

COLIN BOOTH

Biography

- 2010 *Institute of Play*, V&A Museum of Childhood commission
- 2008 Professional Development Award, ACE South East
- 2002 Curator and participating artist, *Colour White*, De La Warr Pavilion. A survey of artists using white: from Naum Gabo and Ben Nicholson to Anish Kapoor and Callum Innes
- 2000-1 Major Award, Support for Individuals, ACE South East
- 1999-01 Part time MA Fine Art, University of Brighton
- 1997-8 Founder Electro Studios, artist's studios and gallery complex, St Leonards on Sea
- 1993-8 Launched and directed Hastings International Arts Festival for Young People (HYPFEST)
- 1993 Moved to Hastings and resumed painting
- 1982-93 Freelance film critic and journalist, *Literary Review*, *The Face*, *Time Out*
- 1980-2 Manager, Edinburgh Film Theatre and International Film Festival
- 1978-80 Freelance art critic, *Art Monthly*, *Artscribe*
- 1977-79 M Litt. Fine Art, Edinburgh University
Freelance curator, *New Abstraction*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
- 1979 Writer's Bursary, Scottish Arts Council
- 1975 Studio visits to Agnes Martin in Cuba, New Mexico and Brice Marden, New York
- 1973-6 BA Hons Fine Art (Painting) University of Northumbria

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Institute of Play & Other Collections

Like The Spanish City did when we were kids:
Playing and building in the work of COLIN BOOTH

30th June – 2nd October 2011

Modernist architecture, children's play and the building blocks they have in common are the background and material of Colin Booth's recent sculpture. He has had several exhibitions in the last year where he has explored these themes in sites including a national museum and a major office building in London's Canary Wharf.

Institute of Play and Other Collections is Booth's first solo show in his native area. International modernism never took root in the North East of England: Victor Pasmore's 1969 Apollo Pavilion in Peterlee has not been much loved; Owen Luder's notorious Brutalist "Get Carter" car park of 1962 was demolished in 2010.

The Laing Art Gallery, in contrast, is an example of late Edwardian Baroque architecture designed by (the unfortunately named) Cackett and Burns Dick who built many civic structures for Newcastle including the piers of the Tyne Bridge and the police/fire station. But, just after the Laing, they also built the permanent funfair Spanish City at the seaside in Whitley Bay, evoked in Dire Straits' 1980 song *Tunnel of Love*. Spanish City was a place for play while the Laing Art Gallery was an imposing place for improvement.

What was The Spanish City like when we were kids? It was fantasy architecture to entrance visitors and many came from as far away as the Glasgow shipyards to Whitley Bay for their annual week's holiday. Spanish City was a playground, exotic and gleaming white. It was a castle in Spain, a dream of future success and maybe, one day, of foreign holidays. It certainly was not modernist in form, but with its huge concrete dome, it prefigured key values of international modernism: aspirational, playful and white, as if sun-drenched.

The first real success of British modernist architecture was on England's sunnier south coast. The De La Warr Pavilion, designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, was built in 1935 at Bexhill-on-Sea in East Sussex. It was the first public building in the new international style in Britain: a masterpiece of concrete, steel and glass with clean lines and generous light, first a "people's palace" and now a major art gallery. The regenerative impact of contemporary art is well-known.

Colin Booth now lives just a few miles away from the De La Warr and his studio faces the site of the former St Leonard's Bathing Pool, or Lido, which opened

in 1933. His studio is filled with the reflected light from the sea, less than a hundred metres away. As a painter, his focus was on surface, light and texture, clearly showing his interest in the simplicity of minimalism and the use of the relief in British constructivist art. All of this and more has been extended and refined in his recent sculpture. Moreover, as a curator, Booth also explored the white modernist aesthetic in *Colour White*, a group exhibition which he produced for the De La Warr Pavilion in 2002.

As a sculptor, he can trace very direct biographical links. His father was a joiner in Gateshead and as a child Booth remembers playing for hours with boxes of small blocks of oak parquet flooring which his father brought home, constructing buildings and towers on his bedroom floor.

About six years ago, he watched his partner's teenage son and his friends gathered around a table playing for hours with some small wooden off-cuts from the studio, which Booth, in his turn, had brought home just as fuel for the fire. This triggered off a cycle of working with reclaimed wooden blocks. Even more potently, in the last few years, he has watched his own small sons as they learned to play in order to explore space, movement and pattern. And so, the child appears once more within the studio.

