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THE  TIMES**Nicholas Pope lights up Salisbury Cathedral**

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An eccentric gathering of terracotta figures that recounts the story of Pentecost will go on show early in June

An eccentric religious gathering will soon set the soaring arches of Salisbury Cathedral aglow. The cathedral's Trinity Chapel, with its slender stone pillars and deep-hued windows of stained glass, will host 12 sculpted apostle figures upon which the pentecostal flames, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, will periodically descend. The flickering light of oil lamps set within each abstracted form's head will cast leaping patterns about the chapel's gloom.

This strange apparition is an artwork, *The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps*, by the sculptor Nicholas Pope. Each of Christ's followers can be picked out: modelled in terracotta according to his character as it is portrayed in the New Testament. Here will be Doubting Thomas, with trunk-like appendages to suck the blood of a saviour in whose resurrection he cannot believe without physical proof. Here will be Judas, his form — thin from one side, fat from the other, to show that he is two-faced — studded with the fleshy protuberances that he pursed to deliver his treacherous kiss. Matthew, the former tax collector and publican, has a well-to-do paunch. And on the steps that lead up to the altar upon which these apostolic forms will assemble, an anonymous "multitude" of 21 onlookers will gather as if to gawp at the moment of miracle that endowed a risen Christ's followers with the power to speak in many tongues.

Pope, born in Australia but trained in Bath, is now in his mid-sixties. Anyone who recalls the work of his earlier career might be surprised. This is the artist who, reacting against the industrial steel slabs and moulded plastic of an earlier generation, made his name by sculpting in more natural materials that he carved, assembled and stacked. Invited in 1980 to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale, he installed big lumps of chalk, angled stone slabs and a line of larch posts. His pieces then were "pretty straightforward, pretty minimal", he says. "They were perfectly good sculptures . . . intellectually neat . . . but they were all about art, about materials in space. After a while I began to feel I was just doing what artists do: they go about filling up space. I was making things about what I thought sculpture should look like."

Feeling what he describes as "a sort of dissatisfaction" — "it was not that I didn't like what I had done; it was more that I felt I could probably do better" — he decided in 1981 to go to Tanzania to learn from the traditional Mbawala carvers in the Ruvuma Valley who, before they began catering to the tourist industry, were making abstracted sculptures through which they passed on their histories and ideas and dreams.

"I don't think I saw my trip there as any great philosophical decision," Pope says, "but what I got out of Africa was so much more than I intended." Given what happened, the remark sounds rather flippant. He was hurt in a minor motorbike accident and tended the wound with Savlon and plaster. Afterwards he remembers sitting with the carvers watching the flies moving

from cuts on the tribespeople to his own skin. He began to feel odd on the flight home, but assumed it was a hangover from a bottle of Mount Kilimanjaro rosé. By the time he landed in Britain, he was seriously ill. Taken straight to hospital, he discovered he had contracted encephalitis, an acute inflammation of the brain. It was this condition that brought about a dramatic change in his life.

Encephalitis was the precursor of Parkinson's disease which he now suffers from. "It hasn't affected my drawing much," the determinedly upbeat sculptor jokes. "My lines were always wobbly." Illness, nonetheless, has had a profound effect on the course of his career.

Returning from Africa, and with a one-year-old daughter, he needed to make a living. So in 1982 he moved from London to March Marcle, the Herefordshire village where he had grown up. There, he began making work that was, he explains, "not primarily about formal art but about the community" in which he now lived. "My horizons were limited," he says. "So I began making abstract interpretations about what was around me, about what seemed relevant." Local characters such as Norman, the cider maker, or the horsey Virginia, became his subjects: the former evoked by a bulbous nose, the latter by strong pony-clubbing thighs and punk hair (a reference to the hairstyle of her daughter that she, with her solid county values, deplored).

"I worked very hard to get over being ill," he says. His work reflects the struggle. In his 1986 self-portrait *Myself in Difficulty* he presents himself as an assortment of spiked and gouged sticks stuck like umbrellas into a carved wooden bucket. "I was in a muddle," he explains. Towards the end of 1987 he stopped sculpting. "There was a period in which nothing happened," he says. He started intensive therapy alongside other people with brain injuries and was taught to self-hypnotise four times a day (a practice he continues). Most importantly, he says, "I was taught to see what had happened as beneficial to me: instead of trying to do what you cannot do, you do what you can."

The drawings that he continued to do throughout this period show the darkness that he felt. In his 1989 *Moving into Auto Destruct*, the words scrawled around a central black hole read: "Just have no idea what is going on, probably nothing, to get going I have to become interested in something, but perhaps I am." There are quite a few drawings of that sort of subject matter, he says.

Then in 1992, Pope emerged from the darkness and began working again. "The change didn't come with a blinding light," he says. He began thinking about religious commandments, studying different societies and sects. "Each seemed to have strong words to explain what we should do and how we should live. Having been very low, it seemed relevant: like a good way to start."

He moulded ten clay pots on the theme. It was the beginning of what has since grown into a sprawling vision that, finding its roots in a middle-class upbringing in which the church is the bedrock, has grown to encompass increasingly ambitious (and often wonderfully whacky) ideas: a motorway service station for the seven deadly sins (he has already designed the sign and the plasticised menu card), or a human recycling plant to which people can turn up and have their barcodes read when they want to check-out.

The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps began with his reading about a revivalist evangelical sect in which the followers speak in tongues and have flames in their mouths. "I began to see the idea of people speaking in tongues and everyone understanding them as an allegory for all people, regardless of where they come from, understanding abstract art," he says. "Anyone, anywhere, can understand Jackson Pollock: he is speaking in the tongue of abstract." The Acts of the Apostles in which the story of Pentecost is recounted ends, he tells me: "And old men shall dream dreams." It reminds him, he says, of the purpose of Mbawala carvings: to pass on ideas and dreams. "I think I got there, only a bit late."

Looking back he sees a story emerging. "I would have gone along another route had I not been to Africa," he says. Because of the illness he contracted, he turned, like the carvers, to creating abstract interpretations of the life that went on around him.

Now his aim is to build a chapel. He has already modelled *maquettes* for the architectural structure, and thought about the fixtures and fittings from altar to font. "It's not about religion," he insists. "It's about belief and about the questioning of belief. There was a time when I didn't believe in myself anymore, or in the art world. But I do believe in the getting interested in certain subjects that has happened over the past 20 years. And I do believe in the importance of questioning beliefs."

Pope's fascinations, first nurtured in the financial boom of the Nineties, certainly seem prescient now in an era when the banks are collapsing and religious conflict tops the political bill. So if you are a would-be art patron who, as your thoughts turn this Easter along religious tracks, feels like commissioning a chapel to be dedicated to the complexities of faith, then perhaps you need look no further. You could have a chapel built by no lesser figure than this Pope.

***The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps* will go on show at Salisbury Cathedral on June 8**

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