

Ambushed by ideas of the new

By Richard Cork

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Entering the handsomely renovated Gallery 1 at Spike Island is like discovering one of the most epic art spaces in Britain. Nothing prepares you for the sheer immensity of this converted tea-packing factory. Its loftiness is astonishing, and so is the light filling the vast chamber even on a dull, rainy day.

The size and luminosity transform everything on display there, and the seven young artists in Working Things Out ambush us with stimulating new ideas about what sculpture might be. Most of the exhibits take everyday objects, investing them with unexpected identities. Sophie Macpherson, from Glasgow, seizes on the familiarity of shoe moulds. But she gives them a sense of strangeness and fragility by hollowing out their shapes on wood panels punctured, disconcertingly, with pins.

Jonathan Owen is fascinated by his childhood memories of neighbours painting their drainpipes in Edinburgh. By the time he has finished with his handcrafted version, though, the drainpipe's normal function has been subverted by papier-mâché, turning it into a see-through object fashioned in a perversely decorative arts-and-crafts style.

The notion of paradox runs through this sparky exhibition, taking us by surprise at every turn. Richard Forster scatters blue splashes across the floor, looking at first like a latter-day Jackson Pollock. Yet these blobs are solid, manufactured pieces of resin: we can step on them without fear of destroying any vulnerable paint. And Forster juxtaposes them with a framed picture on the wall of families assembled in solemn congregation. Although it looks like a monochrome photograph, based on an illustration he found in a National Geographic magazine, this supremely deceptive image turns out to be a skilful pencil drawing. At the same time, the religious nature of the event depicted by Forster makes us aware of the cathedral-like proportions of Spike Island's gallery. Like most of his fellow-artists, he has responded to the remarkable aura of the site itself.

They are not, however, content merely to echo the space's existing character. Haroon Mirza, who provides the most powerful exhibit, challenges our perceptions of these cool, white surroundings. He has dumped an old metal dustbin on the floor. Nothing could be more clapped-out, and yet Mirza charges the bin with a haunting strangeness. On its rim, a broken glass sheet provides precarious support for a replica Bush radio from the 1950s. Eerie sounds wash over us, evoking foghorns at sea or the sinister purring of robotic cats. They seem to issue from a fearful, malfunctioning world, and Mirza adds to the sense of menace by making steam flow out from the bin. A bicycle light flashes through the mist, as if impelled by an urge to warn. The whole macabre ensemble is called "Nightlight FM", adding to our suspicion that we are caught up in some kind of insomniac's trauma.

The nocturnal mood becomes even more inescapable throughout a dramatic work installed in Gallery 2. Its entire monumental space is darkened, thereby providing a suitably ominous setting for a short film shot at night by Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer. Inspired by their recent experience in New York, they steal into the Metropolitan Museum long after everyone else has left. Unimpeded even by a security guard, they appear to roam freely through the building with the aid of a flashing strobic light.

So we are pitched into their startling journey, constantly confronted by sudden, revelatory glimpses of sculpture from widely disparate eras and civilisations. A refined head of a medieval princess seizes our vision, only to be replaced by a ferocious oriental warrior or an ancient, battered carving of a horned animal. The

conventional chronology dictating normal museum display gives way, here, to a fitful and jarring alternative. We are forced to witness a hugely unpredictable dialogue between objects that seem, initially, to have nothing in common but gradually come to share a feeling of shock. They all appear caught unawares, just as we are.

Nashashibi and Skaer generate a fresh way of looking, liberated from the dutiful feeling so often induced by rows and rows of display cases and explanatory captions in daytime museums. Animated by the strobing light, these flashing sculptural forms take on an unexpected and stimulating life of their own.

Finally, in the Project Space, Primrose Coke attempts to free sculpture from the gallery's confines altogether. "This Way For Paradise" are the words roughly splashed in red paint near the doorway. Yet there is nothing at all ecstatic about the handmade structures standing in the room. Tall, rough-hewn and festooned with ribbons and clusters of wood, they look oddly displaced or even forlorn. Mirrors set at uneasy diagonals on the floor offer us edgy reflections of ourselves, gazing in puzzlement at these enigmatic presences. They all appear to be waiting. And sure enough, a home-movie-style film on the far wall shows them galvanised into action.

There, transposed to a landscape setting, they start revolving crazily in the breeze. Coke herself, clad in a warm white pullover, darts among them and ensures that they perform with maximum effect. She is like a tireless director, encouraging her actors to burst into exclamatory dynamism. And then we realise what these structures have now become: bird-scarers, protecting the rural haven from predatory menace. Looking at them, we share their sense of outdoor emancipation. In the end, though, we turn back to Coke's sculpture and once again grow conscious of their silent, motionless existence in the gallery, still waiting for the artist to release their pent-up energies into the wild.

'Working Things Out' and 'Flash in the Metropolitan' continue at Spike Island, Bristol until September 16. Primrose Coke's solo show in the Project Space continues until August 5. Tel +44 (0) 117 929 2266