

Knit One Purl One

In 2001 Lyndall Phelps began to knit a red rope. Some seven years later she has completed three ropes, each made from wool of a single primary colour – red, blue, and yellow – now ready to be taken out on location. Each measures 100 metres in length, and is composed of some 30,000 rows of knitting and 900,000 stitches. This compulsive activity came about as a counter to a project that Phelps had been working on with artist John Frankland at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, *Untitled Boulder* 2001. Phelps' role was curatorial, and Frankland's project involved setting a 78-tonne stone boulder within Compton Verney's 18th-century 'Capability' Brown landscape. The work was complicated, and in Phelps' opinion overtly masculine. Heavy haulage and lifting equipment was involved, everything about the project was extreme.

Phelps's reaction was to make a work of her own comprising three objects: a hand-knitted rope, a hand-crocheted safety net, and a ladder with rungs of glass. Each element was to be installed in a way that would render its function redundant, symbols of escape and rescue would become useless. All were handcrafted in a domestic, feminine way. Through this piece Phelps became interested in extending the rope and she continued knitting not knowing where the exercise would lead her.

Purchasing the wool has had its amusing moments, and has engaged Phelps in strange conversations with shop assistants. 'What are you making?' would be answered straightforwardly by Phelps, 'Ropes.' After raised eyebrows, and further conversations, the notion was accepted, and in some cases the project became the cause of further interest as more and more bundles of wool were purchased.

Phelps's choice of red, blue and yellow was related to her requirement that aspects of the work should be basic, indeed mundane. The activity of knitting in this way – a row of plain succeeded by a row of purl – would produce a basic length that was ordinary. However, its sheer extent has made each piece extraordinary, as do the colours when their iconic symbolism is considered. Red first, then blue and finally – for the moment – yellow. Red, the colour of fire and blood, for passion, danger, love, temper. Blue for calm, the sky, sea, and purity. Yellow, the colour of the sun, and associated with the earth.

While knitting, Phelps mused on what she was doing over and above her immediate task. Gradually her reasons for making the ropes developed, and the associations that knitting had within her sphere of interest became clearer to her. In general terms Phelps likes to engage playfully with a concept, trying to capture a sense of wonder, beauty, or to include surreal elements. On closer inspection, though, her work reveals a darker more sinister side, where loss, vulnerability and danger are never far from the surface. Her knitting became a metaphor for multi-layered ideas, certainly the hand-crafted nature of women's work of this kind, but also the fact that knitting has often been associated with hard labour in Victorian prisons and workhouses. Female inmates were forced to spend the majority of their waking hours making functional objects such as blankets and clothing, or if none were required they were often kept knitting, just for the sake of being given something to do. Phelps needed to fully understand her self-imposed task, and her desire to experience long periods of silence as she tried to work with history.

This re-enactment of history is found in many of her other works, such as *Evacuate* 2007 and a current project involving pigeons, *The Pigeon Archive*. For *Evacuate* Phelps worked with important specimen collections at the Natural History Museum, London and Tring, which had been evacuated to some twenty-five English country houses during the Second World War, for the purpose of their preservation. In turn, over sixty-five years on, Phelps re-united the specimens with their temporary homes. Her photographic records of this activity revealed many of the changes that had taken place within these houses in the intervening years. For *The Pigeon Archive* she has recreated military manoeuvres that were undertaken by pigeons during both World Wars, including the wearing of backpacks to carry crucial messages and being dropping from aircraft bound and attached to individual parachutes. Her photographic and video recordings will form just part of the finished work.

These examples illustrate Phelps's working methods and the ways in which she gradually develops her concepts. Having now reached the stage of completing three 100-metre ropes in the three pigment primaries, Phelps needed to decide how to develop them further. She had already shown the red rope in various exhibitions, each opportunity offering a different context for the work. In *I am Obsessed with Detail* at MAC, Birmingham, 2004, the rope became a self portrait; earlier this year it was shown at Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, in an exhibition exploring fairytales, myths and witchcraft in contemporary art.

Phelps explains: '*Rope* has become an ironic homage to minimalism and the monochrome, being both a cool formal work of pure colour and a meticulously constructed work firmly embedded in the feminine. The repetitive production process references both mechanized fabrication and domestic craft.' She adds, 'Individual ropes, or combinations of them, will be exhibited in a variety of ways; either as sculptures, installations, drawings, video and/or photography. Each new opportunity, or development of the work, will afford a different context, allowing *Rope* to continually evolve and take on new meaning.'

Now Phelps sought a form of contrasting context in which to show the work, and on being invited to think about how she would exhibit the ropes in the Lobby of One Canada Square, and the wider function of Canary Wharf, she decided to use them as both sculptures and as a means of drawing. The business environment being so dissimilar to the art gallery provided Phelps with the disparity she was seeking. Working with photographer Richard Davies, she took the ropes on a playful journey through One Canada Square, using them to make coloured line drawings and sculptural bundles within a diverse range of places; an office, a reception, utility and service areas, a board-room, to mention just a few. She entwined, twisted and looped the ropes over tables and chairs, around photocopiers and windows, calling to mind the Swiss painter Paul Klee (1879-1940) and his statements: 'A line is a dot that went for a walk,' and, 'A drawing is simply a line going for a walk.' The work of other artists holds associations for her – Anish Kapoor (b. 1954) for his early sculptures covered in primary colour pigments, and Yves Kline (1928-1962) for his use of the monochrome, particularly blue. One of her contemporaries Phelps particularly admires is the 2005 Turner Prize winner, Simon Starling (b. 1967), for his processes of transforming one object or substance into another, and the pilgrimage-like journeys on which he may take his work. A prime example is *Shedboatshed* 2005, which consisted of a wooden shed that he had at one time dismantled, converted into a boat in which he sailed down the River Rhine, and then turned back into the original shed in Basel, Switzerland.

Phelps installation in the Lobby of One Canada Square follows her theme to a logical, if temporary conclusion. The installation is two-fold, photographic representations of the ropes' travels through the building, showing how they were transformed from place to place, and how the locations were in turn transformed by the presence of the ropes; and the capturing of their apparent freedom, confining their soft and linear character by placing them in hard transparent containers, with just their texture and colours remaining the constant factors.

Ann Elliott, Independent Curator