Booth began to read about children's cognitive development and heuristic (exploratory) play and researched the links with artists and in particular the crucial role played by the history of the child's building block.

The outstanding figure in this history is Friedrich Froebel, a German education pioneer who created the concept and name Kindergarten in the 1830s. His philosophy was that young children can best be taught about art, design,

mathematics and natural history through play. He created toys which he called Gifts and Occupations that follow the child from babyhood through infancy to childhood. They consist firstly of woollen balls on a string to introduce colour and then wooden objects to explore shape, number, extent, symmetry, proportion then elements of geometry, surface, the line and the circle. The final Gift looks at the potential of play through beans or seeds, leaves, pebbles, pieces of card-board or paper.

The Occupations give even more focus to the way in which the child – proto-artist, architect or designer – is encouraged to create through developing a range of manual skills like wood-carving, paper-folding, painting or weaving.

This self-directed approach to play became very popular in the United States where that country's most important modern architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, was given a set of the Froebel Gifts when he was about nine. In his autobiography Wright explains that through them he learned the geometry of architecture: "For several years I sat at the little Kindergarten table-top... and played... with the cube, the sphere and the triangle—these smooth wooden maple blocks... All are in my fingers to this day". This reminiscence echoed strongly with Colin Booth.

Froebel's theories had a powerful impact on the Bauhaus movement in Germany. Artists, architects and designers who taught there or who were themselves educated in the Kindergarten movement include Mondrian, Kandinsky, Le Corbusier and Buckminster Fuller.

Booth's research on Froebel coincided with an invitation in 2010 from the Victoria and Albert Museum's Museum of Childhood in London to create a work for their monumental iron framed main hall. The resulting installation was

Institute of Play, a work of approximately 3,000 white painted tulip wood blocks. These were stacked and spread to create a major sculpture which successfully evoked both the effect of the canyon-like streets of Manhattan and the serenity of a Ben Nicholson relief, whilst the artist toyed with our sense of scale with an instant appeal to child visitors. Installed alongside historic items from the museum's collection and others borrowed from a private collection were tiny sculptures from a series, made by Booth in deliberate homage to Froebel, entitled *Gifts and Preoccupations*. Froebel underlined the importance of not only the contents of a gift but the act of anticipation, opening, unpacking and revealing. The Gifts also teach the social skills of handing over or presenting and learning how to receive or accept. These are guidelines of good practice in creating exhibitions, too.

Booth has made a limited edition boxed sculpture called simply *Gift* in which a white relief is revealed so the constituent parts can be stacked, arranged, changed and displayed at home.

Streamline, 2009-11, the other major work in the exhibition is a site responsive sculpture from found and recycled birch wood ply. Here, the elements are thinner, more layers than blocks, and some have gentle curves. A streamline is the natural direction of fluidity and is used to describe sleek efficiency in design. Here the pale ply recalls the clean lines of modernist Scandinavian furniture at the same time as the plan of an ideal sunny city.

Booth has noted that a common theme in his work "is the relationship between intimacy (surface) and monumentality (structure) which embraces painting, sculpture and installation and brings into play the physical space of the gallery".

All Booth's works like *Gift* (made for handling) or the large installations, which

are seductive but impossible to enter, have a strongly tactile quality. They are never neutral and balance precision with sensuality. There is also a simple pragmatism which the lyrical titles often disguise. Booth uses found material whenever he can and reconfigures each installation in response to its venue. Inevitably, showing in a white box gallery is a very different matter to a major museum like the Museum of Childhood or the Laing. Their architecture is often dominant and much attention is paid nowadays to the way in which these buildings can be made more welcoming through activities and playfulness.

The Laing's architects built an institution for art and Spanish City for fun. But, in the case of *Institute of Play and Other Collections*, where the artist uses architecture and play as his subject, he also invites us to consider the way we look at contemporary sculpture in a museum setting.

Froebel chose the name Gifts with care and so Booth deliberated over the title *Institute of Play*. The word institute comes from a Latin root meaning to build, create, raise or educate. Colin Booth's sculpture takes each of those ideas in turn and with a lightness of touch uses them to enable the museum in which he shows to be both an institute of play and place to explore the subtlety and thoughtfulness in his sculpture.

Gill Hedley, May 2011