

ARTFORUM

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BOSTON

CORNELIA PARKER

INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

Cornelia Parker first came to public attention in 1988 by arranging for a steamroller to level a scavenged collection of silver objects to create the raw materials for a large-scale sculpture. Since then, melting, slicing, crushing, shooting, and exploding objects (with the assistance of the Royal Mint, Colt Firearms, and the British Army) and recycling the results into eloquently arranged installations has become the trademark of Parker's creative process. The more than sixty sculptures, photographs, and drawings in the British sculptor's first major American survey combined Dadaist wit with Actionist shamanism and ritual. Found objects ranging from teapots and wedding bands to feathers, snake venom, and woolly mammoth hair were transformed into metaphorically rich artifacts invoking royal history, literature, religion, and the paranormal.

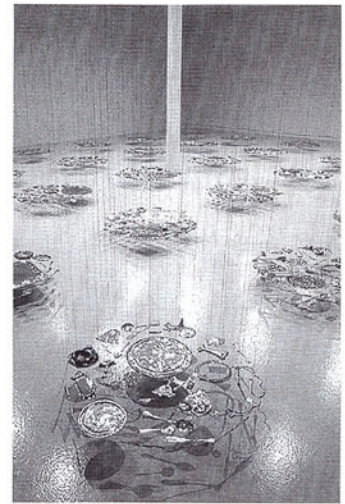
Thirty Pieces of Silver, 1988–89, is a room-size installation of steamrolled silverware, candlesticks, and silver-plated musical instruments orchestrated into thirty groups or "pools" that hang at shin height from the ceiling. The title refers to the coins for which Judas betrayed Christ, and the concept of Parker's piece involves symbolically killing off one set of values (class pretension, personal possession) to reveal another—in this case, the base metal to be resurrected again as sculpture. Parker also re-created, in slightly different scales and arrangements, two recent site-specific hanging sculptures: *A Side of England*, 1999, a suspended composition of chunks of white chalk retrieved from a cliff at Beachy Head, an infamous British suicide magnet; and *Hanging Fire (suspected arson)*, 1999/2000, which comprises dangling charcoal fragments from the burned remains of a London factory

in a stylized bonfire shape. The three works, which the artist refers to as her 3-D silver, chalk, and charcoal drawings, are visually rich ruminations on violence and death counterpointed by evocations of flight and transcendence. Suspended from wires attached to the ceiling, they also reflect Parker's Yves Klein-like desire to defy gravity.

Equally thought provoking and elegant are the many small pieces that were assembled in the ICA's upper galleries. Displayed under glass, framed, or placed on a slide and projected onto the wall, these objects metamorphose from detritus to poetry. The matter-of-fact titles indicate historical origins and Parker's manipulations: *Tarnish from the Inside of Henry the Eighth's Armour*, 1998; *Feather that Went to the Top of Everest*, 1997; *Spider that Died in Mark Twain's House*, 1997. "Very often," says Parker, "the sculpture is just a flimsy excuse for me to get my hands on these things that change the face of history." The tragic-comic surrealist still life *Shared Fate*, 1998, for example, consists of a burned loaf of bread, the front page of *The Times* of London, a silk necktie, leather gloves, and a deck of cards. Each item was sliced by Parker with the guillotine blade that beheaded Marie Antoinette (now in the collection of Madame Tussaud's London "Chamber of Horrors").

Parker, who credits much of her interest in the death and resurrection of cultural artifacts to her Catholic upbringing in England, is a marvelous combination of satirist, cultural anthropologist, mad scientist, criminologist, and alchemist, with a gift for making the unnoticed pieces of life relevant and visually compelling.

—Francine Koslow Miller



Cornelia Parker, *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (detail), 1988–89, silver plate and metal wire, dimensions variable. Installation view.