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In November 2007 Lin Holland and Jane Poulton began a year-long residency in the two cathedrals of Liverpool. The project arose after Holland had completed an earlier work as part of Liverpool Cathedral’s centenary celebrations in 2004, during which she observed that the audiences’ response to the work was significantly different from that usually elicited within the context of an art gallery. This raised questions about the relationship, not only between artwork and site, but also between artwork, site and audience and, furthermore, the influence of venue upon audience.

With these questions in mind Holland and Poulton embarked upon the residency with a three-month period of research and development. Over the remainder of the year six temporary site-specific works were made and installed sequentially between the two cathedrals. A further work, Earth and Æther, was made in 2010 for Liverpool Cathedral as part of its programme for the Liverpool Biennial.

Audiences visit cathedrals for many reasons and are drawn from a broad spectrum of society. From the beginning the artists discussed the position they would take in relation to the roles Liverpool’s cathedrals play in the lives of those who visit them, including regular visitors and the transient tourist population. They agreed they did not want to disrupt the contemplative spaces the cathedrals offered, nor to make work with religious intent; rather they wished to create work that enhanced the reflective spaces with possibilities of plural views and multiple readings, offering a diversity of levels through which the viewer might engage. Uppermost in their minds was the desire to make work that was relevant to the contexts in their broadest purpose and, whilst they recognised that meaning is not contained solely within any given form, but exists within a network of relationships, they also aimed to place the work firmly within the discourse of contemporary art practice.
Art in Sacred Spaces

Holland and Poulton’s year-long residency in the two cathedrals of Liverpool culminated in a series of six works that had in common the exploration of themes and ideas including identity, the purpose of life, the role of ritual and the importance of community. As part of their residency the artists were given studio spaces within the cathedrals and this provided the circumstances for them to become familiar with the buildings’ interiors and daily routines. Whilst each work was site specific, its content did not necessarily uphold or support religious doctrine but served to provoke searching questions.

Some works were personal, in the sense that they related to the artists’ biographies. One such work, Two Seas: High Water, was a film of the seas on the east and west coasts of Britain: the North Sea and the Irish Sea. The work was filmed at Filey (east coast) and Hilbre Island (off the west coast), these locations evoking in Holland and Poulton ideas of origin and belonging. The cropped format of the film prevented identification of the locations; however, the elemental nature of the imagery enabled the work to resonate with the audience. The continuous loop action of the video, its relationship to the High Altar of the Metropolitan Cathedral and its screening throughout the cathedral’s opening hours added to the suggestive power of the work. The metaphorical possibilities of water are immense: in literature and culture it is considered to be the female principle capable of engulfing and purifying, it also marks the point of departure and homecoming, and is a liminal space where the finite becomes infinite. Water is deeply symbolic in many religious traditions, where it symbolises cleansing and signifies rebirth. The calming influence of Two Seas: High Water was noted by the Dean of the Metropolitan Cathedral who observed that, “The reflection of water on the High Altar . . . had a considerable affect on visitors – leading to a greater sense of stillness with more people sitting reflectively…”

This work communicated on a number of levels, ranging from the literal to the evocative. The fluctuations in environmental changes to the seas, for example, can be interpreted as alluding to the changing rhythms of human life. Another work, Three Vessels: Love’s Labours, can be viewed on a figurative level as a reflection (or, more accurately, as a projection) of three important activities that occur in the daily life of a cathedral: the polishing of sacristy objects, the lighting of candles, and the conducting of sacred music. These everyday activities were filmed and projected into three large vessels. The three acts underpin liturgy and worship and are fundamental to the running of service, however, the routine and repetitive nature of such activities means that the ritualistic act is often overlooked. By drawing attention to the simple actions projected in the vessels, the artists are highlighting invisible, but very present, aspects of cathedral life. Three Vessels: Love’s Labours, then, can be read as a meditation on the importance of ritual.

‘Ritual’ is a key term in relation to Holland and Poulton’s work. A ritual is a routinely performed practice with strong conventional (often socialised) elements. Religions use rituals within their frameworks to structure behaviour or to mediate between what is profane and everyday, and what is sacred and, therefore, “set apart”. The actions in Three Vessels: Love’s Labours are at once commonplace because of their regularity, and yet sacred because of what they represent. The accentuation of the activity and its dislocation from real time and space paradoxically draw the viewers’ attention and we start to look at the ritual as if for the first time. Furthermore, by focusing on these actions the artists are articulating the interface between external manual acts and internal spiritual thoughts.

