

Nicholas Pope

*Sins and Virtues*

15 September - 10 November

Belief is what I Believe In: On the Work of Nicholas Pope

Paul Auster's collection of short stories, *True Tales of American Life*, 2002, contains a short anecdote about a woman who is woken up one morning by her elderly neighbour who is chopping the tree down outside his house. She ventures outside to ask him what he is doing and if he needs help and the response surprises her. He reasons that as he nears the end of his life he feels affronted by the tree because it will outlive him. The gentleman had grown up in this house and seen the tree grow with him and had woken up that morning and decided to chop it down. This image of wilful destruction as a protest against the passing of time has stayed with me.

We often act on the world until it bears the imprint of ourselves. The sullen child nudging their fork into cold mashed potato, snowmen in the winter and sandcastles in the summer. Bubbles shaped into beards in the bath. We're attracted to materials that we can shape and mould, that resist fixedness. Sculpting our environment enables us to move from utility into open-ended play or negotiate our surroundings from a fresh perspective. Objects are like sponges that take our place in the world in our absence. Many societies invest inanimate items with emblematic and totemic qualities, infused with animist properties. We make monuments that replace the fragility of the skin with the resilience of bronze, that resist the urge to forget by impeding the corrosive qualities of time. Sculpture often seems caught between two relationships to time — protest and resistance, elevated and earthly, oscillating between attempts to forget the body and remind people of it.

In 2012, I came across a sculpture by Nicholas Pope called *The Tongues of Fire from Heaven to Earth*, 1992. It had a squat white base and pink attenuated tendrils that were held up a doughy ball. While it was made from porcelain, it was fashioned crudely from what looked like baked play dough. Its modest scale and ad-hoc qualities subverted the portentous title, attracting me to more of the artist's work which felt restless, messy, and candid. I learned that the artist had fallen very ill in the early Eighties. This had precipitated a move away from the art world after a period of huge success. After a hiatus, he had come back to making work, replacing the elegant formalism of his earlier sculptures with something more protean. Heavy materials such as stone, marble and wood gave way to softer and more malleable choices of clay and felt that could be more easily handled in the studio. Carving and chiselling were replaced by coiling, drawing and knitting, and yet while the materials and processes became softer, the subject matter took on a more confrontational tone. Overt religious iconography with a bright chromaticism and fungal forms provided the sculptures with a singularity and renewed sense of urgency. The work owed more to a visionary artist and poet like William Blake than sculptural peers such as Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg.

I remember my first vivid encounter with Nick at his studio in Much Marcle, Herefordshire. He picked me up at the train station in his open-top classic sports car. As we sped through the winding country roads, he told me that an accident would be the end of us. There is nothing like feeling the wind in your hair at 60 miles an hour to remind you of your own vulnerability. Relieved to make it to his studio, we had lunch as he showed me his work. He dug out a jelly sculpture that he wrapped in cling film and, as it wobbled about, Nick enthused about its translucence and proximity to glass. The conversation led to a two-year project that resulted in the commission *The Conundrum of the Chalices of the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Virtues*, 2014, produced in collaboration with the glass maker James Maskrey at the National Glass Centre. This commission formed the centre piece of an exhibition that travelled between Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland and Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff in 2016. It included presentations by a younger generation of artists including Jonathan Baldock, Nick Evans, Katie Cuddon, Emma Hart, Lorna Macintyre and Maria Zahle.

Reflecting on the work now, it feels important to talk a little about how the chalices were made. Due to Parkinson's, Nick's mobility is reduced and he has had to find new ways of working that accommodate his decreased stamina. To make the glass chalices, Maskrey translated Nick's original oil stick drawings as he stood on the sideline clutching the photocopies. I would occasionally pop by to offer moral support only to see a litany of broken and failed attempts. There was much discussion about getting the right amount of "wobble and wonkiness" into the chalices to faithfully translate the original drawings. The work is intended to be viewed en masse with the spectator urged to explore the correspondences between the drawings and glass chalices. With bulging and jutting spikes, each form rudely interrupts the other, creating a conversational multitude. Gluttony's shallow blue basin is completed by yellow fist-like appendages. Pride stands tall as if before a fall. We can see what has been translated between idea and execution and what has been left behind in the process. In an untypical approach, the resultant sculptures are much smaller than the original drawings and this act of sculptural miniaturisation further focuses their intensity. The conundrum in the title speaks of a riddle without an answer. Perhaps we all exist somewhere between what we want to be and what we are, somewhere between greediness and charitableness. We remain a work in progress. Nick seems to be suggesting that lived experience remains a conundrum, that belief in believing, even when you don't have the answers, may be enough.

