

Art & Alchemy: Transformation & Contemporary Art

Timetable

Friday 3 June 14.00-18.00

Winstanley Lecture Theatre, Trinity College, Cambridge

14.00-14.10: Dr Alyce Mahon (History of Art Department, University of Cambridge)

Welcome

14.15-14.45: Dr Urszula Szulakowska (School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds) ***Alchemy and Political Activism***

14.45-15.15: Dr Spike Bucklow (Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge)

Everyday Alchemy

15.15-15.45: Dr Alyce Mahon ***Surrealism and Alchemy: Transform the World!***

15.45-16.15: Tea & Coffee Break (provided)

16.15-16.45: Dr Brian Dillon (School of English, University of Kent) ***The Sun Has Turned to Glass: Art and the Crystalline Imagination***

16.45-17.15: Prof. Gill Perry (Open University) ***Gangs and Crystals at Home in South London: Roger Hiorns's Seizure, 2008***

17.15-17.45: Heather Ackroyd & Dan Harvey ***Stranded***

17.45-18.00: Prof. Gill Perry ***Concluding Remarks***

18.30: *Reception*, Kettle's Yard Gallery, Castle Street, Cambridge

Saturday 4 June 11.00-12.30

Norwich Castle Museums and Art Gallery

09.30: Coach departure from Trinity College, Cambridge to Norwich

11.00: Harriet Godwin (Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery) ***Tour of Hubert Duprat: Caddis, Crystal and Company***

12.00-12.30: Prof. Stephen Bann (University of Bristol) ***Adventurous consistency – the wager of Hubert Duprat***

12.45: Coach departure from Norwich to Trinity College, Cambridge

Abstracts

Heather Ackroyd & Dan Harvey

Stranded

This talk will present a brief overview of our art work describing how processes of growth and decay are intrinsic to our practice. It will also offer an introduction to our formative experiments with processes of crystallization in the early 1990s, and in-depth discussion of 'Stranded' (2006), produced for the Natural History Museum and involving the encrusting of the skeleton of a whale with alum crystals.

Ackroyd & Harvey

Sculpture, photography, architecture and ecology are some of the disciplines that intersect in the work of Ackroyd & Harvey, making explicit connections with urban political ecologies by highlighting the temporal nature of processes of growth and decay in sites of architectural interest as well as contemporary art galleries and museums worldwide. Renowned for large-scale interventions in 2007 they grew the National Theatre's iconic Lyttelton flytower with seedling grass and have received numerous awards for their work making complex photographic images utilising the light sensitivity of chlorophyll. They have made expeditions to the High Arctic with Cape Farewell studying the effects of climate change on the ecosystem and exhibited work at London's Natural History Museum, Liverpool Biennial and Japan's Miraikan Museum. Currently they are growing 250 saplings from acorns collected from Joseph Beuys's "7000 Oaks". In 2009, Ackroyd & Harvey presented at the Nobel Laureate Cultural Symposium 'Sculpting Our History' and have given many lectures in the UK and abroad

Professor Stephen Bann

Adventurous consistency – the wager of Hubert Duprat

Hubert Duprat has continually sought to displace the object, and the agency, of artistic creation. He does not belong to any school or movement. He plays occasionally with the conventions of studio production, and of perspectival construction, but always retains a strong sense of the whole history of Western art. His work might appear to be inconceivable without the prior example of Duchamp. But one has to go back far beyond Duchamp to discover striking analogies and sympathetic resonances that chime in with his works. He could be regarded primarily as an exponent of 'curiosity', since he brings back into circulation precious objects and rare materials that were studied and collected in a pre-scientific age. But he is also fascinated by the procedures of science, and many of his works could be seen as carefully designed experiments – often carried to completion in defiance of the technical difficulties that they raise. This talk, which will be given near the site of his first one-man exhibition in the United Kingdom, will suggest how a wider historical framework can illuminate the creative choices that Duprat has made.

