

Any old iron

One of Glen Clarke's long-standing tricks is serial accumulation, the ordered arrangement of prefabricated units. When he won the City of Hobart Art Award in 1993 it was with a mountain of Weet-bix. When he won the National Sculpture Prize in 2005 it was with a bomb crater made of tiny folded-money shirts. The former was a positive form made from horizontally laid bricks, the latter a negative made from vertically suspended tiles, but the essential formalist-additive methodology is consistent. Clarke has applied this system to a variety of materials and forms for more than a decade now: 120,000 marshmallows to make a sunset sky after the manner of Tasmanian colonial painter W.C. Piguenit, 14,000 clothes pegs to make a stack of nine plumbing pipes from the back of a builder's truck; 5,500 wooden school rulers to make a dinghy for convicts and refugees; 5,000 pairs of chopsticks to make three car tyres.

Many make one: points a line, lines a plane, planes a solid, atoms a universe, genes a life, citizens a nation, soldiers an army, casualties a war. But how many? Well, as Mark Twain (or possibly Benjamin Disraeli) said, there are lies, damn lies, and statistics. Beyond a certain point, numbers become meaningless for most of us. How do you comprehend and make sense of, say, 62,006, the latest assessment of deaths in the so-called 'War on Terror'?¹ In order to be seen and understood, a number that high requires simultaneous extension and containment. Extension, laying out, rendering, in order that we can have a physical experience of the arithmetical. Containment, in order to hold its extra-numerical meaning - its human, emotional, political and historical freight - in some coherent framework.

Maya Lin worked with a similar figure in Washington's *National Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982). In this famous monument, the names of the more than 58,000 American dead are each individually inscribed on black granite walls, but the list is held within the geometric form of a double long-triangle corner: an open book, a clean cut wound, the furrow of a Roman plough. Clarke's *A Trembling Quiet* is not dissimilar, in its dialectic of enumeration and limitation, of quantum and singularity.

The specific number of shirt-units that make up the work is not significant in itself. Rather, it stands for a host of other numbers, of

¹ David Randall and Emily Gosden, "62,006 - the number killed in the 'war on terror'" *The Independent*, Sunday 10 September 2006

lists and tables and graphs: dates of conflict, numbers of sorties flown, tonnage of bombs dropped, military casualties sustained, collateral damage inflicted, ongoing civilian deaths and injuries from land mines and other unexploded ordnance. The form, though, does have a special, personal meaning. Although he had no direct involvement in the Vietnam War, the artist's youth was riven with family conflict over the war, Australia's involvement and the issue of conscription. Clarke first visited Vietnam years later, in 1998, and has since lived and worked there and elsewhere in South East Asia over extended periods. In Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the impact of "The American War" is still obvious more than thirty years after the last US helicopter flew out of Saigon. The face of the land is pocked with the craters of US carpet-bombing, scarred with the tumuli of unmarked graves.

For a sculptor, the negative-positive dynamics of these Robert Smithson anti-monuments are irresistible powerful, and Clarke made his first crater objects as far back as 1999. Using shirts folded from paper money (originally Chinese ceremonial "hell banknotes", more recently legal tender) hung in rows from cotton strings, Clarke models the craters' concavities in a kind of three-dimensional graph of points in space, a digital net of form. The shirts have an obvious human reference, signifying individual bodies (populations, participants, casualties), the somatic aspect underlined by the blood-red thread which connects them. At the same time the money also permits a national-international commentary. In *A Trembling Quiet* the land is formed of Laotian kip, Cambodian riels and Vietnamese dong, but the hole blown out by American forces is lined with US dollar bills.

The direct, specific inspiration for *A Trembling Quiet* comes from a 2005 visit the artist made to Thuong Na Di, in Xieng Khouang province in northern Laos. There, around the famous Plain of Jars, lies buried some of the legacy of the "shadow war", the secret but massive American bombing campaign against the communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Between 1964 and 1973, the U.S. dropped some two million tons of bombs on Laos, more than was dropped on Germany and Japan combined during World War II, a plane load every eight minutes. Laos has been described as "the most bombed nation, per capita, in the history of warfare."² (More statistics.) The shattered,

² Kevin Fagan, "Legacy of war: "Bombies" that go boom", *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday 30 March 2003

Swiss-cheese landscape of Thuong Na Di is one result of that U.S. strategy. On the ground forty-odd years later, impressed, appalled and fascinated, Clarke walked across the hillside photographing groups of craters. Having completed this documentation exercise, he and his guide-translator Sillasak were returning to their car when with a lucky glance and an instinctive reaction he stopped Sillasak from treading on a metal sphere: a bomblet, an "APERS submunition", an anti-personnel mine, rusted and corroded, but still intact and potentially lethal.

In a strange, wicked, final bequest, the war has left Indochina scattered with such leftovers of military hardware. Within and around many of the crater holes lie twisted bomb-case fragments, or intact, unexploded munitions. And with steel fetching sixteen cents per kilogram, for poor villagers it is worthwhile risking the trigger. Teams of half a dozen men descend into these mounds of hell, digging for scrap metal treasure. Sometimes they hit an APERS submunition. The American War bites again; there is another blip in those incomprehensible statistics. Clarke's field is South East Asia. But his experience, and the experience of local populations could be from any war, any old war: it could as easily be from Bosnia or Iraq. Even without aerial bombardment, there are still the landmines: an estimated 10 million lie waiting in the soil of Afghanistan and Angola, 16 million in Iran, 23 million in Egypt.

Having come of age in the early 1970s, Clarke is at base a modernist: a formalist, a minimalist, a conceptualist, an artist whose core value is, as he describes it, 'the correct distance between objects'. This dogma is not only a material consideration, of course. It also involves other distances, as between thought and feeling, aesthetics and politics, the individual and the collective, Australia and Asia. The profitable distance is usually up close with a shovel, the safe distance a long, long way away with your hands over your ears. The correct distance is somewhere in between, and requires alertness, negotiation, adjustment, choice.

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