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Artist Cornelia Parker doesn't stop with lightning and fire -- she's even eyed outer space

By Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic
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British sculptor Cornelia Parker has big plans.

"I'd love to do something like put a piece of moon rock on Mars and a piece of Mars on the moon, a sort of reverse archaeology," she said while in San Francisco recently to install her two-work show at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. No land artist or found-object sculptor has thought this big before. And, in Texas eight years ago on an artist's residency, Parker got as far as interesting NASA in her proposal to send a meteor back into space.

"They seemed very enthusiastic," she said, "but I think they had a lot of political problems around that time, there was all this anti-NASA stuff. Then I got back to London, and tried to do it long-distance, and it was much harder. And there was all this talk about why are we spending American tax dollars supporting a British artist. It got a lot more problematic. So I thought about approaching the Russians." A ripple of laughter announced that that move never got beyond the thinking stage.

Anyone who meets Parker, 49, will understand how she could get even a NASA nerd on board with a zany idea such as forwarding a meteorite through the cosmos. Tall, lithe and quick-tongued, Parker radiates enthusiasm for her sly, outlandish art ideas.

Born and raised in rural Cheshire, England, Parker decided to become an artist at 15, after a visit to the Tate Gallery, since renamed Tate Britain. She earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Reading and was nominated in 1997 for the prestigious Turner Prize. In 1995, she staged a collaborative work that consisted of exhibiting the actress Tilda Swinton in a large glass case. Completing a fateful circuit, a powerful example of her sculpture -- an exploded shed -- appeared in the 2000 opening of Tate Modern in London. Thereafter it even cropped up in Ian McEwan's 2005 novel "Saturday." McEwan's neurosurgeon hero, attending the grand opening event, finds Parker's piece the only work on view that makes intuitive sense to him. Parker didn't even meet McEwan until some months after the novel's publication.

She thinks outside the confines of sculptural tradition so comfortably, Parker explained, because of a change of direction in her art studies at the University of Reading around 1980.

"I started doing sculpture rather than painting," she said, when "I was halfway through my degree and I hadn't really done any introduction courses in sculpture. ... I'd missed all the technical stuff. I didn't really know how to weld or forge or carve or model. I'd sort of evaded all those technique classes, so I had no technique. I still haven't got any technique. So what I was obliged to do was use friction. I decided I was going to harness friction that exists in the world."

Hence her resort to forces such as lightning and fire and operations such as throwing objects from high places. "When I got to know about Arte Povera" (the Italian strain of post-minimalism) "and Yves Klein and things like that in art school, I thought 'Oh, OK, it's doable,' "

Parker said. Klein (1928-1962) had famously made "paintings" with a flame-thrower and sold certificates that entitled the buyer to unspecified passages of empty space.

In a 1992 piece, "Words that Define Gravity," Parker wrote longhand a dictionary definition of "gravity," replicated each written word in cast lead and threw it off a high cliff. To complete the work, she collected the lead words, mangled by the fall, and suspended them on threads just above gallery floor level. "The words got made illegible by real gravity," as Parker put it.

The secret challenge of that piece came in facing her fear of heights. She sees much of her work as an almost occult matter of fending off happenings she dreads.

"Maybe it's my Catholic upbringing," Parker said. "I grew up thinking that Armageddon was just around the corner -- now I know it is, with global warming and all. I can keep it at bay by doing the work. It's a sort of reverse sympathetic magic. I'm always doing it so it doesn't happen to me."

She refers to the operations she carries out or annexes in her work as "cartoon deaths": pitching off a cliff, passing under a steamroller, being exploded or incinerated.

A 2000 Parker piece titled "Hat Burnt by a Meteorite" -- a hat that evokes the charismatic artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), who never appeared in public without one -- tricks us into seeing it as the trace of an awful blow of fate. But neither the hat nor its wearer was struck by a meteorite. "There's no lie in there if you read the title carefully," Parker said. "I got an iron meteorite and heated it with a blowtorch and carefully applied it to the hat. ... I quite like the idea of a meteor by horrible chance landing, and then there's this decision about heating something up and applying it very carefully."

When I wondered aloud whether Parker had not developed a skill peculiar to her artist self, despite her lack of "technique," she said yes, "I kill things off and then resurrect them, which is where suspension helps."

In the pendant pieces at Yerba Buena, she has resurrected two burned-down churches in Texas and Alabama, one struck by lightning, the other by arson. In each case, she has hung from the ceiling nearly invisible threads studded like macabre beaded curtains with the building's charred remains.

"If the remains of the church were just laid on the floor, it would be like a morgue," Parker said. "They would be full of pathos, and they'd be nothing more than just killed-off churches. But because I've put them in the air, they're resurrected again and then they're art and they take on the language of art. When I look at them I can't help but think of (Franz) Kline or Motherwell or Rothko or whoever. ... That's not the reason to make the work at all, but once you start fooling around arranging materials, they start to take on the look of something."

But many visitors to Yerba Buena will find the sociological facts behind Parker's "resurrected" churches more compelling than their artistic echoes.

"It was very lucky that while I was there, a church got struck by lightning," Parker said of her 1997 Texas residency. "Lucky not for the church, but for me. So I drove down. ... When I got there I was struck by this beautiful, iridescent, newly burnt charcoal. Anyway, (the minister) said, 'Yeah, take what you like.' ... I asked him how he felt about having his church struck by lightning. You know, in insurance terms it's deemed an 'act of God.' And he said 'Oh yes, I think God wants us to have a bigger, better church.' He was very optimistic, very upbeat."

The Phoenix Art Museum bought the 1997 piece. When the For-Site Foundation in Nevada City invited her to do another residency in 2005, she saw an opportunity to make a companion piece involving a church incinerated by arson.

"I'd already talked to the church builders who were going to rebuild the (lightning-struck) church," Parker said. "There were a retired architect and retired builders and plumbers and they go 'round rebuilding churches. And I asked them, 'Do lots of churches get burned down?' -- I couldn't believe they all got struck by lightning -- and they said, 'Well, sadly, mostly the black congregation churches get arsoned and we go and rebuild them.' They were white guys and apparently they'd rebuilt quite a few black congregation churches. That was the first I'd heard of this phenomenon. I thought that was something that had died out in the '60s, but apparently it happens fairly often. ... I just kept monitoring church arsons on the Internet -- you know, Google news alerts -- you can get news alerts about almost anything. I still get them. Sadly, a good 90 percent of them were in the South." Knowing that she made "Anti-Mass" (2005) from the by-product of racist arson lends her YBCA show an uncharacteristically tragic note.

"I don't want my work to be issue-based," Parker said. "I want people to be able to read it in lots of different ways. ... With the kind of symmetry of the two pieces here, I worried that it might be a bit didactic, but I really needed to do it. ... This will probably be the only time they're seen together, so it's kind of a unique moment. And if they show on their own, they'll have their own reference, not necessarily to do with this God versus man thing."

Cornelia Parker: New Work: Sculpture. Through March 5. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. (415) 978-2787, www.ybca.org.