

# The Arts



Clod-hopping? Cornelia Parker's Subconscious of a Monument uses soil from beneath the leaning tower of Pisa to make a feeble observation

# Irksome quirks

CORNELIA Parker was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997, but would have fitted snugly into this year's line-up, given the similarity of the feel and style of her work to that of Fiona Banner and Keith Tyson. Together they sit at the soft end of the spectrum of contemporary conceptual art, creating work that is often a visual manifestation or illustration of a "quirky" idea. For Parker, that often involves committing acts of violence or working odd transmutations on objects culled from the everyday world. In the past she has blown up a garden shed and artfully arranged the resulting fragments to create Cold Dark Matter, now on display in Tate Modern, and flattened a number of brass

**EXHIBITION**  
**Cornelia Parker**  
 Frith Street Gallery, W1  
**Nick Hackworth**

musical instruments to form *Breathless*, a commission by the V&A for its new galleries. Here, Parker exhibits work created over the past two years that is very much in keeping with her familiar style. Indeed, the most visually impressive work on display, the *Subconscious of a Monument*, is the repetition of a piece Parker made in 1999, albeit with different elements. Filling the front gallery, it consists of a myriad

of evenly spaced thin wires that run from ceiling to floor, from which lumps of light brown, desiccated soil hang at irregular intervals. The room looks as if it is filled with particles of soil floating in a gravity-free atmosphere. The soil, and this is the "conceptual" bit, was excavated from beneath the leaning tower of Pisa when measures were taken to prevent its imminent collapse. The irony, that this particular soil has failed to perform one of the basic functions of soil by providing the foundation for buildings, is in truth a rather poor one and pointless to highlight, for the piece's power derives solely from visual impact. Downstairs, things do not improve, filled as it is with works whose existence is

justified only by their rather dull quirkiness. The *Tooth* Drawings are just that: a series of individually framed little bundles of thin gold wire made from reclaimed dental gold. *Blue Shift*, meanwhile, consists of a lightbox recessed seamlessly into a wall in a darkened lower gallery, in which is displayed the blue shift worn by Mia Farrow in Roman Polanski's *Satanic Classic Rosemary's Baby*. As with much work in this style, Parker has sacrificed most of the qualities that art can have in the pursuit of ideas and concepts that are interesting for only the briefest of moments.

● *Until 21 December.*  
*Information: 020 7494 1550.*

# Revealing layers of Far Eastern artistic tradition

**EXHIBITION**  
**Unryuan: Master of Traditional Japanese Lacquer**  
 Victoria and Albert Museum  
**Hephzibah Anderson**



IF lacquering brings to mind visions in ebony black and blood red, then these exquisite examples prove that in the hands of a master craftsman, this ugly, intractable sap can also transform surfaces with lustrous grounds of gold and silver, and an iridescent palette of blues, pinks, purples and greens. Unryuan is the art name of one of Japan's leading contemporary lacquer artists and translates as cloud, dragon, hermitage, hinting at a meeting of worlds ancient and modern, Eastern and Western. Born Kitamura Tatsuo in 1952, the eldest son of a fishing family, he came to his craft relatively late in life, training first as a graphic artist and working in Tokyo until family affairs called him home to Wajima, a traditional lacquer centre. Fascinated by this heritage, he devoted himself to reviving its ancient techniques, and 17 years ago established his own studio. Fitting into just two cases in the museum's Toshiba gallery, the objects he creates provide an anthropological index to Japanese culture, from saké cups and tea caddies to a half-sized archery set and inrô, the netsuke-toggled purses traditionally

Gem-like: a netsuke toggle decorated with a snail in golden lacquer worn by men. No surface is left untouched, but Unryuan's instincts remain coolly graphic, and every embellishment, be it a spider's nest, a sumo wrestler sizing up his opponent, or even a pod of beans, belongs to a highly economical visual code representing belief and ritual. Dramatic scenes from daily life and traditional Japanese theatre and mythology are realised with a watercolourist's light touch, detailed enough to capture the grain on a plank of wood, or individual blades of grass in a meadow, while elsewhere three-dimensional flora and fauna rise up from gilded backgrounds, and inlays of mother-of-pearl and myriad shards of shell sparkle and shimmer. Today, many of these esoteric artefacts are virtually obsolete, and a melancholic theme threads through their titles — "autumn dusk tea caddy", "sounds of autumn writing box", an incense box adorned with "autumn drifts". As a meditation on past skill and creativity, these gem-like objects transcend their function and become art.

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