

The Harvard Crimson  
February 11, 2000

## HYPNOTIST-COLLECTOR CORNELIA PARKER COMES TO AMERICA

By **TERI WANG**  
CRIMSON STAFF WRITER

Spider corpses and snake venom are among the sculptor Cornelia Parker's materials—guillotines and explosives are among her tools. These are the things that keep Parker up at night, "the things that make the hair on the back of my neck stand up," as she puts it.

Parker is already well-known in her native England: she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997 and had a solo show at the Serpentine Gallery in 1998. But the exhibit now showing exclusively at the ICA is Parker's first stateside museum survey. It is a mesmerizing show, covering a decade of her magical and witty work.

Beholder beware: Parker is a sneaky sort of artist. While the explanatory placards that museum curators nail up beside the art are generally a waste of time, Parker packs conceptual punch right in the average aesthete's blind spot—when looking at her work, do stop and read the captions.

For instance, one of her pieces is a long piece of metal wire strung through the eye of a needle. The little placard says that the piece is called *Three Fathoms in a Thimble* and made out of a "silver thimble drawn into wire and threaded through a needle." Eloquent, elegant, it clicks.

Or take the *Spider that Died in Mark Twain's House*, sandwiched between two glass slides and projected on the wall. Although the piece itself is visually arresting, something—some poignancy, some aura—is added by the knowledge that it was in Twain's house that the spider died.

In another piece, *Shared Fate*, we see an array of objects—a pair of gloves, a deck of cards—sliced into by that most humane of execution devices, the guillotine. This wasn't just any big blade; it was, as the caption informs us, the one used to behead Marie Antoinette, now too rusty to slice bread.

At times, Parker's verbal wit is the match that lights otherwise dull embers. *Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon*, benefits greatly from her title and written explication—"Georgian silver spoon drawn to the height of Niagara Falls." Likewise, *Measuring Liberty with a Dollar*, made of a silver dollar drawn into a wire the height of the Statue of Liberty, is not primarily a visual experience. If we didn't have Parker's clever titles and explanations, one work might easily be cast aside as a messy tangle of wire, while the other, neatly coiled, has only some nice, simple formal qualities.

On some level, her art seems more dependent on the play of language than visual ingenuity. A number of her found objects make this particularly clear, such as *Breath of a Librarian*, a deflated black balloon found in the reading room of the British Library. Works like this

might lead us to wonder whether collector, rather than sculptor, might be a better description for Parker.

Parker is the consummate pack-rat, collecting and cherishing all kinds of seemingly worthless objects—rocks, feathers, tarnish rubbings. She combines these materials in ways that are often stunning visually, and, at the same time, she uses them as a means of making associations and narratives. She says that she is intrigued by Freud's theory of the unconscious and has made a photograph of a white feather that came from

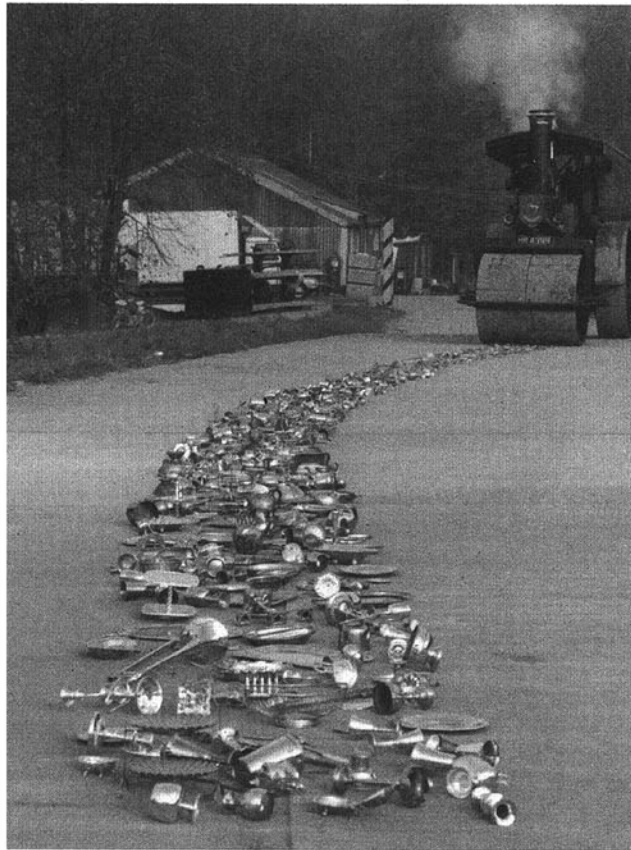
nating, many of her pieces are also visually spectacular. Admiration for the British landscape painter J.M.W. Turner and a good rummage through the basement of the Tate led her to the "Room for Margins" series. In Turner's time, no corners were cut and paintings were dutifully double-backed—two layers of canvas were used. Turning over the Turners, she placed the 200-year-old canvas backings under glass. Because a horizontal wooden support directly bisected the back of the canvas, a region of the backing was left less weathered, lighter in tone than the rest, so that a pale horizontal bar runs across the middle of each. The canvases look like a miniature Rothkos in sepia tones. Rothko wanted to create "the modern landscape," so the association comes full circle, again.

The best of Parker's work, like "Room for Margins," depend on such effective combinations of the visual and the narrative aspects of her art. The most memorable have as much visual as verbal wit, and can stand alone without the extra information, the story, imparted by the caption. A visit to a firearm factory yielded two Colt 45 revolvers, arrested mid-production and polished, so that they look soft and immature, almost harmless. Visually, the pair of handguns look like two Nefertitis moving in for a kiss.

Parker's best tricks are her acts of levitation. The ICA is filled with the slender threads by which Parker hangs these pieces in a permanent state of suspense. In a piece called *Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson)*, the charred remains of a London factory fire are hung a foot above ground by barely visible metal wires. The lumps of blackened charcoal, some suspended from their center of mass, some askew, are arranged with the larger pieces on the bottom, getting smaller towards the top. The living fire resides in incinerated stasis; the figurative and literal, the pun and the sculptural elegance of the piece, mingle together.

*Thirty Pieces of Silver*, a Biblical reference to Judas's bounty for his betrayal of Christ is another of Parker's hanging pieces. A cascade of fishing line tenuously holds, in a five-by-six array, thirty pools of steamrolled silverware, from forks to platters to trombones. A slight rumbling from the Green Line below and the room is awash with music. A spiritual experience indeed—it's a near miracle that all those pieces manage to hang without tangling.

Unlike the other pieces of display, *Thirty Pieces of Silver* is accompanied by a photograph of its making. Parker has discontinued documenting the progress of her work photographically, preferring to keep some of the mystery. In all truth, seeing the photo, which is on display beside the finished product at the ICA, makes that final product more vivid. One is given the opportunity to muse about both the chicken and the egg.



*Thirty Pieces of Silver*, Tate Gallery, 1988-9, work in progress. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

the pillow on the infamous couch. The feather is associated with slumber, slumber with dreams, dreams with the unconscious and then we're back again at Freud. Parker often takes us on these wonderful little loops. She strings these narratives and chains of association through both her finished works and their making. With *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, Parker could have chosen to blow up the garden shed herself. Instead, she called up the British Army and asked them to do it, because that would make a better story.

While her narratives and plays of language are fasci-