

Alan Phelan: Troubled Parenthood

There is a silent game of Deathmatch Pong being played out. On the left side, bionic Sith Lord and estranged parent Darth Vader sits smugly, quite adept with the video game's console. On the right, sculptor and mother of four Dame Barbara Hepworth struggles determinedly, frowning slightly. Each time the pixelated ball is played, new meanings and crossovers are being created. Every hit casts an echo, each return doubles its import. The eventual winner's efforts will be immortalised in *papier-mâché*.

The programmer behind this match is Alan Phelan. He has drawn from particular sources a cast of characters, historical events, and mythical objects. He has set the parameters, marking off a pitch for a game within which facts and appearances are crossed, punned and intertwined. He then simply lets his protagonists play, and what we see are the trophies of such matches. He keeps several games going at once, calling in at various times figures from Irish history, Modernism and science fiction. The exhibition *Ralph Eamon Odo Barbara* takes its title from the roll-call of its players: Ralph Gifford, a U.S. Navy sailor from Oregon stationed at an American military base on Whiddy Island, County Cork, during the first World War; the dominant Irish politician Eamon de Valera; *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*'s shapeshifter and onboard chief of security Odo; and the aforementioned Dame Hepworth.

These pseudo-trophies that form the exhibition make the tankstation feel like the Batcave. It is filled with bizarre forms and surprising transformations, each with its own intriguing tale and countless reverberating references. In the front hall, a blow-up doll usually found parading Temple Bar's hen-party scene has been imbued with Odo's gooey morphing capabilities. It grows out from its plinth, bending mid-air to gesture casually towards the gallery's main hall. Covered in newspaper clippings and air-brushed gold, *Barbara's Boy* moulds itself in an imitation of the posture from Hepworth's *Mother and Child* (1934). It is caught in the act of formation, reanimating the original stone sculpture with a fiendish wink as it casts the child as a tarted-up party accessory.

Ralph Gifford followed in his father's footsteps as a professional photographer, and it was his photos of fellow navy men on Whiddy Island from 1918 that Phelan stumbled upon in the Oregon State University Archives. Mundane shots from the base's relatively unused recreation room, its low-lying barracks among the country surroundings; one picture of the men posed around a Christmas tree. Picking up on background details from photos of the base, Phelan has turned these into objects before us: a hand-written 'No Smoking' sign for the drawing *No Smoking*, the low entrance to a small cave becomes *Ralph's Crawl Space*, the suspended lights from the Christmas tree spiralling upwards on their own as *Missing Tree*. One peculiar poster in the barracks depicts a drawing of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, her wings replaced with a pair of airplane propellers bearing the U.S. Air Force star. Phelan has given this the full Pimp My Ride treatment, coating the miniature plaster cast of the statue in silver-chrome car paint, the wings made of smooth balsa wood with a star burnt into each, though *Pyrrhic Victory*'s title undercuts its cool demeanour.

Like the anachronistic translation of minute details from Ralph's photos, Phelan's sculptures make verbal puns on their origins and physical puns on their own existence. *Red Star Death Star*, for example, is built on the principles of Buckminster Fuller's utopian geodesic sphere, but put towards the sinister end of the planet-destroying ultimate weapon of the *Star Wars*' Empire. Constructed out of translucent red film, however, this star is simultaneously a remake of the five-point Communist star, as well as a very attractive lampshade. Loading and overloading each reference severs it from its original fixed location and defers explicit readings. Even Eamon de Valera is tongue-tied: from his open mouth issues a devilish foot-long tongue. His tongue is cast in the shape of the leaves of the plant known as mother-in-law's tongue; due to its sharp point, though, it also goes by the name of the snake plant – accordingly, Eamon's tongue also bears the texture and perforations of a snakeskin belt.

Each of these sculptures is historicised, without being historical. In the combination of statuesque presentation and derivation from photographic sources they occupy forms that present themselves as monuments to actual events. Their relationship to the past, however, is one that places factual occurrence and mythical yarn on equal footing, a relationship that mocks the hoops that busts and effigies have to jump through in order to claim their presentation of history. The collage of clippings from the *Daily Telegraph* for the *papier-mâché* sculptures is a red herring, drawing you in to examine what stories might make up and add to the object in front of you. What's provided instead are inane cut-off reports about random subjects. "Use of defensive force may become a legitimate remedy for Christians," reads one lump on the backside of *Barbara's Boy*. The life-sized cartoonish *Pig Protester*, based on an image of protests during the Shell to Sea campaign in County Mayo, is made up of *Financial Times* clippings. As you stare up its nose, the inside of its head is lined with rows and rows of stock listings and snippets of business reports. The clippings and their content are overwhelmingly immaterial, a deliberate sabotage of attempts to trace the origins of these objects and to thwart any particular narrative reading, though leaving it with a distinct political charge.

What's left is an impression that the set of references that each object is derived from is not entirely unimportant, but no longer entirely relevant. Each exists as defiant misappropriation, flaunting its textuality and daring you to ask why it now exists. It's as if history has been reinterpreted, with broad creative liberties being taken by someone like De Selby, Ireland's most famous fictitious theologian and physicist. Phelan's method seems to hold an affinity with literary critic Harold Bloom's use of the term 'misprision,' which he described as a writer's creative misreading or misinterpretation of a predecessor's work, a misunderstanding that then opens up a new imaginative space. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom used the word in a purely aesthetic sense, abstracted from historical context and with heavy religious overtones, where creativity is overseen by a series of priest-like father figures that the newcomer must dispense with. Phelan reinserts this into a finite historical matrix, re-connecting this act of misinterpretation to both its past and present historical associations, as well as to the vital influence of less canonical sources, such as Trekkies. With Phelan, it is less about killing the father than sneaking in, stealing his stash of pornography and making a series of absurd collages out of it. His sculptures' uneasy finality create an eerie silence that is

unsettling and haltingly liberating, leaving us to ponder an imaginative re-history that opens the legacy of the present.

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