In the above analyses I have discussed some of the complex dimensions of the work, from literal readings, referring to its iconography, to the more metaphorical and spiritual interpretations, where “spirituality” is meant as an inclusive term encompassing conventional religious beliefs and practices with non-religious perspectives. By stripping back the work further, other levels of interpretation, or non-interpretation, are revealed. As well as being able to read the works within a sociological or theological framework, it is possible to approach them not from the perspective of what readings they might generate but as merely opening up a space for reflection, or providing the opportunity for contemplation. For example, Two Seas: High Water serves to instil a sense of calm in its audience; the film does not have a message or narrative to impart but is an exposition of the hypnotic rhythm of the sea. Similarly, Journey features a small-scale, white model of a church (Teampall Bheanain) situated on a black-tiled floor. The black tiles describe the actual footprint and orientation of the real church and anchor the placement of the model church, but they also serve another purpose; their high-gloss finish provides a reflective surface that metaphorically operates as a void (or non-space) for reflection in which to find oneself.

Heartsounds is a further work prompting reflection. The ten canticles of this sung piece are based on ten short audio recordings of a human heart – that of Elsie Price, Poulton’s mother – approaching the end of life. The recordings were developed into a musical score for unaccompanied solo female voice by composer Robin Hartwell, while the lyrics are an arrangement of a prayer written by Elsie Price and a eulogy written by Holland. Heartsounds was sung from the Corona Gallery of Liverpool Cathedral as a live ritual every morning at 11 o’clock from 18th September to 18th October 2008. The work is a powerful embodiment of emotion, referencing the union of the material with the spiritual: the transformation of the breath of life into song.

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1 See Camille Paglia’s Sexual Personae, Vintage: 2002, for an exploration of the metaphorical possibilities of water.
It is possible to view these six works as independent pieces but also as part of a collective body of work; individually they do not reference one another but have overlapping themes such as identity, reflection, ritual and dialogue. A distinct feature common to all these works is their sensitivity to the specific locations for which they were made, paying heed to the surrounding architecture in its form and function. This was evident in the case of Three Vessels: Love’s Labours, one installation of which was sited in the quiet darkness of the South Choir Aisle of Liverpool Cathedral. If the work had been situated in a busier location then due attention might not have been given to the simple actions projected in the vessels. Similarly, Untitled: Unknown, an installation in Liverpool Cathedral’s Chapter House, occupied a great amount of space without impeding the function of its site. The work demonstrated an ‘absent presence’, achieved by its use of transparent materials, creating a visual experience that was not imposing but which did open up questions to the viewer. This absent presence was also apparent in Journey where, once again, the work had been integrated into the extant space without imposing its difference upon the audience.

In order to assess the aesthetic and cultural impact of this body of work, I would like to focus on what I consider to be two of the most powerful and dynamic pieces in the series: Ring of Roses: Paper Falls on Stone and Untitled: Unknown.

Firstly, Ring of Roses: Paper Falls On Stone, which consisted of two halves, was pertinent in this pluralistic age of multi-faiths and mixed communities, in that it embodied a spirit of fellowship. The work was commissioned by Liverpool Hope University for the opening and closing ceremonies of The Big Hope, a week-long International Youth Congress, for which the artists devised community workshops, and processional and interventional events. These involved the making of ten thousand paper petals and three hundred paper flowers produced in collaboration with members of the Youth Congress, The League of Welldoers and The Rotunda Community College. This communal activity conveyed a high level of cultural and inter-generational action. At the opening ceremony of the Congress at the Metropolitan Cathedral the flowers and petals were used in a processional act and, at the end of the closing ceremony at Liverpool Cathedral, a spectacular event was staged whereby the ten thousand petals were dropped from the Corona Gallery to fall among the congregation one hundred and seventy four feet below. These symbolic acts of coming together, which occurred throughout the duration of the work, adhere to the meaning of ‘church’ in the original sense of the word, which refers to a body of people rather than to a physical building. This project involved the artistic endeavour and contribution of a number of people of different races, creeds and age, and these collective activities seem to me to be deeply religious in spirit. Furthermore, the flower (a motif chosen by the participants) is a symbol that transcends national and geographical boundaries.

Secondly, Untitled: Unknown consisted of a circular glass disc, some six feet in diameter, with seven large glass vessels strategically placed on its surface. The edge of the disc was inscribed with symbols from the Periodic Table, a list of chemical elements that form the building blocks of matter. Each of the vessels was engraved with an extract from the opening verses of the Book of Genesis. Six of the vessels contained water upon which floated a layer of carbon; the two principal chemical constituents of life. The seventh vessel signified God’s day of rest, and was empty. The glass disc, which appeared to hover at table height, was suspended from the vaulted ceiling of the Chapter House by nine steel hawsers aligned with a nine-pointed star in the tiled floor. The Epistle to the Galatians (5:22, NIV) lists the nine characteristics of the Holy Spirit. The scripture reads as follows: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; against such things there is no law.” The work can be read as a debate on the theory of creation and its location is apt; a Chapter House is a space where meetings are held and in this particular meeting we have a discussion between three different realms: creation, science and morality. This is an open debate and although the work is located in a cathedral it does not prioritise the religious reading.

