

Touch

Although Lyndall Phelps' projects appear, at first sight, to be completely unrelated in content, in fact connecting strands and themes can be observed. She is drawn to what she calls 'the poignant', and through site and context specific artwork that primarily references the past, she presents series of objects which at first glance might appear beautiful, playful, even surreal, yet, on a closer look, reveal a darker side.

Touch *i.* the action or an act of touching; exercise of the faculty of feeling upon a material object

ii. to put the hand or finger or some other part of the body upon, or into contact with (something) so as to feel it; 'to exercise the sense of feeling upon'

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press

Touch - the title chosen by Phelps for her exhibition at Leamington Spa - alludes to two possible meanings of the word: the relationship of the viewer to the material objects in the historic collection and the commissioned installation pieces made specially by the artist; and the treatments carried out in the spa where the touch of the hand of the physiotherapist or masseur on the body of the patient formed a crucial part of the rehabilitation process.

How does the research process for a new body of work begin? What is the starting point? How much evidence of the many ideas and thoughts that emerge remain evident in the final installation of work? What stays in, what goes out? How are choices made?

With *Touch* Phelps' role has been part curator, part artist; her brief to respond to the collections and create new insights into the stories behind the spa. A period of studying the Art Gallery & Museum's archive and the collection stores led to the discovery of a set of files containing an oral history project. These records are based on interviews, conducted in 2007, recalling the experiences of staff and patients from the late 1950s through to 1990. It is these social and personal records - the human stories - that engaged Phelps' attention and became the starting point for *Touch*.

Leamington Spa's Royal Pump Rooms opened in 1814, responding to the needs of the growing number of visitors who paid to drink the waters and take a bath in the various spa establishments already established in the town. From 1948 until the 1990s when the Therapeutic Pool closed down, the Royal Pump Rooms was used for the treatment of arthritis, rheumatism and polio. By the 1970s Leamington was one of the few places in the country where hydrotherapy could be received on the NHS and by 1988 it was the only spa in Britain still giving NHS treatments in the original building and still using the waters. As the extensive photographic collection from the 1950s to the 1990s shows, the buoyancy of the saline spa water helped to support patients during massage, manipulation and exercises. Initially patients were given hydrotherapy treatments to stimulate muscles and improve circulation in the limbs by trained physiotherapists and masseurs in the pools and treatment rooms. Later on, as ideas concerning rehabilitation changed, patients were encouraged to take responsibility for their own exercise.

The writer Jeanette Winterson in her introduction to the 2010 Jerwood Contemporary Makers exhibition, *The Making Game*, suggests that

“The life of objects is a strange one.

A maker creates something like a fossil record. She or he is imprinted in the piece. We know that energy is never lost, only that it changes its form, and it seems to me that the maker shape-shifts her/himself into the object. This is why it remains a living thing.”

This energy and process of transformation is apparent in Phelps' approach to *Touch* and other projects. She is fascinated by systems, codes, repetitions and what she refers to as 'extreme processes', where the mundane is transformed into the extraordinary. Thorough and detailed research will inform and ultimately determine the choice of materials, the making process and the most effective method of presentation to communicate the story or narrative behind the project.

By looking at some of the daily practices and rituals associated with the spa treatments, and re-presenting a selection of the objects in a gallery setting, Phelps challenges our perceptions and sets up a series of questions. The viewer is invited to use his or her imagination to make sense of these objects and speculate about their use and function. Ambiguity and the presentation of objects which look functional and carry the potential for use, but cannot be used, is a recurring theme in Phelps' work. She is also fascinated by contrasts, how situations can be both positive and negative at the same time, and this is apparent in the subtle allusion in *Touch* to both the pleasure and pain experienced by patients during their treatments.

Many of the historic objects associated with the treatments, such as the goggles, hot packs, slings, weight bags and electrode pads exhibited, were either made up from scratch or combined pre-manufactured components with hand made components fabricated on site in the spa's specialist sewing and engineering departments. In our 21st century world of mass-produced, readily available imports, where there is a greater separation between the handmade and the manufactured, objects such as the goggles which incorporate hand cut and sewn leather and foam edging are a reminder of the past. A close look at the edges of the electrode pads used to pass electric currents through the skin to ease muscle pain reveals the roughly cut form; nowadays these items would be laser cut or machine finished in a factory.

Each of Phelps' projects is heavily reliant on research and collaboration with a wide range of individuals, whose expertise or interests reflects her own. This often involves finding ways of making things and sourcing manufacturers who can create items to her specifications. With the *Touch* installation Phelps has deliberately created an ambiguity between the historic and contemporary works. Historic objects and treatments are re-presented using 21st century materials and with a 21st century sensibility. Phelps' fascination with time and labour, and commitment to sourcing the most appropriate materials and making processes, to ensure the finished works relate visually and conceptually to their historic originals, is evident in the labour intensive objects made specially for the exhibition by the artist.

Touch (blanket) has been knitted by Phelps from hypothermia blankets and incorporates ribbon and thread. The textile, despite appearances to the contrary, is soft to the touch. The silver colour and metallic finish refers to the use of metallic foil which covered both the walls and patients in some electrical treatments.

The starting point for *Touch (electrode pads)* was the tile pattern from the Vichy douche treatment area. Made from photo-etched aluminium, a number of pads are displayed in stacks alongside their historical counterpart. Only fragments and traces of the original architecture (other than the Hammam which survives largely intact) and decoration remain. The memory, however, of the blue and white tiles in the Ladies Pool and the red and black pattern on the walls of the Turkish bath has remained with patients and staff and is the basis for many of the works in *Touch*. “*It was all like Turkish or Roman arches, you know, and nice ornate tiling like you see in the Alhambra*”(Lillian Bates). Extracts such as this from the oral history archives show how the decorative qualities of the building appeared to aid the healing process, and explains why Phelps was keen to reflect so much of the lost and overlooked architectural decoration in the works. The use of pattern also highlights another contrast between the artist’s work and the plain and utilitarian historical objects.

Touch (petri dishes) comprises thirty-six glass petri dishes displayed on a floating plinth: the grid format and use of multiples are intended to suggest order and repetition. The dishes are sandblasted with patterns still visible in the columns found in the Turkish bath, now the Local History Gallery. This piece makes visible two of the raw materials used in the spa treatments: each petri dish is filled with either fuller’s earth (used to fill the hot packs) or wax beads (referring to the hot wax bath treatment). The choice of mundane, utilitarian glass containers more commonly associated with the medical and scientific professions elevates their position and, as with other works in this exhibition, deliberately creates an ambiguity and invites curiosity in the viewer.

Touch (slings and weight bags) made from fabric, glass, metal, thread and sand relate to the sling apparatus used in the Therapeutic Pool and the lifting exercises prescribed for patients by the physiotherapists. The fabric was specially woven and replicates the pattern on the walls of the Turkish bath. The use of the glass rings implies fragility and tension.

Touch (towel) made from fabric and thread refers to the hot towels - “*great big fluffy blue and white [towels]*” (Trudie Golby) - embroidered with different colours for different departments, used to wrap and warm patients during or after their treatments. The pattern is taken from the tiles in the Ladies Pool and the extreme length of the towel appears simultaneously menacing as well as comforting.

The *Touch* project is a testament to the rewards and insights of close investigation, research and enquiry, and the potency of objects to endure over time. Phelps has absorbed fragments of memories, recollections and anecdotes from the oral history archives to form a series of multi-layered intriguing objects which clearly reference, and provide insight into, past histories and narratives.

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August 2010

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