The Savage Approach - Clifford Rainey
Max Jacquard
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The first thing that struck me about Clifford Rainey was the boundless energy he seemed to possess. I came across him working at the Royal College in the build up to his recent exhibition at the Piccadilly Gallery – Cork Street. The man was going like a steam train, he had about four jobs on the go – one cast piece was being cut in the diamond saw and Rainey drilled one of a succession of parts from a half assembled torso as he gave out instructions to an assistant.

In conversation he was also highly animated, leaping from politics to art or religion and back again at breakneck speed. Looking at the exhibition over Christmas it was evident that this energy had dissipated itself into his art. The show contained an incredible wealth of references taken from so many cultures that it was difficult to know where to start. Then there was the wealth of materials and techniques, all executed with such ease that they could almost be overlooked. It was refreshing to find someone working with glass to a high technical standard but to whom the technical aspects were of low importance. Someone who could rub oil paint into glass, who could break it, put it back together make it whole again.

Impressions From An Exhibition.

Clifford Rainey is in his fortieth year but comes over more like a twenty year old. Born in County Antrim, Northern Ireland in 1948 he has had a rich and varied life which included crewing with an Icelandic trawler and working with a travelling Norwegian tented circus. He has set up studios both in America and this country and has always travelled extensively, drawing and channeling his experiences back into his work which has been exhibited in numerous solo and group shows throughout the world.

“We live in a irritating society where things have to happen overnight.”

Rainey works from one floor of a warehouse near the heart of London’s city. When I visited him, many of the pieces from the show were placed in the space as if on exhibition for Rainey himself. This is in line with the way he works – constantly turning from one piece to the next, fighting each one until he feels it is right. “I allow myself the luxury of letting it change.” This is a great way to work when you think about the long delay factors involved when casting glass but is difficult when as Rainey says, “We live in a irritating society where things have to happen overnight.”

The subject matter of much of Rainey’s work comes from his travels. Earlier tours of Greece and Turkey sparked off a series of sculptures based on classical myths and antiquities but lately he has concentrated on the idea of “the savage”.

“…a huge coca-cola bottle, solid cast from recycled wine bottles,..”

One of the most memorable images from the recent exhibition called ‘Africa’ was a huge coca-cola bottle, solid cast from recycled wine bottles, it had an ancient marble-like quality. Sliced up into drums like

those of a classical column, it was presented more like a primitive totem. Set against a sackcloth backing of rich red oil paint and to one side, a branch, much polished from being handled and carrying a knotted white rag, the effect was like a shrine you might come across on a dust track through African scrubland. Rainey's message however was not so much about Africa as about the coke bottle itself – "The coca-cola bottle is an object which everybody in the world is aware of today. When you look at a coca-cola bottle you think "this is a very simple trivial form". But when you start to look into it….it grows and grows and becomes quite complicated. Warhol made that statement very simple. What I'm trying to do is take it ten times further".

"He is not a real person, he is the essence of everyman…"

Of the other pieces at the Piccadilly Gallery there was one image which kept recurring – an adult man, something like an anatomical doll of indefinite race and character, sometimes without arms or facial features, perhaps with a bird skull on its shoulder or a spear through its chest. This figure has been repeatedly used by Rainey for the last two years – "He is not a real person, he is the essence of everyman basically he is humanity". The figure appears in different guises, one moment he can be Cu Chulainn – a Celtic hero, the next he may by an Egyptian figure or cut up and displaced he may suggest a classical column, its order about to disintegrate into chaos.

"…beautifully controlled, almost academic drawing style…"

It becomes immediately apparent that Rainey is a superb craftsman. This runs right through his work from the beautifully controlled, almost academic drawing style and the models, both of which are used to explore and develop ideas, to the sculptures immaculately executed in cast glass, bronze sheet metal, marble, wood and other materials, sometimes heavily worked, sometimes used as found. He is a natural all rounder but works hard to ensure that techniques serve his ideas to maximum effect. "Some of these new pieces are not as yet concluded. It's not the object I am battling but the idea that lies behind them. The fight is to create tension between the object and the idea."

Sometimes Rainey will be forced to make compromises. He spent four hundred hours working on a drawing for an etched window in an architects' office in St. James's, London. It was executed in such a way that it could easily be translated onto glass but at the last minute the format of the window was changed from the pictorial to the portrait. Rainey had to change his composition and the proportions of his figures, drawing them directly onto the glass!

"…they're not meant to be looked at as "Hey, this is really attractive"

Clifford Rainey had a problem with glass. He clearly loves its mysticism, its presence, but often it is so seductive, that it takes away the idea it is portraying. "When the piece goes into a gallery they're not meant to be looked at as "Hey, this is really attractive", I want people to look at them and think What's this guy trying to get across?" He hopes eventually

to reach the point where you could look at a piece and be unaware that it was made of glass because the overpowering thing would be what it portrays. Rainey is however, honest enough to admit that if he wasn't working in glass he might not be as successful as he is.

Rainey On The Royal College

"The Royal has got its priorities wrong, I believe the future of glass as a material for art making lies in a sculptural context. This seems to be were the guts are. In a fine art context there is no one of importance making goblets." "To me a college's responsibility is to channel into a system which is going at the time. And without any doubt the future of glass is in the sculptural element. There is a huge Renaissance of glass going towards sculpture. The whole idea of designing glass like the Scandinavian glass that's really boring – it's had its day! The real interest worldwide is in the Sculptural Element. You can't force people into making goblets. You let something ride its course because when something rides its course it allows other people to rebel against it – its only rebelling that makes things exciting. There's a lot of people in education right now who are pretty naïve. The only way things can work is if there's rebellion. Art is a fight, it's a battle!"