These six works represent Holland and Poulton’s first collaboration, and the result is a synergy of ideas and practices. Interestingly, the works often have two titles, or are comprised of two halves. What is striking about the titles and the artworks themselves is their simplicity. Simplicity is meant in a two-fold way – as in elemental, and as in the distinct lack of ornamentation. Holland and Poulton do not distract with ornament but remain entirely focused on the simple formality of the work, which invites the contemplation of issues that are of incalculable importance to the human condition: the significance of rituals, ideas of belonging and the sociological ramifications of communal activities.

The use of installation, film and sound enables the viewer to immerse him/herself in the work instead of adopting a detached and dispassionate perspective. One of the artists’ objectives during their residency was to respect the significance the cathedrals have to those who visit them. The sacrality of the space enables the visitor to experience feelings of a qualitatively different nature to the profaneness of everyday life, and this indisputably added to the challenges for the artists, whilst simultaneously adding to the distinctiveness of the venture. In their collected works they have not only protected the sanctity of the sacred space but have opened up unexplored areas of inquiry and generated a real dialogue between art and spirituality.

Dr Rina Arya
Reader, University of Wolverhampton
Two Seas: High Water
Moving image projection
Continuous loop
310 x 71 cm
Heartsounds (extract)
Live performance with solo female voice
26 performances, each of 10 minutes duration
Composer: Robin Hartwell

air through all the changing scenes air
joyful singing of my life joyful singing
changing scenes of my life changing scenes my life
joyful joyful singing
prayer circle eternal and new experiences
prayer circle and new experiences
new eternal and new experiences
prayer circle

human to the surprises human of the Holy Spirit
youthful spirit human youthful spirit youthful spirit
the Holy Spirit human

home new thoughts home
new thoughts sense of humour
new new thoughts home humour
sense of humour
Journey
Perspex, architectural model
350 x 450 x 50 cm
Ring of Roses : Paper Falls on Stone
Paper, processional performance and intervention
Three Vessels / Love's Labours
Moving image projection, mirror, acrylic, steel
Height 240 cm, other dimensions variable
Glass, water, carbon, steel, inscribed text
165 dia x 8000 cm
After completing their residency, Holland and Poulton were invited to continue as artists-in-residence at Liverpool Cathedral and to make a new work for exhibition during Liverpool Biennial 2010. They were asked to consider the Chapter House as the site for this new work, building upon the success of the previous installation, Untitled: Unknown.

The resulting work, Earth and Æther, explores mans’ attempts, through the imbued sanctification of earthly objects, to approach a sense of the sublime.

As with the previous work, the installation responds to the fabric, decoration and spatial volumes of the Chapter House, utilising its height, floor space and shifting polychromatic light.

Earth and Æther’s materials and forms – stone, gold, mirror, and ‘house’ – have aesthetic, symbolic and physical relevance within, and beyond, a religious setting. These elements, together with the contextual siting of the work, combine to explore variable contemplations on universal themes including substance and space, reality and faith, permanence and transformation.

Earth and Æther
Red sandstone, gold, Perspex
Dimensions variable
Lin Holland biography

Lin Holland was born in Liverpool and now lives on the Wirral Peninsula, Merseyside. She is Head of Sculpture at Liverpool Hope University and Director of Coast International Artists Limited, part of a global network of artist-led events.

Education
1982-85 Manchester Metropolitan University: BA (Hons) Fine Art Sculpture

Selected Solo and Group Exhibitions
2010 Global Studio: Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool
2009 Tales From The New World: 10th Havana Bienalle, Cuba
2007 Next Up – Liverpool Art Now: Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool
2007 Do As I Say Not As I Do: Cornerstone Gallery, Liverpool
2002 Made In Liverpool: Found in Cologne City Hall, Cologne, Germany
2001 The Hil Site-specific Installation, Irriz Gallery, Cologne, Germany
2000 Access/No Access: British Council Gallery, New Delhi, India
2000 Brief Encounters: Melbourne Station, Australia

2001
10th Open: Oster Myszyn Gallery, Llandudno, Wales
1996 Castlefield Gallery, Manchester
1996 White Farm: Tumpkin Gallery, Leigh, Lancashire
1996 Holm Grima: Cultural Centres, Düsseldorf, Germany
1997 National Gallery of Nairobi, Kenya
1996 Touring exhibition of 11 Lancashire venues
1995 Fol The Door Gallery, Perth, Australia
1994 Vessels and Planes: The Art Centre, Lancaster
1992 Bolton Municipal Art Gallery
1991 Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester
1990 Home Base: Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool
1986 Oldham Art Gallery, Lancashire
1987 BBK Gallery, Grenoble, France
1987 Artists At Work: Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
1986 New Contemporary ICA, London and The Hatton Gallery, Newcastle
1985 Young Contemporary: Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, Prix Winner

