

## Artwork of the Month April 2026

### Cornelia Parker, *Engagement Ring drawing (as long as it lasted)*

Dorothy Nott, formerly Chair of the Friends and recently elected President, discusses Cornelia Parker's wire drawing, *Engagement Ring drawing (as long as it lasted)*, the subject of her talk at the Gallery, which at time of writing is on display in the Burton Gallery.

[Click here to see another of Parker's wire drawings in the same series](#) or, alternatively, search 'wire drawings Cornelia Parker' through Google to see a range of images featuring her work.

Cornelia Parker is one of Britain's best loved and most acclaimed contemporary artists. When I think of her work, the words 'subversive', 'quirky', 'imaginative', 'challenging' come to mind. She is driven by curiosity - always looking at the underside, the spaces, cracks, shadows, and creases - for example the way light coming through a window shows up the dust particles, and where the dust, rather than the light is the thing which engages her. She is as concerned with the space around things as with the things themselves. She reconfigures everyday objects using transformation, playfulness, and storytelling - I always like a pun she says - but, by doing so, she engages with important issues of our time, challenging the viewer to see the back story. Puns feature largely in her work and in her titles, and reflect her playfulness. Her focus is not so much on the object itself but on the aftermath. Many of you will remember her famous installation [Cold Dark Matter](#) - an exploded shed made possible through her collaboration with the army. Ordinary objects from the inside of the shed hang suspended in the gallery, and thanks to the lighting throw up intriguing shadows which even the artist had not imagined. It is also a piece which continues to evolve as every installation is minutely different. It has a life of its own. As Parker herself says, she likes pieces to be reflective of life itself; so, as humans evolve, why not art? As she herself acknowledges, her approach to her work is idiosyncratic.

Her playfulness came from her love of cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, where the cat is constantly being squashed, knocked unconscious, flattened, echoes of which can be seen in the beautiful [Thirty Pieces of Silver](#) at one time on view in York in St Mary's Church. This is where a steamroller ran over items of domestic silver plate collected from car-boot

sales, markets, auctions, and wedding presents donated by friends, which were then assembled in thirty roundels suspended from the ceiling on fine translucent wires, a few inches above the ground resembling water lilies in a tranquil lake but with resonances of the betrayal of Christ by Judas, an altogether darker meaning. Brass band instruments were given a similar treatment by crushing them in the steam press of Tower Bridge in a later piece entitled *Breathless* and created for the V & A. Other brass instruments were flattened and again suspended from the ceiling with fine wires and called *Perpetual Canon*. As you may imagine, this destruction was not uncontroversial in the brass band community!

Cornelia Parker studied Fine Art at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in the 1970s. She was from a rural setting in Cheshire where her father treated her as a boy unlike her sisters, and where she worked with him on the family smallholding, milking cows, planting, and scything hay. She enjoyed the hard labour which gave her many practical skills. Arriving in Wolverhampton she found her new surroundings pretty grim - seeing urban decay all around her and the atmosphere politically charged. She says this was the only place which would take her, and believes this was on account of her drawing of the head of a lapwing. At first, she practised to be a painter, but she found that she enjoyed the reality of light rather than what she described as her crude depictions of it, and would spend hours trying to find other ways to capture light including 3D. As a student she was inspired by her week in David Nash's studio watching him making interventions in the landscape - planting and twisting trees for example. It was not long before Nature intervened in her own work. After she saw the effect of raindrops on her canvas while drawing outdoors and dust settling on the damp surface creating beautiful marks. She found herself very open to these interventions, and willing to follow a path leading on from these unexpected effects. After Wolverhampton she went on to Reading University for a Master of Fine Arts degree in the early 1980s.

On viewing an object, her first instinct is to intervene, to create something which will make the viewer see that object in a totally different way. So while she is making conceptual art accessible and playful, she is at the same time challenging the viewer to think laterally and about the world we live in. So, for example, in *War Room* she exhibited what was left of red sheets of paper from which poppies had been cut out for Remembrance Sunday with all the baggage which that entails: something very simple but so very full of meaning.

She then began to look at ways in which she could intervene, not just in everyday objects like the shed, but also in objects found in museums, for

example, the backs of Turner paintings, Queen Victoria's stocking, Freud's couch, David Livingstone's hat, and Dr Crippen's medicines. Probably her most well-known of these is her intervention into Rodin's famous sculpture *The Kiss*, which she wrapped in one mile of string and renamed *The Distance (A Kiss with String Attached)*. She was amused when her work evolved further in unexpected ways, when a group of protesters cut the string and left it at the base of the statue. Parker immediately gathered up the string and created *Distance with Weapon*, a ball of string wrapped round a weapon - a perfect example of the evolution of a work of art. String was and is a medium Parker relates to, especially in a kind of homage to Marcel Duchamp's installation when he wrapped a mile of string around surrealist paintings in an exhibition in 1942. Parker cites Duchamp as one of her greatest inspirations, along with Kurt Schwitters, Yves Klein, and Piero Manzoni, all of whom used non-traditional techniques and materials. Strikingly, although she says that, as soon as she gravitated to sculpture, she found her spiritual home, she is adamant that her form of sculpture is a world away from the likes of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth and what she calls the 'sculpture lump'. Instead, her emphasis is on the ephemeral, creating images that disturb and startle by a process of destruction, resurrection, and transformation - and frequently using violent techniques, like exploding, crushing, shooting. She wants to make something which is abstract and representational at the same time, art which will trigger cultural metaphors and personal associations, which enable the viewer to witness the transformation of the most ordinary object into something compelling and extraordinary. In the variety of her interventions she resists categorisation where her spontaneity and her curiosity combine. It is the process she says which excites her and the licence to be the opposite of perfect. She admits that her techniques are very idiosyncratic, but they reflect the world around her. Harking back to her childhood, she feels that life - and art - should be about getting our hands dirty.

