

The familiar Queen's head that we unthinkingly stick on envelopes every day is blown up to the size of a small Royal Mail van, reconstituted on a black canvas backdrop and washed in the glorious Technicolor of Blackpool illuminations. Propped up against the bare grey wall of an anonymous studio in the wastelands of east London, next to the M11, this giant postage stamp positively fizzes with life, the everyday object subverted and transformed into something surreal.

On closer inspection, the dazzling colours that illuminate the Royal profile are made up of thousands upon thousands of hand-sewn pearl buttons. "In a way, it's a homage", says its creator, Ann Carrington, "to an alternative royalty, the Pearly Kings and Queens of the East End, who for many years, because they were itinerant workers, were treated as outcasts". What she calls

"psychedelic disco colours" are a way of undermining the formally associated, even in this Golden Jubilee year, with the Queen herself. "I certainly didn't intend it", she laughs, "as part of the Jubilee celebrations."

Whether it be the social establishment or the artistic one, Carrington is quietly but defiantly an outsider. Until the birth of her son, Isaac, two years ago, she worked in squat studios. She stages her own shows, having despaired of more conventional galleries, and avoids the sort of self-publicity and posturing that has so marked the high-profile career of her contemporary on the Royal College of Art sculpture course, Tracy Emin.

In the 15 years since she graduated, Ann Carrington has won an devoted and influential following, but although her works command high prices -

each item in the stamp collection will go for upwards of £5,000 - her name remains something of a well-kept secret among the cognoscenti. Part of it is her refusal to jump through hoops and market herself as a brand. She prefers to let her art speak for her - a sure way of missing the Turner Prize shortlist. The discerning, however, latched on to her quickly. The designer Paul Smith, for example, bought up half her first show, and put some of her tin-can fish and oil can cars on display in his New York shop. He remains both a patron and a friend.

Her use of recycled materials has led many to label Carrington the Sculptor of Scrap. Many of her most celebrated works has resurrected discarded objects: fragments of old denim used to create a map of the USA commissioned by Levis; coconut shells to make larger-

PEARLY QUEEN

Her refusal to play the celebrity-artist game, and the accidental destruction of her most precious work, have ensured that Ann Carrington and fame have remained strangers. But that's to about change, says Peter Stanford

Photographs by **Andrew Montgomery**



Heads she wins, from left: Ann Carrington working on a safety-pin coin: an earlier work made entirely from cigarette butts; some of her precious note books; in from of her oversized crown; the 20p artwork



than-life horses in flamenco postures; worn-out shoe uppers for a scaly brown crocodile; old kitchen chairs for skeletons; and worn out bone-handled knives for elephant tusks.

“I like the idea of things going full cycle,” says Carrington. What she’s not keen on, though, is the Sculptor of Scrap tag. ‘The materials I work with don’t have to be old, they can be brand new. I’m not making an ecological point. I like objects to have more than one life, to use something apparently mundane to tell a different story’.

There is a resolutely down-to-earth quality to Carrington, unlike her Bloomsbury namesake, the painter Dora Carrington (they are not related). The daughter of working-class parents from Birmingham, Ann Carrington has a warm, approachable, giggly and, with her reddish hair and big smile, rather like the girl next door. She’s unaffected and so unafraid to talk about, or even explain, her work. “I think one of the reasons it sells is that people understand what I’m about: that there can be more than meets the eye to things we see every day, that there are resonances. My work speaks for itself. It’s not cryptic.”

Next to the postage stamp in her studio - she pays for this one, deciding that with a baby in tow she needed to have somewhere warm and watertight – there are other

pieces for her upcoming show. These include giant representations of the 2p, 20p and 50p pieces, part of a set of six, created again on a black backdrop, but this time made out of gold and silver safety pins and zips. She must be keeping some small haberdashers going single-handed.

They look fantastic, I say, almost like those chocolate coins children get at Christmas. Carrington beams broadly and visibly relaxes. I’ve said the right thing. “With the whole euro thing, I realised that there is every chance our fantastic coins will disappear without people ever having looked at them properly. We are almost blind to the heraldic pomp and circumstance designs on them, the calligraphy.” It is not, however, that that she wants to celebrate their designs. If she did she could have blown up photographs. With Carrington, there is always a twist, a wry observation. Here what she seems to be about is undermining the symbolism, the taken-for-granted authority that means that these worthless pieces of metal have a monetary value.

Outside of its’ practical associations, the safety pin is also linked to the punk era, when Carrington herself was growing up. But there is more than personal nostalgia at work here. As she unpacks a complicated story, she gives a glimpse into the broader context of her current work.

“The safety pin is also used by the Herero people in Botswana to make pictures. They come originally from Namibia but have been displaced. They were deeply influenced in the 19th century by German missionaries, and the women still wear 10 petticoats and cameos round their necks as they goose-step to German waltzes. For them, safety pins don’t have the same baggage as they do for us. They can be as beautiful as diamonds.”