"When you're dealing with a lot of cultures I think what your trying to do is understand yourself"

Rainey draws most of his inspiration from his travels and many people thought the Piccadilly show very eclectic. I can imagine him as a kind of hyperactive mole, searching for clues about culture, digging up marks and symbols, using some and discarding others and through this process drawing out meanings. He sees this eclecticism as a strength, "When you're dealing with a lot of cultures I think what you're trying to do is understand yourself". "Symbols mean a lot to me – I know why I put them there but I also want people to read them in their own way." In one piece he uses impressions of hand tools picked up around the studio in the same way that the ancient Egyptians used everyday objects as symbols. On one level Rainey hopes to convey a political message or comment on something that is happening to a particular culture but on the second level it should convey an experience common to all cultures.

"The work isn't about the image let loose – it's about what's inside it."

Rainey's work is also problematic. The viewer may understand something of the depth at first glance but when you have considered all its bits and pieces – the symbols, the geometry, then your understanding of it should increase – it may reinforce your first impression, it may make it more complex or it may change that impression completely but it should be an understanding that relates to your own experience of the world. "The work isn't about the image let loose – it's about what's inside it. If you actually look at what I do – for along time, eventually things come out of it. There's a language in there".

“An artist’s job is to mirror society as he sees it.”

The recent preoccupation of Rainey’s with the culture of the savage has much to do with the way it reflects upon himself. He sees himself very much as rebel and as a rebel artist his role is to counteract the forces that control. To oppose the consuming forces of consumerism and to side with the underdogs, the oppressed. To be the mouthpiece for those who don’t have the power or the knowledge to speak eloquently. “An artist’s job is to mirror society as he sees it. I don’t believe in society. I consider myself as the ultimate anarchist”.

Rainey On Art.

“When I go to a gallery or museum I want to walk out angry, I want to walk out elated, I want to walk out wanting to change the world. I don’t want to walk out saying “That was quite a nice exhibition. I think galleries play safe, I think critics play safe and when I read reviews in papers that I respect – I find them playing safe – I think, Jesus, why the hell am I reading this stuff!”.

“A stunningly simple idea…”

Rainey’s opinions about society are particularly evident in the piece, “Man trapped in an Idaho Potato”. A stunningly simple idea, a silhouette of a potato in green patinated copper with a human figure cut out and displaced through 90 degrees so that it forms a stand. The image of this man being suffocated by a potato was one which stayed with me and provoked a great deal of though. The message was basically very straight forward. “If you ever go to Idaho you see these big limousines driving around with strips taken out of their number plates saying, “Idaho famous for potatoes” and all this land has been wiped out just to grow potatoes. But there was an amazing culture that used to live on this land only a hundred and twenty years ago and that’s just a few generations back”.

Rainey takes his message further, “An American can turn round and knock a South African, which they should do but they still have a terrible responsibility to their own people. Australia will not send its cricket team to South Africa but they still keep the Aborigines in appalling conditions. There’s this total hypocrisy in the world and that’s what the pieces are about. But they’re meant to be subtle”.

Clifford Rainey’s art works on two levels, firstly there is the political or conservational statement, secondly there is the cross-cultural message – the way it reflects our own society, but what about a third level? What does it tell us about Rainey himself?

When you look at Rainey’s work as a whole there are so many solitary figures – lost in their own thoughts and if there are other figures in the same composition there seems to be no interaction between them. Rainey has made himself an observer of cultures and as such, an outsider. If the Idaho Potato figure is a self portrait then perhaps it shows Rainey floating in limbo.

“..child-like passion when talking about ideas…”

The Cu Chulainn figure is another image that Rainey may more consciously associate with himself, - a strong figure, a man in isolation, a poet. Rainey is a very passionate man. He becomes animated with an almost child-like passion when talking about ideas and is deeply involved in the process of making them come to life. Yet there is also something very cool about him. He is supremely confident and occasionally makes remarks that sound conceited, “You see I’m a very flippant person in a way, I think I’m quite intelligent but I’m flippant”.

What I like is that he’s not afraid to speak his mind or say things that my sound contradictory. I see Clifford Rainey as a very complex character. One minute he appears passionate and outspoken, a rebel fighting the system, disdainful of its conventions, the next minute he is the smooth talking businessman, well dressed, eloquent, approaching problems with the cool diffidence of an intellectual.

Although a self-confessed anarchist and born again Pagan he is certainly conscious of his own image and his image as an artist. There is a story from one of his Royal College students which comes from the time that Rainey was preparing for a trip to Saudi Arabia on some environmental sculpture projects. He was discovered in the staff office lying under a sun lamp reading a copy of the Koran.

After all the contradictions in Rainey’s character he remains a sincere and endearing figure. A man whose work deserves a lot of attention and whose sheer energy should be an inspiration to us all.

“Do you ever slow down?”
“No……very rarely……and that’s my big problem”.

Clifford Rainey has forthcoming exhibitions in Miami, Chicago, New York and in July, Paris – a one man show for the bicentenary of the French Revolution.