The earliest forms of blown glass were found in modern day Iran, dating from the 2nd century BC, and the process of glass making has changed little. The glass form is made at speed in physically demanding conditions by blowing a lung-full of air down a pipe as the glass blower spins and shapes the vessel. It is sculpture as a type of performance — you have one shot at it as the glass can only be modified in its heated state. It solidifies quickly as it cools down and this is the riskiest part of the process, as glass is liable to crack under the slightest duress. It is a hard material and incredibly fragile — something that could potentially last hundreds of years only to be smashed in an instant. The visually seductive qualities of the medium are dramatised by the process of their making and the potential of their unmaking.

While Pope was brought up Anglican and his work contains overt Catholic imagery, it often feels that faith surfaces as an inquisition. Absolute belief is replaced by something uncertain — the exalted is always connected to the earth. The chalice is one of the most sacred elements of Christian liturgical surface; the vessel holds wine that serves as a metaphor for the blood of Christ. Nick's sculptures often feel like proxy bodies, and invested with a certain animism, they become objects in place of absent (vulnerable) subjects. The chalices are part of a much larger project that Nick has been working on since the early nineties. The sculptural component forms part of *The Oratory of Heavenly Space*, a non-denominational chapel that could be used as a space for worship without doctrine. Nick's other religiously themed public proposals include *Oblivion (detail) Recycling Plant a la Ledoux or a Section '106' Regeneration Project*, 1999, a volcano-like structure that operates as a furnace for devouring bodies and burning souls. Partially inspired by the visionary architecture of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux the structure comes with elevators for maximum efficiency. The third part of this theological triptych includes the *Motor Way Service Station of the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Virtues*, 1998. The plans for the station are laid out in a series of drawings and — in a sly nod to countless prosaic motorway cafes — a laminated menu made in collaboration with the writer Kevin Mount.

The work re-stages the purgatorial space of the service station and turns it into a religious site, where the ecclesiastical merges with the unremarkable. A place you would usually go for a "magazine, a muffin and a piss" is recast with typical Pope absurdism. Those travelling northbound could pop in to see the seven virtues, while on their journeys back down south drive by the seven sins and pee in the unisex urinals (Nick really has thought of everything). For the frequent traveller, faith becomes embedded in the quotidian experience of the everyday. Like much of Nick's work there is a heavy dose of satire and bodily humour mixed in with the grandiose themes. Collectively, these works put belief into conversation with doubt, and monumentality into dialogue with precarity.

While much has been written about the difference between the first and second phases of Nick's career, his work has always been bound by a persistent sense of instability, of objects teetering on the edge of imminent collapse. He has made a point of looking down as well as up. Collectively, his sculptures attempt to articulate the (in)capabilities of the body. They ask big questions about fundamental topics. What is faith? Can art play an ameliorative role in a moment of ill health? What does it mean for an object to stand in for an absent subject? Pope's sculptures are saturated with the lived experiences of flawed lives — their pleasures, anxieties, intimacies and fragilities.

George Vasey

Nicholas Pope b.1949. Lives and Works in Ledbury and London, UK. Selected past exhibitions include Sticky Intimacy, Chapter, Cardiff, UK, 2016, Baldock Pope Zahle, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, UK, 2016, Nicholas Pope: The Apostles Speaking in Tongues, Salisbury Cathedral, Salisbury, UK, 2014, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, 2014, New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park, Salisbury, UK, 2013, The Ten Commandments in Flowing Light, Art & Project, Slootdorp, The Netherlands, 2001, Art Now: Nicholas Pope: The Apostles Speaking in Tongues, Tate Gallery, London, UK, 1996, Art & Project, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1992; Waddington Galleries, London, UK, 1986; Nicholas Pope: Wax Drawings and Sculpture, John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK, 1982; Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands, 1981; British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1980; Summer Show 3, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK, 1976; Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 1976; The Condition of Sculpture, Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 1975.