

FOLKERT DE JONG THE HOLY LAND

THE THREE SCULPTURES
OF THE KINGS STAND
AMONG A COLOURED
SAND-SCAPE, IN FRONT
OF A SKYLINE OF
MONOLITHIC SAND-
BLOCKS AND TOWER
ABOVE AN ARMADA OF
GHOSTLY BURNT-OUT
SAILING SHIPS.



Installation view, Folkert de Jong, *The Holy Land*, 2014 at The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Stuart Whipps.



Untitled, 2014, courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

Three armoured ages of Henry VIII meet in *The Holy Land*. There is young slim Henry with the downturned expression of a kindly saint. There is fashionable Henry, resplendent with scalloped shells of bronze armour appended to his knees, his feet covered with a fine layer of sand. And there is old Henry, whose precarious balance tips him forward, as if he has been freeze-framed a moment before falling. The three sculptures of the kings stand among a coloured sand-scape, in front of a skyline of monolithic sand-blocks and tower above an armada of ghostly burnt-out sailing ships. Machine guns are piled in one corner, while Glock and Heckler & Koch handguns are combined with oranges, lemons and walnuts, a chair, walking canes and bowler hats to assume the form of a tree, or that of an electrical conductor of a perverse power station. Three figures preserved in glass cases stand adjacent, as witnesses or as some-time participants from another era. Something has happened here.

That 'something' is both the presentation of an event and the actual process of making sculpture. The intense psychological experience of the exhibition is inextricably connected to the materiality of the objects. This short essay seeks to explore the processes of creating this extraordinary sculptural tableau and the effect of these processes and their representation on the viewer's experience of the work.

Folkert de Jong first visited the Royal Armouries collection held at Leeds in 2013. This national repository of arms and armour spans continents and centuries and includes some 70,000 objects. Among this overwhelming wealth of material the curators vividly recounted the narratives attached to each sword, gun, gauntlet or breastplate. A tiny inscription proved that a piece of armour had been captured during the Crusades. Another piece of curatorial detective work identified a strange hole and spring mechanism as a theatrical adaptation of a piece of medieval armour: when a string was pulled the mechanism would snap tight, propelling a spurt of blood from the breastplate of the knight.

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THEATRICALITY AND PLAYFULNESS CREPT INTO THE FOUNDRY IN THE FORM OF AN INANIMATE VAUDEVILLE OF WALKING CANES, BOWLER HATS, DEFLATED FOOTBALLS, PILES OF PAPER CUPS AND BALLOONS.



Untitled, 2014, courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

The defensive 'armour' of an American Football player nestled against the stiff leather jerkins of the English Civil War. Above all, the armour asserted its authority as living artefacts, with each bespoke suit being the surviving imprint of bodily existence, and its empty shell implying a real body. To put one's hand into a chainmail gauntlet was to touch the hand of a knight, to put one's foot inside the armadillo-like plates of a piece of foot armour was to walk in the shoes of a king. Inevitably the presence of Henry VIII, whose terrifying horned helmet provides the branding image for the Armouries, came to dominate the visits, as did the collection of contemporary firearms that comprise a reference library of modern weaponry.

Folkert de Jong selected to be digitally scanned three of Henry VIII's armours, and a number of contemporary firearms. Reduced to digital data, the files were emailed to de Jong in Amsterdam and then printed in polystyrene. These three-dimensional prints were taken to a traditional bronze foundry, where moulds of compacted sand were created around the objects, the polystyrene removed and molten bronze poured into the negative space created by the now-absent polystyrene guns and armours. Other objects, more familiar from art-historical traditions, were also subject to the bronze casting process: for example, fruits as seen in a Cézanne still life or a chair with a seat of woven caning as depicted in a painting by Picasso. Theatricality and playfulness crept into the foundry in the form of an inanimate vaudeville of walking canes, bowler hats, deflated footballs, piles of paper cups and balloons. An armada of model galleons was created alongside sculptures of outmoded technologies such as a phonograph and movie camera. Meanwhile polyurethane sculptures were also moulded depicting: a dying king surrounded by female heads, his soul escaping through the curved form of a gramophone's horn; an over-coated figure extruding an amorphous trail or tail of decorative and defective lion heads like manifested thoughts; and a regal bust surrounded by a halo of shards. All of which is contained within acrylic glass cases reminiscent of museum displays.

The use of particular materials in de Jong's work has never been arbitrary. His early garishly coloured sculptures used styrofoam and polyurethane, cheap materials traditionally considered inappropriate for the production of art. But their use was not simply an anti-hierarchical gesture. Styrofoam is the product of a chemical reaction that is irreversible: it is said that it will take a million years to decay as it is a pollutant and its effects on the environment are radically detrimental. The material is inherently dangerous and unethical while de Jong's palette is candy-coloured and seductive. This is a nod to the trademarked colours of the companies that produce these chemical compounds.¹ If one looks at the grotesque subjects of de Jong's early sculptures it is clear that both the subject and the material were implicated in issues of morality and self-destruction.