Although many of her better-known works are large-scale installations, there is another side to her work that she refers to as being smaller, quieter, and more subliminal. One piece involved collecting fluff from the Whispering Gallery in St Paul's Cathedral to form earplugs - *The Negative of Whispers*. And there is a series of what she calls drawings - again a pun - because these drawings are not what we would conventionally think of as drawings, pen or pencil on paper etc. Rather they are metals which have been drawn out so that their original manifestation has been transformed. She uses different metals including gold and silver, and says that her drawn pieces will, like the shed, never be the same twice. So for example, a silver dollar is melted down into an ingot, and then drawn out

by pulling and pulling to the height of the Statue of Liberty, in a work entitled *Measuring Liberty with a Dollar* (1998). Similarly, *Measuring Niagara with a teaspoon* and again, *Wedding Ring Drawing (Circumference of a living Room)*, where two 22 carat gold wedding rings are drawn into a wire and trapped between two sheets of glass evoking the history of the marriage - perhaps trapped into the living room. Does this indicate the stifling nature of a marriage? She doesn't say, and it is up to the viewer to imagine the meaning. Context, of course, plays a large part in interpretation. These smaller pieces are genuinely poetic, carrying a sense of drama - a delicacy but one conveying strong messages.

This 'drawing' here came to the gallery recently together with two other works of art from the Richard Sykes and Penny Mason collection through the good offices of the Contemporary Art Society. York Art Gallery has recently focussed on collecting work referencing the body, alongside affording higher profiles for the work of women artists, who it is said, often need support at the early and mid-stages of their careers, since male artists are frequently prioritised when it comes to exhibitions and collections. The other two works are Julia Favrer's *Double Theatre Variation* (2001) and Rosalind Nashabibi's *Untitled* (2004). Parker herself does not like to be thought of as a woman artist, but as an artist; however, it is good to see the Gallery identifying the lesser opportunities historically available to women.

Ever since *Thirty Pieces of Silver* Parker has been interested in silver, which she considers to be the most reflective of materials, but with the potential to tarnish - probably not here. Looking at the '*Drawing*', like the gold wedding rings, this is made from metal, melted down and then drawn out to change fundamentally its original significance, and possessing a new energy. It is no longer an engagement ring, but instead poses the question - What does this mean now? The title almost answers this question - *As long as it lasted*, but what is the story behind this? Was the engagement broken off? And if so, why? And by which party? Was there a change of mind? Or was there a tragic accident? The question is hanging in the air, and the artist leaves it to the viewer to write the script. As Parker says, drawing (in both senses) is the way she sees the world, and she makes things that are like tracery. She wants her works to be a catalyst rather than a sealed off, finished thing. So, although this may seem a small insignificant piece, it holds within it a vast reservoir of meaning, of life itself. That apart, looking at the drawing, it is incredibly delicate. The metal is very fine and drawn out into spirals over drawings; the ring has an ephemeral quality at once conveying fragility - the fragility of the engagement perhaps, but in its transformation becoming a thing of

beauty reaching out across the page. It is almost 3D, with a conventional drawing underneath, shadowing the pattern of the silver. You really need to see it up close, and to see the patterns the silver wire makes, moving away from its original form to become a piece of rare delicacy and meaning.

Parker has received many accolades, becoming a member of the Royal Academy in 2010. She was awarded the OBE and then the CBE. In 1997 she was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, losing out to Gillian Wearing, and in 2017 she was chosen as the official election artist for the 2017 General Election. She has received many commissions, for example for the roof garden of the Met, for Jupiter Artland, and as curator for an exhibition at the Foundling Museum, and she has been awarded honorary doctorates by the Universities of Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Gloucester, and Manchester. She won Artist of the Year Apollo Award in 2016 beating off stiff competition from the artists including David Hockney. She is known for her collaboration with, for example, the army, the police, the Royal Armouries, Madame Tussauds, and in 1995 with the actor Tilda Swinton, creating an installation in which the actor could sleep in a glass case, and which was exhibited as *The Maybe* at the Serpentine Gallery. She has become a key figure in a new sort of cross-disciplinary collaboration between science with its wonder and excitement at new materials and art interpreting the possibilities of those materials. Who knows where her curiosity may take her next?

## **Dorothy Nott**