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ART INSTALLATION

Poetry from the underground

Edwin Heathcote
is enthralled by
Cornelia Parker's work
exploring time, space
and architecture

After more than 150 years of increasingly complex interventions, Professor John Burland from Imperial College, London, decided the way to prevent the Tower of Pisa from toppling was to excavate some earth from one side so the tower would settle slightly back. This extraordinarily simple proposal worked and the tower is open again.

Some of the clumps of clay excavated from beneath the tower have now been reunited in one of London's most enthralling and visually captivating installations of recent years. The rocky lumps have been suspended on fine twine from the ceiling of the gallery at the Royal Institute of British Architects in Portland Place by Cornelia Parker.

"Subconscious of a Monument" populates this stiff, rather masonic art deco room in the most gripping way, partially filling the space below waist level while the upper part of the room is sliced through with translucent suspension wires descending like fine rain and giving the narrow, dour room an incredible depth.

The work is very much in the tradition of Parker's earlier pieces, exploded things inhabiting space that aims to question gravity, weight

and the very essence of matter. Her beautiful "Left Luggage" involved baggage left on a platform connected by similar threads to a railway carriage, while "Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View" saw the shattered remains of a garden shed (blown-up to order by the army) suspended from the ceiling and distributed around a single light bulb. These are pieces about the dramatic death of ordinary objects, the supernovas of the everyday.

The kind of post-*Matrix*, martial arts filmic trickery in which a camera moves around a figure suspended in mid-air karate kick, or of the

nano-moment in which an explosion erupts, once so dramatic, now such a cliché, is revisited here, all strings attached.

The installation is viewed only through an open double door so we are denied the opportunity to walk through it, which would undoubtedly end up in a spaghetti of tangled string.

Like its predecessors, this exhibition has profound things to say about the suspension of time, the impossibility of being at the centre, the nature of matter and anti-matter and of the object's relationship to the space in which it exists. These are, or at least should

be, the fundamental preoccupations of architecture, yet architecture exhibitions consistently fail to address them. It is ironic that it takes an artist to elucidate the concerns of the tectonic but it is good that at least someone is doing it.

It is also a credit to the RIBA, which has taken much deserved criticism for the quality of its own shows, that it has had the wit to move outside its immediate world to present this marvellous, thought-provoking installation.

RIBA, 66 Portland Place, London, until 25 October. Tel 020 7580 5533



Vintage twine: Parker's 'Subconscious of a Monument' suspends time

Daniel Lynch