre’s imaginary “fourth wall”...

Naomi Siderfin
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¹¹ David Crawforth and Naomi Siderfin are the co-curators and artist directors of Beaconsfield