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THE FORMAL GRIDDED
ARRANGEMENT OF
THE SAND-BLOCKS
REPLICATES THE
POSITIONING OF THE
DISCARDED BLOCKS
IN THE FOUNDRY.



Untitled, 2014, courtesy the artist and James Cohan Gallery. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

So at first glance the valorised art material of bronze seems to operate in sharp distinction to the man-made chemical compounds of previous works. Yet there is a parallel in operation here; the history of the material is central to understanding its deployment in de Jong's art. Bronze is the historical material par excellence, marking the shift in ancient civilisations from the Stone Age to the next period, the Bronze Age, and is also the result of a chemical process. The method of heating copper alloy and casting forms is one of mankind's earliest technologies and one that is implicated in religion, ritual and the production of early weapons.² These rituals of making are foregrounded in *The Holy Land's* sand-pit, a rendering of the piles of waste sand coloured by the chemical processes of casting and subsequently piled up in the foundry. The formal gridded arrangement of the sand-blocks replicates the positioning of the discarded blocks in the foundry, which is the consequence of manoeuvring these unwieldy objects. The clamps holding these two-piece moulds together also suggest an innate energy barely contained within. As such, the exhibition uses as material and subject matter the various processes involved in making the sculptures themselves.

The value ascribed to the finished bronze sculptures is curiously complicated by the processes involved in their creation. The aura or power of a work of art is, as Walter Benjamin, the cultural critic, famously put it, dependent on its status as a unique and original object.³ Here the aura that adhered to the armour of a king who believed himself anointed by God has been abstracted, digitally stripped away and reformatted as dematerialised data. The power inherent in a Kalashnikov has similarly undergone transformation. The objects have been produced as debased polystyrene casts, then remade as art. Yet in retaining the spurs created by pouring the molten bronze into the moulds, the armour and guns have also become curiously organic forms. The spurs at their most delicate resemble mossy lichen and at their most robust a tree branch, electrical circuits or harnesses on each Henry: a form of otherworldly power-charging system.

Still holding an aura, but differently charged, these objects are implicated within a wider enquiry into cultural value. What do we choose to preserve? Why do we choose to exhibit objects in museums? How do we record and present the past? The presence in the exhibition of objects of record-making and communication, such as the camera and the gramophone, further highlights a compulsion to preserve. Both machines appear capable of transmitting a moment, past or current, to another place and time.

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THE SCENE DE JONG
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A HIDDEN OR UNSEEN
MOMENT – AN
UNCOVERED CONSPIRACY
FROM THE PAST.



Installation view, Folkert de Jong, *The Holy Land*, 2014 at The Hepworth Wakefield. Photo: Stuart Whipps.

The experience of encountering *The Holy Land* recalls the scene-setting of monumental sculptures commemorating historical figures and significant events. However the scene de Jong creates does not feel like an official history, but rather a hidden or unseen moment – an uncovered conspiracy from the past. The sandpit suggests also an excavation reminiscent of an archeological site. Perhaps this goes some way towards characterising the effect of *The Holy Land* as a whole. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud repeatedly used the metaphor of archaeology to describe the operation of memory. He believed that both archaeology and the subconscious were dependent upon a model of stratification whereby layers and fragments of the past could be uncovered, interpreted and reconstructed to make sense of the present. In de Jong's exhibition the title, subject matter and constituent elements provoke a similar impulse to examine, re-examine and construct a narrative that adequately accounts for the scene in front of us. As such the energies of the past are barely contained in each individual sculpture and when the three kings meet again in *The Holy Land* we know that something is happening here.

Dr. Samantha Lackey, Curator
2014

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Notes:

¹ DOW styrofoam is pink while that of BASF produces is green and Owens Corning has a trademark registration in the word, 'PINK'. Folkert de Jong quoted in 'Folkert de Jong in conversation with Ana Finel Honigman' in DE JONG, FOLKERT, (2007) *Les Saltimbanques*, Amsterdam: Black Cat Publishing, and New York: James Cohan Gallery, p.56.

² BENJAMIN, WALTER (1936) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

³ Henry VIII's personal interests also intersect with de Jong's realization of this project; "Throughout his life Henry took an almost childlike delight in technology and gadgets: clocks, navigational instruments, automata and above all guns. ...Henry VIII had taken steps to found a domestic armaments industry, and Henry VIII established a foundry making cast bronze cannon in 1511." COOPER, J.P.D., (2009) 'Henry VIII: Power and Personality' in *Henry VIII: Arms and the Man*, Leeds: Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds, p.17.