

MODERN PAINTERS

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE FINE ARTS

SPOTLIGHT

ANN CARRINGTON

by Nicolas Guppy

Nicolas Guppy discovers the work of sculptor Ann Carrington who makes cuddly helicopters

Ann Carrington transforms garbage into creature-things, going well beyond Schwitter's elegant bus-ticket arrangements, or Rauschenberg (whose junk remains junk, to my mind). I first saw her work three years ago, and since then, I have visited her studio several times and encountered her art in the homes of friends who have been keen-eyed enough to buy it

One usually conservative lady – the sort who has mainly nineteenth century prints on her walls – acquired a feathered helicopter. She had seen it leaning against a wall at a show, looking as if it needed a cuddle, and had felt sorry for it. That's how Ann's art affects people: she turns the weirdest jumbles of scrap, in this case old tin cans and feathers, into life-imbued beings. Certainly there is whimsicality in her art, but there is nothing soppy. Today that helicopter, about three feet long and two feet high and wide, hangs from the ceiling in a Regency hall, incongruous style-wise, but enjoyed, admired and coveted by all who see it. Out of the fantasy world of ancient and medieval mythology came the proto-surrealists as Hieronymous Bosch, or Giuseppe Archimboldo, who in the sixteenth century painted heads and faces made of fruits, vegetables and animals. And, more recently, Picasso's goat with bicycle-handle horns, and Calder's toys made from old tin cans, are Ann's precursors. But there are important differences in content and intention.

On a recent visit, I looked around Ann's studio. The variety of lively look-

ing furniture, of extraordinary animals made of old shoes and hammers and chisels, the strings of wriggly fish whose mouths were purses, and whose tails and fins old forks, the open notebooks full of vivid images, the helicopters and planes swooping and darting – what a feat of excitements to find high up in an old semi-derelict building by Smithfield market! Everything – chairs, fish, tables, aeroplanes, llamas, ponies, eagles and buses

walk with: they reminded me of the caddis worms which as a boy I had found in streams, living in cases made of twigs and shells and other bits and pieces. Ann's ideas often start with just a word, or doodling in a sketch-book – 'pirate radio', for example, and all the associations, often just one-liners, that come out of that, like 'skull and crossbones' and 'rock' radio, materialising from her feeling of saturation with the endless sophistications

of society, and all its' high technology. They are restatements and reinstatements, comments that are often witty – which is why she made ten 'Pirate Radios': a 'series', like a radio or TV serial, but also like radios in Taiwan on a conveyer belt.

Genuine hand-made modern objects that are non-arty-crafty are difficult to find today, compared with the machine-made. The eccentric, the odd, the original, the hand-made are being eradicated from people's lives. It is the endless discards from our society that are important to Ann, because they have meaning: the very fact of being discarded gives them new and unlimited possibilities.

In Africa and Asia millions of people use discards from industrialised society that we would just throw away. They have no prior idea of the objects' proper function, so they use them in ways that are to us totally original. I remember being in Calcutta when a great sewer was being laid in part of the city, huge sections of pipe about twelve feet long and six feet high. No sooner were they unloaded from the lorry on the side of the road that they were occupied: a family would move in at each end and turn it into a home, a semi-detached. I passed



Ann Carrington, with her U.S. of A., stretched denim on a wooden frame 310 x 310cm

was so alive you felt at night they probably all moved around and talked to each other, and then scuttled back to their original places when the first light of dawn struck the windows.

There was a line of working pirate radios, which looked as if made of crystalline rock sugar. Atop the mast-aerial of each was a skull and crossbones, and their sides were covered in sugar-bones, while one or two had feet to

several hundred; each lived in by two families who thought they in clover, having such beautifully waterproof houses.

Historically, nothing like Picasso’s goat had been done before in the West, and for us it revealed a new way of seeing and thinking. But as Ann points out, the many African sculptures that use found objects in unexpected ways were as much an influence on Picasso as the better-known fact that from African sculptural forms he created Cubism. Stemming from Picasso, today we have now built up a history of using found objects in art, a massive trash art/throwaway culture.