Residencies / Artists’ Workshops
2010 Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Pakistan
2007 Coast International Artists’ Workshop, Wales
2001 Cyfunan International Artists’ Workshop, Wales
2000 Khop Residency and Workshop, New Delhi, India
1999 Cyfunan International Artists’ Workshop, Wales
1997 The Ruth Project: Kunstfugl, Prostil, Leipzig, Germany
1997 Wasserkraft International Artists’ Workshop, Kenya
1995 Western Australian School of Art & Design
1990 HMP Prison Walton, Liverpool
1987 Artists At Work: Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Collaborative Work
2004-2007 Belonging And Beyond Commissioned by Liverpool Cathedral – travelled to three venues in UK and Germany
2006 Lion's End: Les Szortleges Production of set and costumes for the Royal Opera – travelled to five countries in Europe
2001-2004 Three Halves: First exhibited at Cornerstone Gallery Liverpool, then travelled and re-made using location specific materials for Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, India, and Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, UK

Recent Awards
2010 Bluecoat Gallery Research Award
2010 British Council
2010 Liverpool Hope University Research Grant

Work in private collections in Africa, Australia, Britain, Europe and India

Jane Poulton biography

Jane Poulton was born in Manchester and now lives and works in Filey, North Yorkshire. In addition to her visual art practice she is a writer and is currently working on her second collection of poetry, Breathe On The Mirror.

Education
1985–1986 Manchester Metropolitan University: MA Textiles
1982–1985 Manchester Metropolitan University: BA (Hons) Textiles

Selected Solo and Group Exhibitions
2009 Wetpaint Gallery, Clitheroe
2008 Art Unfamiliar Place: Scarborough Art Gallery
2005-2006 Godfrey & Watt, Hamburg
2002-2003 Cornish Elm House: Folly Gallery, Lancaster
2001 Distinct Landscapes: Still Lives: Sheil Hall Gallery, Stafford
2001 16’ Bergen, Norway
1995 ongoing OCA Galleries, London
1996 Out Of The World: Crafts Council Gallery and national tour
1994 Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
1993 & 1994 Bankfield Museum, Halifax
1993 Norwich Arts Centre
1993 Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead
1992 Out Of The Frame: Crafts Council Gallery and national tour
1992 The Commonwealth Institute, London
1990 The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
1990 British Design: The Design Council, Mitsuohi Store, Tokyo
1990 Collecting For: The Future: Victoria & Albert Museum
1989 Beasts Of The Field, Birds Of The Air: Stafford Art Gallery
1988 New British Embroidery national tour
1988 Surface and Symbol: STGV Gallery, Amsterdam
1986 International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles, Saka, Hungary
1983 International Exhibition of Miniatures Textiles, Strasbourg and European tour

Residencies / Artists’ Workshops
1997 Oxfam International Artists’ Workshop, Wales
1997 International Artists’ Workshop, Montenegro

Public Art / Commissions
2004-2008 Design and production of multi format scheme of artwork for Milton Hospital commissioner: HAPNEY
1993-2003 Bowles Park: commissioner: Rochdale MBC
1991-1986 Centenary: commissioner: North British Housing Association
1984 Flame: commissioner: Bury MBC
1984-1985 The Secret Garden: commissioner: Bury MBC
1984-1995 Signs Of Life: commissioner: North British Housing Association

Collections
Victoria and Albert Museum
Macmillan Books
Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
Stafford Art Gallery & Museum
Embossing’s Guild Collection
Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester
Sterling Hotel Group
Equitable Life Assurance Company
Rachael Kay: Shuttleworth Collection, Gaudhnope Hall

Work in private collections in Britain, Australia, Japan, Scandinavia and North America.
Acknowledgements

Lin Holland and Jane Poulton would like to thank:
David Lewis, Brendan McCormack, Elsie Price and Owen Weston

Funders:
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Arts Council England, Liverpool Cathedral,
Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, Liverpool Hope University
and The Foundation for Sport and the Arts

Sponsorship-in-kind was also received from the following:
Transpennine Express and Northern Rail

Lin Holland and Jane Poulton would also like to thank the following sources
for their kind permission to reproduce the photographs in this book:

David Lambert & Rod Tidnam: Journey 14: Three Vessels: Love’s Labours: 18, 19
Brendan McCormack: Ring of Roses: Paper Falls on Stone 16
Jane Poulton & Lin Holland: Ring of Roses: Paper Falls on Stone 2
Graham Rodger: Journey 15
Photographer unknown: Ring of Roses: Paper Falls on Stone 17

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ISBN 978-1-898749-08-0

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Lin Holland and Jane Poulton were nominated for the Northern Art Prize 2009
for their six residency works.