

Nicholas Pope remembers representing Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1980

Sculptor Nicholas Pope recalls sitting in the Venetian Biennale Gardens in front of the German Pavilion



From left Bill Feaver, Waldemar Januszczak, Nicolas Pope and Vena Cork Photo: Tony Stokes

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We are sitting in the Venetian Biennale Gardens in front of the German Pavilion and next to the British Pavilion, which is where my work and that of Tim Head, who also represented Britain that year, was exhibited. Given that it's press day I appear relaxed. I'm on the bench, in the middle, chatting to the art critic Waldemar Januszczak, and on the other side of me is Vena, the wife of another art critic, Richard Cork. Standing with the camera is Bill Feaver, a third critic. Behind us, through the door of the German Pavilion, you can see Georg Baselitz's wood carving Model for a Sculpture, but what you can't see are Anselm Kiefer's mystically evocative bad dream paintings, which were hung on the surrounding walls. My main works at Venice were Three Stone Slabs and Long Larch Line, which was pretty much what you saw: in one room three smoothly carved stone slabs danced through the space, and in the other a couple of hundred roughly cut larch sticks hokey-cokeyed from one corner to another.

My overarching impression of the Biennale was the effect getting so close to Kiefer's work had on

me. Of course I have memories of Venice itself, the intensity of installing the exhibition, an earlier recce with my wife, Janet, to Venice in the February mists, the buzz of the opening, parties, suppers and staying at the Accademia. But overall I remember coming away from the experience thinking I must ram more into my work. At the time I always seemed to be reducing, removing and refining, so this was a real shift in my thinking.

Soon after this picture was taken I travelled to the Ruvuma valley, inland from Mtwara in southern Tanzania, where the Makonde tribe originate. The Makonde carvers used to pass on their history and dreams through their abstract carving, and exposure to it further developed a sense of wanting to do something more in my work. Little did I know when I made that resolution in Venice in 1980 that it would be nearly three and a half decades before I began to think I had succeeded in ramming more into my work. Along the way, in the mid-1980s, while artist-in-residence at Oxford University, I added 'make allegorical sculpture' to my list of jobs to do.

I am currently exhibiting two sculptural installations that display this 'allegorical ramming': *The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps* at Salisbury Cathedral, which depicts the biblical account of the Apostles at Pentecost, and *Mr and Mrs Pope knitted, shrunk and hung* at Richard Saltoun Gallery, which depicts Janet and me, the eighth portrait of us during our marriage. *Mr and Mrs Pope knitted, shrunk and hung* hangs – as in noosed – from a girder in the roof, either as dejected gobs of fluffy pink felted mohair (looking as we might sometimes feel after 38 years of marriage) or, more probably, contented, if drooping, but warm and happy with what we have achieved in our life together.

The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps is at Salisbury Cathedral until August 3. Nicholas Pope is represented by Richard Saltoun Gallery; his solo presentation there runs until July 4

How we moderate

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