**All in the Minds? Colin Booth’s Levels of Existence**

Colin Booth combines, alters and re-contextualises found elements – of material, history and language – to form resonant new constellations of meaning. He moves things out of their utilitarian origins into new beings as objects of contemplation, and in so doing connects social and cultural aspects of past and present. He has, for example, used wooden blocks to engage with modernist architecture through its affinities with children’s play, cunningly building in the formative aspect of the Kindergarten movement on the childhood of several relevant architects; and has installed the shortest sentence in the Bible – ‘Jesus Wept’ – as an imposing neon sign in a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood, so relating an ancient phrase to modern conditions using current technology. Typically Booth combines an interest in underlying structures and communal agendas with an evocation of the personal matters which go on regardless of era or setting.

Here Booth focusses on the history of St Leonards Bathing Pool. His studio is close to the sea, and to the site of the Olympic-scale facility which opened in 1933 – 100m long with space for 2,500 spectators, it had something of the amphitheatre about it. Perhaps the pool was always too grand for the modestly-sized town, but it embodied the spirit of ‘Concrete King’ Sidney Little, the visionary Borough Engineer from 1926-50. His schemes included split level promenades, sea walls, hotels and underground car parks. Such ambition reflected an optimistic drive to transform the historic town and Victorian resort into a dynamic forward-looking destination for the leisure that came with improved holiday leave. By the end of the 1960s, though, both pool and town were suffering the effects of foreign holidays on the English seaside trade.

I grew up locally, and was a regular at the pool before it began a long decline which saw it halved in 1974, closed in 1986, and demolished in 1992. Such a diving tower, now familiarised by televised Olympic coverage, seemed an alien presence then. I remember my father challenging me and my younger brother to jump off it. Ten metres seemed a long way up and even further down - especially as we had to make the leap twice, Dad having claimed - with a typically twist of humour - that he hadn’t been looking the first time. That makes it easy for me to relate to the versions of that very diving board which form the centrepiece of Booth’s exhibition. Yet such a direct link is unnecessary: cued in, perhaps, by a selection of archive images of the old bathing pool, everyone will have comparable tales, if not of a swimming pool then of other locations which brought personal and communal experience together. It’s likely enough, too, that the infrastructure in which those experiences occurred will have been demolished.

Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753), the pioneering idealist philosopher, held the apparently paradoxical view that there are no mind-independent things, hence the slogan esse est percipi — ‘to be is to be perceived’. Demolished structures might be seen as a more mainstream version of just that: they have entered the ghostly half-life during which they exist only in the diminishing pool of collective memory, slipping incrementally out of the world as the number of people who remember them reduces. And what is true of the structures in our lives is, of course, just as true of our lives themselves. The bathing pool’s span wasn’t so far from a human pattern: around four decades at full capacity; two of reduced capability; one of wholly non-functional survival; and then the end.

Archival photographs of the pool in its pomp add further atmosphere to the exhibition, and remind us that 20th century technology ensured that more of our everyday existence could survive than was the case in Ancient Greece. Time will prove whether that century was an exception, as the era of hard copy is succeeded by the hazards of the digital. Another form of ghostliness threatens. That fits with Booth’s choice of neon for his principal depiction of the diving tower. The concrete structure is rendered insubstantial, in line with its status as pure memory. The classic seaside holiday was all about water and sunlight. Here we have no water – the pool is gone, the diving tower stands useless – and a light with no sun.

The literary equivalent of that process of ‘reducing existence‘ might be seen in the poetry of Sappho, the legendary poet who lived 2,500 years ago. Not much is known about her, and the papyrus she wrote on has disintegrated over the millennia. Mostly, what we have are odd verses or teasing phrases. Frustrating as that is, it also plays to modern tastes to make her, arguably, seem more contemporary than ‘the poet whole’ might have been: cue the romantic aesthetic of the ruin; the isolation of an evocative elements; the generation of ambiguity encouraging interpretation, speculation, imagination. It’s no surprise then, to find that Booth has made a series of works which appropriate Sappho’s fragments and cast them in contrarily permanent form. Monumentalisations of ‘Who is gone’ and ‘surely a sign’ preceded this show’s ‘Someone will remember us’, as sandblasted onto a battered and roughly cut piece of old and rather beautiful white marble.

The voile curtain is another way of ensuring we get only part of the picture. The obvious association is with the voyeuristic looking in, but the dividing role of the curtain (as in a confessional) also comes to mind, and the suggestion of a window plays with the trope of painting as a window onto the world – albeit, in a tease my father might have enjoyed, without quite giving us the painting or the world.

Booth also presents a fluorescent pin badge asserting ‘I love 1920's Socialist Architecture’. It was made in 2007 when locals were fighting the Council in a vain attempt to stop it pulling down the concrete chalets, which were by then the only physical remains of the pool development. ‘One can imagine’, says Booth, ‘the case in which all that is left of a structure is what was made in order to oppose its demolition’. Here the badge points to the parallels between Little’s programme and the building projects of the Eastern Bloc, and to their commonality of fate.

Are we to suppose, went one challenge to Berkeley that a house goes in and out of being according to whether anyone can see it? His reply was that continuity was assured through its presence in the mind of God, whom he invoked as the cause of our sensory ideas. Just so, it would be easy enough to be struck by the cool and elegant presence of Booth’s works and wonder what more to make of them. For wooden clocks, voile curtains and borrowed phrases to operate as conceptual art, it needs the role of Berkeley’s God to be played by the artist: it’s the originating connections made in Booth’s mind which bring the works into coherence – into a whole other level of existence.