

THE HUMAN FACTOR: THE FIGURE IN CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE: Hayward Gallery, London (from 17 June) • SKYLIGHT: Bill Nighy and Carey Mulligan star in David Hare's play at Wyndham's Theatre, London (from 18 June) • ST MAGNUS INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL: Orkney (20–26 June)

Guiding lights

Nicholas Pope's sculptures are at once transcendental and wonderfully earthy

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The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps

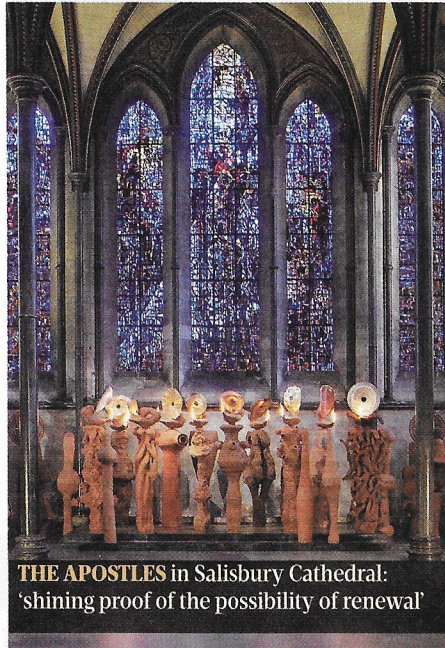
SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

IMAGINE THE Apostles at Pentecost, gabbling away about the wonderful work of God to a multicultural crowd of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judaeans, Cappadocians, Pontian Greeks, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans, Arabians and Jews, all “amazed and in doubt” to discover that they understand every word. Some cynics suggest that it’s just the wine talking, until Peter – always the practical one – replies that the Apostles can’t possibly be drunk, “seeing it is but the third hour of the day”.

I was reminded of Peter’s practicality standing in Nicholas Pope’s Herefordshire studio in front of his larger than life-sized sculpture of *Peter the Rock*. Sculptors are practical people who have to interpret things relatively literally. Painters can fantasise freely on a flat surface, but sculptors working in 3-D are bounded by the limits of physical reality.

From the orderly stacks of planks and tyres in his studio yard, Pope is a practical person, but there’s nothing literal about his sculpture of Peter except its rocky surface. It’s less a figure, in fact, than a ceramic vessel moulded from rough brick clay in the shape of a rather knobbly standing stone, with a bowl and metal disc on top. The bowl is an oil lamp and the disc is a halo-shaped reflector. This human-scale clay candlestick is one of *The Apostles Speaking in Tongues Lit by Their Own Lamps* which, for two months (until 3 August), will – at appointed times of day – illuminate the east end of Salisbury Cathedral.

Surrounded by a featureless multitude, the Apostles are characterised by physical attributes based on analyses provided by Graham Holley, former rector of Pope’s local church at Much Marcle in Herefordshire. While Philip is a clean-shaven Greek, the Jameses – viewed by Holley as “the two wide boys” – have extravagant coiffures, James the Lesser with an Elvis Presley quiff and James the Greater with Bob Marley dreadlocks. Bartholomew, seen by Holley as “vacant”, has hollow space between his ears. Matthew the Roman tax-collecting publican has become the English pint-pulling sort, with jowls and a paunch. Judas – absent from Acts but represented here – is covered in trout-pout lips for kissing, while Doubting Thomas sprouts “suction trunks” for siphoning blood from the wounds of Christ. “He’s a blood-sucker,” Pope explains. “That’s what doubters do: they suck all the energy out of believers.”



THE APOSTLES in Salisbury Cathedral: ‘shining proof of the possibility of renewal’

If the scriptural basis for these interpretations seems doubtful, that’s because doubt was central to their evolution. As a rising star of British abstract sculpture in the 1970s, Pope had few doubts about his direction of travel, which took him straight to representing Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1980 at the age of 31. It was in Venice that he first began to question the path of pure abstraction he had taken, when Anselm Kiefer’s paintings in the German Pavilion made him feel his own work lacked emotional content. Two years later he travelled to Tanzania to look at how traditional Makonde sculptors combine abstract form with symbolic meaning. The trip was a mental and physical turning point. Working alongside the Makonde carvers, Pope contracted a rare encephalitic virus that permanently damaged his nervous system and left him with a legacy of Parkinson’s. For five years he struggled to work at all, despairing at the inability of his brain and hands to function. Then it dawned that, despite the loss of dexterity, he “could get the same or more substance from relatively ham-fisted making”.

At this point, he hit “scriptural bedrock” with an idea for the Ten Commandments. It progressed no further than 10 clay thumb-pots. His problem was faith, in Christianity and in himself, until a moment of revelation described in his booklet, “I Believe or Do I”, “that it is not necessary to believe all the time to believe at all.” If the Ten Commandments pots looked wrong to his old self, “what was needed was a change of heart – to accept the wrong”. *The Apostles* was “a first attempt to be as factual and actual as Sunday School Scripture about the abstractions of religion”. His spirits lifted as his studio “filled up with this rather personable army of guiding lights” and soared at the feeling, when the lamps were first lit, “that I’d found myself a little gap in the world ... where the candle of belief and self-belief might gutter yet”. It was palpable proof of the power of the physical to sway belief, or to challenge the lack of it.

“Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams,” Peter quoted Joel’s prophecy at Pentecost. Pope has dreams of an “Oratory of Heavenly Space” for which, alongside *The Apostles*, he has designed vestments, fonts and a ceramic reredos. After hitting a creative brick wall with the Ten Commandments, he remembered the feeling of space inside a church, “its peacefulness, light, ceremony, the momentary safety, the absolution and how it seemed to bestow the hope that it’s possible to start again”. He’s not aiming for a feeling of transcendence, of “something better or more glorious”, rather the reverse: an affirmation of his belief in the possibility that “there might be another way of transcending life in the other direction”. Subscending it, if you like. He envisages his chapel with a muddy floor.

Pope’s *Apostles* are extraterrestrial in two senses: they’re both otherworldly and extra-earthly. It’s a combination suited to our English cathedrals, with their soaring architecture punctuated by gargoyles. When exhibited at the Tate in 1996, they signalled a daring change of artistic direction. In Salisbury Cathedral, they will stand as shining proof of the possibility of spiritual renewal.

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