Stephen Bann is Emeritus Professor of History of Art and a Senior Research Fellow at Bristol University (UK). He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1998, and appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) in 2004. He was President of CIHA (the Comité international d'histoire de l'art) from 2000 to 2004. Originally trained as a historian, he obtained his PhD as a student of Herbert Butterfield at Cambridge University in 1967. His interdisciplinary study of

historiography as a faculty member of the University of Kent resulted in the publication of *The Clothing of Clio* in 1984. Among his subsequent studies in the history of art and historiography are *The True Vine* (1989), *The Inventions of History* (1990), *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (1995), *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (1997), *Parallel Lines: French printmakers, painters and photographers in nineteenth-century France* (2001), and *Ways around Modernism* (2007). A Senior Fellow of Dumbarton Oaks from 2001 to 2008, he was in residence as Beatrix Farrand Distinguished Fellow in 2009. He was Guest Curator for the exhibition of the work of Paul Delaroche at the National Gallery, London (Feb.-May 2010), and co-authored the catalogue, *Painting History: Delaroche and Lady Jane Grey*. His edited volume, *Art and the Photographic Album* was recently published by CASVA (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC), where he was Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor in 2005. Among contemporary artists, he has published studies on the sculptors Jannis Kounellis and Stephen Cox, and was closely associated with the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay for over forty years. He is a Trustee of Little Sparta, the garden created by Finlay. He has taken a close interest in the work of Hubert Duprat since the 1990s.

Dr Spike Bucklow

Everyday Alchemy

This talk will take a fourteenth-century painter's recipe for purifying lapis lazuli to illustrate alchemy as a routine part of artists' work. It focuses upon the so-called Aristotelian elements as informing principles for both alchemy and art. It treats the four elements as operative concepts within alchemy as well as popular concepts that integrate alchemy with boarder cultural activities.

Spike Bucklow trained as a chemist, worked in the film industry and then studied Art History, supervised by John Gage. He now teaches conservation and undertakes research on paintings at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. He is currently writing a sequel to *The Alchemy of Paint* (Marion Boyars, London, 2009).

Dr Brian Dillon

The Sun Has Turned to Glass: Art and the Crystalline Imagination

This paper traces a broad history of the crystal as a means of conceiving of several strata in the history of twentieth century art. In the wake of the nineteenth century's romance with crystals (expressed in Paxton's Crystal Palace, John Ruskin's *Ethics of the Dust* and George Sand's *Laura: A Journey Into the Crystal*), a certain image of the crystal persists in Modernism: it informs both utopian projects such as Eisenstein's projected film *The Glass House* and ruinous vistas such as those imagined by the fiction of J. G. Ballard. But the most compelling crystalline imaginary of the century is Robert Smithson's expressed in his Spiral Jetty, his writings on New Jersey and numerous other works. I will trace here the influence of Smithson's "crystal land" on subsequent artists and writers.

Brian Dillon studied English and Philosophy at University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin before coming to Kent in 1995 to complete a Ph.D. on

concepts of time in twentieth-century literary criticism and theory, focussing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Jean-François Lyotard and Giorgio Agamben. He taught at the School of English for several years before becoming a freelance writer and editor in 2002. In October 2008 he returned to Kent as an AHRC Research Fellow in the Creative & Performing Arts, pursuing a research project entitled *Ruins of the 20th Century*. His publications include *In the Dark Room* (Penguin 2005) and *Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives* (Penguin, 2009) and he is UK Editor of *Cabinet*, a quarterly magazine of art and culture founded in 2000 and based in New York [www.cabinetmagazine.org]

Harriet Godwin

Hubert Duprat: Caddis, Crystal and Company

Hubert Duprat: Caddis, Crystal and Company is the first UK solo exhibition of the work of Hubert Duprat. One of the major figures of his generation, Duprat has shown nationally and internationally for over twenty years. Emerging as an artist in the early 1980s, Duprat's output has taken many different forms. His work derives from disciplines and historical precedents that are both combined with and often opposed to issues around modernity and conceptualism. Referencing archaeology, architecture, science, craft and art history his sculptures and installations are rooted in research yet are often imbued with a playful undertone.

Harriet Godwin is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery where she is responsible for the programming of contemporary art exhibitions as well as artist projects, public programmes and the development of the contemporary collection. She has worked for a number of arts organisations including the Frieze Art Fair and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She received her MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art, London in 2009.

Dr Alyce Mahon

Surrealism & Alchemy: Transform the World!

