Commentary on ‘Transplantation A sense of place and culture- British and Australian Narrative Jewellery’

Samuel O’Hana
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The UK’s National Centre for Craft and Design, Sleaford is 30km south of Lincoln, a cathedral town in the north of England. A show of contemporary jewellery there is an ambitious place to begin a touring exhibition, but the curator Professor Norman Cherry, inaugurated it’s opening with a deep and inspiring enthusiasm that has been long sought after for regional centres of contemporary culture. Transplantation has been launched in the top floor of this building, artist’s statements on plastic plecants on the wall and the pieces laid out in glass topped cases, islands of jewellery in this whitewashed room.

What appears to be an important aspect in the temporary style of the exhibition, in which nothing is hung, sealed or installed. The foldable display cases and their wheeled carts, says Cherry, were purpose built to echo 18th century British campaign furniture portable, durable and internationally recognisable. This approach has allowed Transplantation to see the thread of a global aesthetic wherever the exhibition tours.

The work that these cases carry are of a wide variety, but more importantly, it is a rich college of artists work, giving voice to the personal content of their stories. Each jeweller has created work in accordance with his or her own narratives of transplantation, and the pieces come together in a show of distinct identity and statement. While the artists have a clear philosophical tie, that of the quest, migration and of cosmopolitanism, their work is vigorously independent, perhaps stemming from a twinned consideration of their geographic origins and of their distinctive creative practice.

The pieces are a challenge within the challenge of contemporary jewellery, which is that the particular experiment with the ‘narrative-object’, provokes us to depart from our understanding of both stories and the precariousness of the physical. Many of the pieces unfold with time and examination, instead of providing immediate impact. I left the exhibition a number of hours later with a sense of fondness for the obvious intimacy portrayed in the work. An important theme raised by Jiwon Aystafch is that of Helmet, the rootlessness and native location of your home. Her work, and that of others in the exhibition, displays the cultural origins of the artist, through the lens of a retrospective number of years. What is the view from these explorers? Each jeweller offers up a kind of landscape seen from his or her destinations.

Yet these destinations from which they communicate their views are surprisingly nebulous. There is no fixed location from which each artist looks back at their origins; rather there are a number of touchpoints shown in the work that allow us to see the distance they have travelled. Transplantation is not a show of nostalgic nationalism, or of the brutality of migration. Visitors to the exhibition will be relieved that the artists do not portray wistfulness or any partisan attachment to their past, in fact the immediacy and precision of their perception of the present day provokes a deeper understanding of nostalgia, a clarity and strength that shatters any idealism we are tempted to hold about our own past. The pieces are freshly assembled artifacts, pointing a new and powerful light on the shadowy history of migration, and re-calibrating the potential of the art-object to tell us a story that is truer and more believable than we have previously been exposed to in contemporary jewellery.

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Artists:
Norman Cherry, Jovan Asfalek, Roseanne Bartley, Nicholas Bastin, Lin Cheung, Jack Cunningham, Anne Davern, Joungsoo Do, Sheridan Kennedy, Bridie Lander, Jo Pond, Laura Potter.
Curated by Norman Cherry.

Opening at Bluecoat Display Centre: Friday 18 May - 5:30 to 6:30pm
Saturday 19th May - Saturday 23rd June

Curated by Professor Norman Cherry in conjunction with the Hub: National Centre for Craft & Design and the University of Lincoln.

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Additional information

About the author:
I am an undergraduate English and Creative Writing student at the Centre for Modern Poetry in the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK. I am in the early stages of developing a cross-cultural understanding of contemporary poetry and am hoping to lead integrated research and practice in that field. I reported on the Gray Area Symposium in Mexico in 2010 (www.grayareasympo.com/blog/3389) and more recently on electronic music events in the UK (www.residentialisar.net/review-view.aspx?id=3990).

Website: www.tangential-poetry.co.uk

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Perhaps the most pressing, urgent and demanding pieces deal with more than a simple dialogue between two places. The narrative jewellery that acknowledges a constellation of location reveals to us that the distance between our homeland and ourselves increases with any looking back.