

Nick Cave: Power & Cycles

The politics of the human body lies at the beating heart of Cave's sculptural imagination. It charges both his political and his material thinking as an artist, coordinating his works' elaborate structures and their protective overlays, concealing and revealing the bodies underneath. The resulting multipartite and mixed media works all call for attention and for change, pushing the boundaries of figuration, while exploring the rich possibilities of fabrication. Found and made are combined: part-object and part-sculpture harmonized. Every single element plays its part within the larger whole, from the worn surface of a carved wooden head and the patina of a used toy to the delicate glitter of a sewn button and the intricate bloom of an artificial flower.

The ancient idea of *glamourie* comes to mind when looking at Cave's work. At the origin of the word 'glamour' today, it points to a mysterious, spell-like condition that can give objects magical qualities that have the power to bedazzle and bewitch, creating visions and capturing contemplative thought. Cave's sculpture has something of this older spirit, communicating it with the most contemporary of material means. Our eyes are sucked up into the sensuality of his forms as we find ourselves ensnared by the beads, fibres and fabrics of Cave's sculptures, drawn to their details as we are struck by their overall effects. With a background in performance and dance - and well-known for his earlier powerful *Soundsuits*, activated by their material hustle and bustle - the non-visual plays a fascinating role in this too. Cave is extremely adept in asking us to look and listen simultaneously: to see voices and imagine sounds in his sculpturally resonant objects - objects that are sometimes moving, sometimes still. The vibrant juxtapositions of colours, materials and surfaces play important roles in the imaginary body and soundscapes he makes. Often exuberant and declaratory, at other times quietly shaping the forms of a whisper, a homage, or a prayer. Even when standing unworn and sound-less, Cave's sculptures are never silent.

The group of works shown here in *Nick Cave: Power & Cycles* offers compelling insight into his present work. *Arm Peace* is a play on words. It recalls the language of 1960s and 1970s conceptual art - the art 'pieces' of artists such as Bruce Nauman and Bruce McLean, for example, made at a time when sculpture and performance were beginning to hold hands. *Arm Peace* is also a declaration of peaceful endeavor: a determined 'call for peace,' rather than a 'call to arms' and to pick up weapons. The sculpture is a cast taken from the artist's own body. There is a striking collision and coalition of material and meaning when bronze casts are used for the representation of black bodies. We have become well-accustomed to seeing white bodies cast in bronze in urban spaces, commemorating nations' dignitaries on plinths. Cave, however, takes things in a different, and plinth-less, direction. Hung directly on the white walls of the gallery *Arm Peace* addresses viewers directly while implicating the whole room in its message. Hanging from the sculpture we find a wreath of flowers, offered up in a gesture of defiance and remembrance.

At the centre of the display hangs a striking new work called *Chain Reaction*. This 4-meter-tall multipartite sculpture comprises 15 suspended chains - resin casts of interlocking arms and wrists, taken from the artist's own body, hung in concentric circles in the gallery. On the floor, underneath these hanging hands, Cave has included other sculptural objects, including heads, pillows and carved eagles. These objects, placed closely together in interactive relationships, extend the life and death narratives suspended above, at once grounding them in repose and sleep, as well as giving them the capacity for flight. Gravity,

one of main conditions that sculpture always has to deal with, is thus given a quasi-thematic role here: these are grave and weighty issues that inhabit shared space and the ground we all walk on.

Chain Reaction is a work with a moving historical resonance, evoking the chaining together of slaves, rendered as disembodied body fragments. Hung as a circular constellation, the ensemble of conjoined body parts floats in ghostly and orbital ways. It is a powerful call for togetherness and interdependence, for defiance and compassion: a work which stops us in our tracks, at once sharing our space and confronting us at the same time. A demonstrative act of collective-portraiture as well as individual self-portraiture, *Chain Reaction* invites us to react and reflect on the world and on what can be achieved when human beings come together in acts of mutual support and alliance.

Tondo is another wall-bound sculpture. Historically, a tondo describes a circular painting, a carved relief or a modelled plaque. Perfectly poised – round, but not ‘in the round’ – it oscillates between painting and sculpture. Cave takes up these historical associations and makes the genre his own. Instead of a traditional image of a mother and child, common in many Italian tondos, we are faced with the weather patterns of climate change and of brain scans of children in urban districts where gun crime is high. *Tondo* is thus a powerful visual and thermal image of mother earth and youth, both combined in damaged and turbulent states.

His *Tondos* work on many levels: a world, a head, a disc, a vessel... Their compelling shifts in register have a surrealistic quality and we might think of Meret Oppenheim’s *Fur-covered Cup, Saucer, and Spoon* (1936), that much-loved surrealist object regularly on display in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, since its acquisition in 1936. Like Cave’s, Oppenheim’s work highlights the ways in which material and bodily allurements carry unsettling qualities too. The distant memory of such work serves to highlight the power and presence of Cave’s sculptural approach to assemblage today, bringing together visual forms and associations that surprise and compel in equal measure, inviting us to look, think and think again.

Dr Jon Wood