In their second manifesto of 1929 André Breton and his surrealist comrades called for 'the occultisation of Surrealism', outlining an alchemical role for the avant-garde movement. In his speech to the Convention of Revolutionary Writers in Paris in 1935 Breton made the radical potential of this alchemical research clear: 'Marx has said "transform the world", Rimbaud asked us to "change life": for us these two watchwords are but one'. The vision of the surrealist artist as alchemist only grew stronger as the movement survived the second World War and as the transformative power of love, specifically of the union of opposites, for a war-torn world became all the more urgent. If woman invariably became symbol and vessel for Surrealism, then surrealism, led by chief alchemist Max Ernst, positioned her as the path to the Philosopher's Stone itself. However alchemy also offered a subversive means of challenging gender norms, one seized by such women artists as Jacqueline Lamba, Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo. With this in mind, my talk will explore surrealism's pursuit of alchemy's golden awareness.

Alyce Mahon is Senior Lecturer in the History of Twentieth Century Art at the University of Cambridge. She has been a Distinguished Scholar for the Hong

Kong Li Ka Shing Foundation's Distinguished Scholars Exchange Programme with the University of Cambridge (2004), giving a series of academic and public lectures across China; a Research Fellow at the Columbia University Institute for Scholars, Reid Hall, Paris (2005); and a Visiting Scholar at Princeton University (2006-07). Her publications include the monographs *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968* (Thames & Hudson, 2005) and *Eroticism & Art* (Oxford University Press, 2005, republished as part of Oxford History of Art Series, 2007) as well as essays in catalogues for international exhibitions of modern and contemporary art: *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* (Tate Modern 2001), *Pierre Klossowski* (Whitechapel 2006), *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* (V&A, 2007), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009), and *Donna: Avanguardia femminista negli anni '70* (Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, Rome, 2010).

Prof. Gill Perry

Gangs and Crystals at Home in South London: Roger Hiorns's Seizure, 2008

In 2008 the British artist Roger Hiorns transformed a derelict ground-floor flat at 157 Harper Road, near the Elephant and Castle in South London, into a phantasmagoria of blue copper sulphate crystals. The crystals enveloped the space, appearing like a carpet of bright blue crustaceans. Commissioned by the London-based arts charity Artangel, Hiorns conceived an installation that would fill and line the contours of this domestic space, evoking a strange sculptural interior involving material transformation and 'self-generation'. Fascinated with scientific processes of crystallisation, Hiorns pumped around 80,000 litres of heated copper sulphate solution into the flat, after reinforcing the walls and ceilings.

This paper will explore the complex network of associations – architectural, domestic, poetic, aesthetic and social – which this crystallised work evoked, including the social and political significance of the site, and the gang culture which now invades the boarded up block of low-rise flats. The site can be seen to represent the degradation of 1960s British modernist building projects, and some of the failed housing policies involved. But I will also argue that *Seizure* has enabled and provoked a 'contamination' between social and aesthetic space, which involved elements of chance and play.

Gill Perry is Professor of Art History at the Open University, and chair of the archive and website The Open Arts Archive (<http://www.openartsarchive.org>). She has published widely on twentieth century and contemporary European art and eighteenth century British art. Her books include: *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work*, Harper and Row, 1980; *Primitivism, Cubism and Abstraction*, co-author, Yale UP, 1993; *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth Century Art and Culture*, ed. and co-author, Manchester UP, 1994; *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: Modernism and 'Feminine' Art 1900 to the late 1920s*, Manchester UP, 1995; *Gender and Art*, ed. and co-author, Yale UP, 1999; *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art*, ed., Blackwells, 2003; *Themes in Contemporary Art*, co-ed with Paul Wood and co-author, Yale UP, 2004; *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art 1768-1820*, Yale UP, 2007 (shortlisted for the Theatre Book Prize, 2008). She is currently writing a book titled *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art*.

Dr Urszula Szulakowska

Alchemy and Political Activism

The paper will present a brief introduction to alchemy from the point of view of the political engagements of the historical alchemists. There will be a discussion of the use of alchemical metaphor in a political context from the origins of alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt through to contemporary art practices of a subversive nature. Whereas many alchemists supported the political status-quo of their period, the alchemical discourse advanced theoretically and imagistically only within the context of political resistance of a radical nature.

Dr Urszula Szulakowska is a lecturer in the History of Art at Leeds University. Previously she taught at the universities of Sydney and Queensland. She has written extensively on the history of alchemical illustration in the Renaissance period and on the adaptation of alchemical imagery in modernist and contemporary western art. Her publications have included the monographs *The Alchemy of Light* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), *The Sacrificial Body and the Day of Doom* (Leiden: Brill 2006) and *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* (London: Ashgate, 2011).