



# In pursuit of freedom

Simon Morrissey cuts to the chase with Cornelia Parker and finds out how she has fought commercial pressures to follow her own artistic agenda.

IT IS PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING THAT CORNELIA PARKER approaches decision-making about her career with the same deliberation that characterises the precise combinations of objects and processes found in her work.

One of Britain's most quietly compelling artists, Parker first came to prominence in the early 1990s after completing a BA at Wolverhampton – “which I loved” – and an MA at Reading University – “which I didn't” – with a series of large-scale suspended installations in the early 1990s. *Thirty pieces of silver* (1988-9), comprising approximately one thousand silver-plated candlesticks, plates, spoons and teapots flattened by a steamroller and hung on wire in thirty circular groups, was selected for the British Art Show 3 in 1990. This was closely followed by *Cold dark matter* at Chisenhale Gallery, London – an installation created by having a garden shed and its obsessively collected contents blown up by the British Army. The resulting fragments were then suspended, around a single light bulb. Commissioned by Jonathan Watkins, current director of Ikon Gallery, Birmingham – who has over the years been one of Parker's main critical supporters – *The Shed* as Parker affectionately refers to it, is still perhaps her best-known work.

Both works now reside in the Tate's collections, but their journey there was neither swift nor easy. As Parker gained attention with works such as *The maybe* – the seminal collaboration with actress Tilda Swinton at The Serpentine Gallery in 1995 – she resisted offers from private collectors to buy *Cold dark matter* and *Thirty pieces of silver* but she did so with a particular conviction. “I don't make that much large-scale work and what there is of it I want to be in public collections and seen by a larger audience. It's a question of access. We have a culture of free access to museums in this country and that was

where I found my inspiration as a teenager. Coming from a working-class background and having had my life hugely transformed by art it is nice to think you might be able to offer some inspiration back.” When the Tate eventually purchased the works – up to ten years after it was made in the case of *Thirty pieces of silver* – it was for significantly less than Parker could have sold them to private collectors, but she feels it was completely worth it. Fearing commercial galleries would pressure her to churn out signature, large-scale suspended works, which she describes as “perhaps only A to D out of a whole alphabet of ideas, but what people want because they are more spectacular”, Parker resisted being represented by a gallery until the late 1990s. Instead she made her living from teaching, residencies and fellowships, including the prestigious ArtPace residency in San Antonio, Texas in 1997 and three years as Senior Research Fellow at University of Wales Institute, Cardiff between 1992-95, where she concentrated on the development of works on a more intimate scale.

Following her Turner Prize nomination in 1997, however, Parker accepted Frith Street Gallery's offer to represent her in Britain and was heavily courted by half a dozen New York galleries, including some of the most prominent players on the US commercial scene. A troubling dip in the water with Jeffrey Deitch of Deitch Projects in 1998, who the artist describes as, “a dealer with a capital D. He is everything I fear about the commercial art world”, only justified her natural caution. It has taken her four years to find another New York gallery she feels comfortable to work with, recently agreeing to show with Chelsea-based D'Amelio Terras.

Parker feels she belongs to a generation that saw becoming an artist as a political statement rather than simply a career option. “It was about being

free and making your own rules. Although I now realise that this is naive, and that the art world has as many rules as anywhere else, it allowed me the psychological permission not to conform and to develop for my own reasons. I didn't expect to be an overnight success – I've had breathing space to mature and become more sure of myself before getting real attention.”

Parker is now able to survive from the sale of her work. Although she sometimes finds this intimidating – survival is more open to the vagaries of the market – Parker ultimately finds it liberating, as it gives her the freedom to pursue her own agenda. “As you get older you have a better idea of what you want but you also have more demands imposed upon you, and if you aren't careful you can end up fulfilling other people's ideas for your work rather than your own. This means you have to prioritise your own interests, because it doesn't get any easier to make interesting work as you get older – in fact I think it gets more complicated!”

**SIMON MORRISSEY IS AN INDEPENDENT CURATOR AND WRITER. HE HAS RECENTLY BEEN APPOINTED CURATORIAL FELLOW 2002/3 AT THE BOWES MUSEUM, COUNTY DURHAM.**

*Cornelia Parker's first permanent site-specific commission, Breathless is now on display in the British Galleries of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.*

*She also has forthcoming solo exhibitions at Frith Street, London, November 2002 and D'Amelio Terras, New York, March 2003.*

Opposite: Cornelia Parker, *Breathless*, brass musical instruments, flattened, suspended, 2001. Photo: the artist. Top left: Cornelia Parker, *Thirty pieces of silver*, steamrolled silver plate, metal wire, 1988-9. Photo: the artist. Top right: Cornelia Parker, *Cold dark matter*: an exploded view, 1991. Photo: the artist. All images courtesy: Frith Street Gallery.

