

Jesus Wept

Colin Booth lives and works in St Leonards on Sea but has a well established practice as a sculptor exhibiting nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions have included *Metropolis*, Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury (2009); *Measure and Intuition*, 1 Canada Square, London (2010); *Institute of Play*, V&A Museum of Childhood, London (2010) and *Institute of Play and Other Collections*, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne (2011). Booth has also participated in *East Sussex Open* at Towner, Eastbourne (2011) and his work was included in an international exhibition at Sanyi Wood Sculpture Museum, Taiwan (2012).

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Jesus Wept

It's an expression my Irish neighbour uses a lot. Like many a Christian phrase, its original context has been eclipsed by its common usage as a mild – and perhaps these days, slightly tongue-in-cheek – expletive. Yet its original meaning is very powerful. The shortest verse in the King James Version of the Bible, it describes Jesus' sorrow at the death of his close friend Lazarus, who had died before Jesus was able to reach him, and whom he is moved to resurrect before all the mourners. The bare show of emotion in that succinct line is traditionally interpreted as demonstrating Jesus' very human compassion for the fate of mankind.

Colin Booth has appropriated the phrase for his first major public work, a neon text mounted on sixteen-foot-high scaffolding and installed on a barren plot next to St Leonards Warrior Square train station. The stark white tubing, foreboding Gothic font (close to the original Bible version) and unexpected text defy the usual kitsch connotations of neon signs. It is hard to anticipate how the audience will react. If public art today is tied into regeneration strategies, Booth rejects the celebratory and the neat instrumentalisation of artwork for a more ambiguous reading. Some might see the work as humorous, others as a comment on the surroundings. This area of St Leonard's, after all, has the forlorn air of the faded seaside resort, a place, God knows, that could use a little redemption and empathy. (One might also be tempted to relate the scaffolding to Christ's crucifixion.)

Jesus Wept is the first time Booth has used text in his work. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the pre-existing, imperfect object (in this case, the scaffolding or even the location) against the pristine and custom-made (here, the fragile, neon letters that were commissioned from an experienced fabricator) is one that is echoed in Booth's recent work. He appropriates discarded, once-functional objects – a hospital trolley, a decorator's trestle, a designer chair – to which he adds unexpected formal elements and specially constructed plinths and supports. One might indeed view the phrase 'Jesus Wept' as part of that category of objects that have lost their original value and authority.

However, Booth makes an important distinction between the Duchampian tradition of the 'found object', that is, an object that is not subsequently worked on but which simply undergoes a change of context, and what he prefers to term a 'chosen object', an object selected not arbitrarily but chosen to complement – sometimes sub-consciously – his existing body of work and which then becomes material towards a future composition. The chosen object, which is just the first of many choices made during the working process, is also a way of managing the limitless choices available. He refers to a quote from Stravinsky, who once wrote that he could only be creative by working within strict constraints: "My freedom consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings."

Although the chosen objects may then be worked on in a physical way (sanding, painting or turning into neon) or its existing physical qualities emphasised in relation to other objects, it is not always immediately clear when and if the artist has intervened. He has, for example, accumulated a collection of thousands of off-cuts from a furniture factory that look as though they might have been painted by the artist in various intense shades of blue, green or red; yet it turns out that they were already colour-coded by the wood yard to denote different types of wood such as beech or ash. Booth clearly enjoys this ambiguity and the fact that a decision – in this instance whether to use colour and which colour to use – has been made for him, allowing him to focus exclusively on the actual material he collects, organises and assembles in the studio.

To a large extent, then, Booth's work is generated in response to the materials he selects – their shape and size, their texture and colour – but, equally, he allows himself to be led by a sense of intuition. In one particular body of work, he has put together his off-cuts to create a number of floor-based assemblages and installations, including *Endless*, a cityscape of stacked blocks to which new elements could, in theory, endlessly be added. With their bold colour scheme and neat configurations, the works make unapologetic reference to Minimalism and Constructivism, yet they also recall children's building blocks or architectural maquettes. As with *Jesus Wept*, Booth never allows the past to dominate but confronts the historical with real-life references, contemporary materials, and a sense of contingency and playfulness.

Booth is not interested in making a moral statement with *Jesus Wept*; his is no evangelical attempt to save the souls of the locals. He is, after all, a local – one of the damned – himself. Furthermore, the piece is expected to be shown in different contexts in the future. Rather, he is interested in how the historical can have contemporary meaning, in the same way that, formally, the historic font of the text is made all the more striking for being translated into the resolutely modern neon. What significance does this familiar phrase 'Jesus Wept' – so poetic and compassionate, so loaded with religious and cultural history – have in an age of apathy, religious friction and broken community? Today's barrage of inane advertising and political jargon have numbed us emotionally, and made us cynical towards touchy-feely or ideological statements. Yet could the very brevity of the phrase resonate with a generation brought up on textspeak? Is it possible to move strangers with words or gestures, to find a universal language?

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