Photo: Ann Carrington
studio in London's
nd, working on one
elaborate coin
es that are made
safety-pins and zips

Carrington met the Herero when she was travelling in Africa in the early 1990s. It was a journey of pivotal importance for her work, though the long absence from this country it entailed is another reason why her name is not better known. The story of the trip all began, she recalls, turning down the button-encrusted radio next to the kettle, when she was at college in Nottingham trying to be a painter, “I was competent but not interesting”, she admits. “It was

only in my last year there that I realised that what I was doing at home was really my own artistic language. Since I was a child I had been making sketch books out of sweet wrappers, bubble-gum papers, postcards, photographs, cuttings from ‘National Geographic. From ‘Fab 208’ and ‘Jackie’ – anything that caught my eye-stuck in alongside my own writings about what I was doing or feeling. In that last year in Nottingham I knew what I had to do was to take what was two-dimensional in the sketch books and turn it into something three-dimensional as sculpture.”

She may, characteristically, be underselling herself. Carrington left Nottingham with a first with distinction, but what is true is that on the basis of the sketch books alone, she talked her way on to the Royal College of Art’s MA course. “I had nothing else to show them, certainly no sculpture.”

It was down then to the impact of the sketch-books, which sit in front of us on the decorating table in the middle of Carrington’s studio. Highly - coloured , multi-textured pages, they are a stunning visual diary – “a documentation of my world as it comes to me,” as Carrington finally puts it after searching for the right words. As well as objects of beauty, they are also

workaday tools. So when I ask her to spell a name, she jots down the letters in the corner of one of their pages.

One of her tutors at the RCA was sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi. He was also curator of an exhibition ‘Lost Magic Kingdoms’, at the old Museum of Mankind in 1985, which combined his own work with pieces made by people in Africa, Mexico and India. For the first time, Carrington realised that there were others doing much the same thing as her all around the globe. “One of the best exhibits was a kerosene lamp from Ghana, made from a defunct electric lightbulb, a tin and a wick,” she says. “I just thought, what a superb ironic twist. But what I really liked was the work by children in the exhibition, reinventing scrap they had found on their doorsteps into toys because they had no manufactured toys”.

From that point on, Carrington was determined to travel in order to put what she had glimpsed into some sort of context. It took her six years to find a way, but finally in 1991 she was awarded a six-month Commonwealth Fellowship and set off for Zimbabwe. “Eventually, I found Tengenenge, a village of serpentine sculptors. I hired a hut there and started collecting the discarded stone-cutting tools. Then the kids started to come to me because I had pliers. They would make toys – or artworks, depending on how you saw it – out of bits of scrap. I decided to photograph them at work.” come to me because I had pliers.

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Soon she was in the capital Harare for a sell-out exhibition of her work and, at the private view, she met an architect who turned out to be a pilot with a plane. On impulse, she let him take her on the first leg of a tour round southern Africa. “I can’t drive, so afterwards I would take public transport. At bus stops, I would show people pictures of my work and ask if they know anyone else doing the same sort of thing.” In Natal, South Africa, she was directed to 17-year old Punch Mbhele who had built a house, shaped like a fish, out of old transit vans and telegraph poles.

Mbhele, and others like him, changed Carrington’s view of what “art” is. “Here, we have a few figurehead artists but I came to realise that the idea of an artist is a Western concept. Punch didn’t think of himself as an artist. It was just what he did, a skill that he had. He was part of a big broad river of creativity with textiles, tool-making and all sorts of practical things feeding in. “ With financial support of the London Arts Board, Carrington commissioned some of these people and transported their work to Britain for an acclaimed touring exhibition in 1996.

But she wanted to reach a wider audience and so painstakingly put down the story of her African odyssey: the people she met, changes it wrought in her.

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A graphic-designer friend put the text and her photographs into a book and she set off – doing it all herself, as always – to find a publisher. At the first port of call, Penguin Books, the manuscript was accidentally shredded. Thames and Hudson then misplaced her second copy. She only had one more left, which she hand-delivered to the British Museum in the hope its’ publishing arm would go for the project. Again, it was lost. This time, however, Carrington, revealing as she tells the tale of steel and determination that resides beneath a gentle and haphazard exterior, made such a fuss, ringing every hour, even being escorted off the premises at one stage, that she came to the attention of publishing director Emma Way. The manuscript was found and Way called soon afterwards to say that she had decided to publish it with the backing of US partners. “Don’t think there’s a happy ending.” Carrington warns me. “For the Frankfurt Book Fair last autumn, we had made a poster to advertise the book to other publishers. It was a boy with a crumpled jumbo jet that Punch made from bits and pieces of metal. Then September 11th happened, and of course, the

the American co-publishers withdrew”. The book, at the moment, is on ice.

Which in one way is odd, given Carrington’s growing reputation. In tandem with her African travels, and with marriage in 1999 to East End market trader Richard Gottschalk, she has managed to translate being the next new thing into something more substantial. Issey Miyake and Clark’s Shoes have commissioned her to make pieces. She’s collaborating with Paul Smith on T-shirts based on the button pictures. The growing interest in her work, and motherhood, has led to some concessions. Sometimes she lets her art students help with the sewing and pinning, but at heart she remains a loner. She feels closer to those not considered artists than she does the art establishment. “I instinctively understand people who are in an obsessional world of their own and do what they do irrespective of what was done in the past or right now, like a postman on the south coast making things out of leaves and paper and bus tickets.”

Her stamps may have a wider audience than the postman’s creations, but you can draw from her description of him an element of autobiography. And so in her spare moments, Carrington is still sticking things in her sketchbooks, trawling street markets. “Most times I know what I’m looking for, but then others, I’ll see something – a box of nails, for instance- and it will be suggestive, trigger a resonance.”