But Ann does not feel herself part of that or, indeed, of any other modern art movement:

I don’t want to say I’m a one-off, because that would be vain. But my purpose is not to extend or comment on anything that has happened before – I’m just not that interested in that at all. No, I’m a kind of obsessive collector; and the things that I collect form a sort of diary, since I was about eight, and stuck things in it. They were never anything to do with my life outside: they were completely private, about what I was thinking, my inner world, although they had pictures and drawings in them. When I first went to art college, I showed my sketch-books, like any other student. Then I found myself completely lost for ideas for about two years, until it finally hit me that what I did at home was in fact my art. Finding a way to present it was difficult, because it was so private, so my first piece of work was a big drawing about those diaries at home. It was a huge piece, and took me about a year and a half. It included things that I had written about previously, and used documentation and layering, and there was a big dinner table full of people I had left behind. Next I made a massive box, again about diaries and documentation, and I made it out of small pieces of rolled paper, because I wanted it to be about stratification and the layers of my own history, so that you could read down into it. That was the only piece of sculpture I made before I went on to the Royal College of Art. There was a lot packed into it.

A group of open-winged lecterns caught my eye, and Ann explained that they were functional, rests for her sketch-books, and like them, conglomerates:

The lecterns you find in churches display the worthiness of the books they support, for instance, an eagle made of gold and gemstones speaks the language of holiness, of the Bible upon it; while in a town hall a business-like lectern carries the minutes of meetings for some pompous man to read out.

The starting point for Ann was when she was at the Royal College, and having a meal in the Science Museum cafeteria. ‘Right at the top there are aeroplanes’, she told me, ‘and I love it up there. I could not make head nor tail of what all the things were, but I just enjoyed looking at them and choosing bits, perhaps just knobs and other parts, and making other things with them. Not something like Thomas the Tank Engine, who has a human personality, but developing the objects’ own characteristics, so that the planes, for example, have real aeroplane or bird personalities’.

‘You’ve caught the fact that real airliners have powerful personalities



Ann Carrington, Fish Wish, mixed media including tin can, 40 x 40 x 10cm

‘they’re not allowed to show, otherwise passengers would get frightened. Your planes are like baby planes, they are still being fun and being themselves, before they are forced to conform to the life of an adult aircraft’.

‘Exactly. And the feathered ones also contain a threat and are meant to look as if they’d be quite scary if they were bigger, like in Hitchcock’s ‘Birds’. And they contain other ideas also. For example, most sculptures on the European art market are made of bronze, and even if they are not worth anything as art, they are worth their weight in bronze – which speaks a language of its own before you’ve taken anything else into consideration. But my things are made from old tins and feathers and wood, and the only value they have is the art.’

Among the works in her studio are a pair of beautiful, naturalistic life-size horse heads. They are made from Mortadella, sealed in plastic resin inside and out so they won’t go bad. Their starting point was the Roman horses in the British Museum, which are made from a red granite that looks like salami. Then a lorry driver in Italy told Ann that real Mortadella is made out of horse and donkey meat: ‘So I thought... the Italians are such great equestrians, and yet their favourite meat dishes are horse-flesh or donkey meat! So I reversed the process, and modelled these two pieces to look classical.

On the wall of her studio is a big square patchwork map of the USA.

I wanted to make a series of atlas pages that really tell you about each country – unlike the view got by an armchair traveller who lives his life through the ‘National Geographic’ or travel encyclopaedias. You know how travel articles select the exceptional things, never the

commonplace, so that you get an idea that’s distorted, though it may be evocative and attractive. I like the idea of America being kind of Wild West, blue jeans, cowboys. I like the idea of America being kind of Wild West, blue jeans, cowboys, and also the colonial idea, the quilts that you might find in a Waltons-style, whitewashed house. So I thought I’d make my map of the USA out of blue jeans...original Red Indian maps were made out of silver birch bark. Because they were great travellers, they used to pin them to trees. So it’s got something of that. My Canada is a bit upside-down: I think of veneer and fake wood units. But it’s not as corny as if it was made from pine cones or sheaves of wheat.

And those ships, and half ships made of dangerous looking broken glass?

After the hurricane I woke up, and there was all the glass lying over the street. It made me think of ships at sea and wrecks. I wanted to make a bed of sea.

Ann is Circe in reverse, transforming what was previously swinish garbage into a multitude of desirable beings, alive, full of humour and interest. Over years as an art dealer, collector and critic, I have developed my own criteria for what is worthwhile, and Ann Carrington’s work fulfils them all. Richly imaginative, and an energetic doer, she will be remembered many years from today.