

Ruth Claxton and Marie-Anne McQuay in Conversation
25 January, 2008, Ikon Eastside, Heathmill Lane, Birmingham

- mm Your most recent series of work is called Lands End. Can you tell me about the significance of this title?
- rc The title came from a plate that I had, one of those blue and white souvenir pottery plates, from Land's End. I originally used it in a piece of work, hung on the wall with a fake plant coming out the top of it, like a little picture. Shortly after I decided I was going to use it as a title for this series, the piece fell off the wall and broke – very disappointing because it could have been a great invite card. In terms of its significance, I like the idea that it can just be a statement of fact: if you take the apostrophe away, it becomes 'Lands End', a kind of border, where one thing finishes and something else starts – like an abstract extremity, rather than a geographical place.
- mm And the title of your last series, A Place of Rainbows (2006)?
- rc That came from a JG Ballard short story called The Illuminated Man. The protagonist is a scientific attaché invited to witness The Hubble Effect – a phenomenon that is occurring in the Florida Everglades, where everything – landscape, animals and people – is becoming consumed by crystalline structures. He describes it "as if a sequence of displaced but identical images were being produced by refraction through a prism but with the element of time replacing the role of light" – an irresistible but deadly spectacle. The only thing that reverses the effects and stops the crystals encroaching and consuming you is the intensity of light from real jewels. I liked the story visually, not that the pieces illustrate it as such. They are just rich images to have in your head when you are making work.
- mm These works seem to gesture towards the Romantic or sublime landscape. At the same time, their glittering components seem to be function as a kind of illustration of technological space, a space one can't comprehend in terms of nature.
- rc Well, in a way that kind of technological landscape is a sublime experience, an experience that we can't fully comprehend, that's even more enormous and edgeless and beyond ourselves than nature. We don't know and can't illustrate how big the Internet is for instance; thus we become this minute element outside a different kind of sublime. These ideas do have a relationship to the works I make; its roots are in the real world but one that seems to move and slip around, one that you're never really sure of it.
- mm One of your techniques is to use mirror to destabilise the space, to co-opt it into the work. There is also an element of uncertainty about where the work stops and the viewer begins. Is it waiting for an audience?
- rc I do think it's more interesting when someone is in it – the work becomes activated in a different way. When you look at it from just one angle or photograph it, you focus on a formal, coherent arrangement of objects in a space, but for me that's the least interesting aspect. It's when you start to move through it, then it's almost like it moves with you and

it changes so that you get shifting experiences as you catch sight of yourself or different elements in the mirrors. For me that's what is exciting. I also like the fact that you have these moments where you come to the small ornament sculptures and have an intense, close-up, focused experience on a single element within the work before everything starts to shift again.

- mm I can really imagine that the experience of being outside it to within it and then back again, totally changes your perception of how the work functions.
- rc Absolutely, it's one of those aspects of the work that will really become heightened as this show tours. I see the Ikon exhibition as one version of the work. For me it's a year-long piece, where I can set up these different scenarios, different viewpoints and vistas in each of the spaces. There are all these variables in terms of how a viewer encounters the work. I can encourage them to move through it in a particular way but just their individual physical being – their height for example – will affect their experience of it. I guess I don't want to make sculpture that stays the same, that's just itself.
- mm I think I would refer to your work as sculpture, foremost, rather than installation. You produce works with component parts that reconfigure, yet they seem to have a greater autonomy than the word installation suggests. They are very much 'about' form – a space is drawn into them, rather than responding to a space in a site-specific way.
- rc I have definitely made some works with a space in mind. Although, you've got an idea of what will happen when you put all the elements together, you can't fully predict the effect until it's actually in a space, with the ceiling as high as it is, and lights and so forth. I set them up as if they are trying to consume the architecture, so that it's carrying on and on and on, breaking through the physical space. So no, they're not site-specific works as such ... I think they are site responsive, possibly.
- mm Is staying so directly involved a key part of the process for you?
- rc This is the first piece of work that's just beyond my physical capacity to do absolutely everything. I've had to have other people helping me, painting stands and making the basic components that are common to most of the metal structure. That approach only works up to a point – I can't give detailed drawings to metal workers to say this is exactly what I want. The rest of it is just me standing in a space with some steel, making intuitive, responsive decisions with material in space. Someone asked me the other day how I decide on what scale to work on, and said I don't know – I think about the architecture or what I can get through a particular doorway, really practical things. Then I suddenly realised that I can pick up virtually all of the pieces on my own. So maybe there is something about that, my physical relationship with the work when I am making it and measuring things according to my body
- mm Looking back over your work, I've noticed that in early versions of I Thought I was the Audience and then I Looked at You (2004), you use domestic tables to support the figurines, but years later the work mostly features steel stands. How did that key change come about?

rc The work naturally progressed in that direction. I first started using the tables with figurines in my post-graduate show. I originally intended to scatter the figurines across the floor as an audience for these bigger sculptures. Then I realised I didn't have enough and to resolve this I went to a second-hand shop and bought tables which distributed them at different heights. By the time the work arrived at EAST International 03, the figurines and tables had become the work. The latter were covered with resin and paint, so that they had a slightly suffocating surface – this is something I am potentially interested revisiting in the future. By the time I showed the audience at Angel Row, everything was more pared down; the tables were very black and quite graphic in some ways. This was counterbalanced with fringing which suggested they were trying hard to be glamorous, deliberately artificial in a glossy, showy kind of way. I was also using reflective surfaces by then, so all the top surfaces were mirror or coloured glass. When I started to talk to people once the show opened, and this is usually when I have dawning revelations, I realised that these supports were still too domestic and that the figurines couldn't escape being located in the space of the home. I hadn't yet created a different sort of environment for them. I then became ill for quite some time so couldn't make anything but started to think about this problem and based the new supporting structures on a classic brass plant stand. These new forms somehow distilled the essence of 'stand' but took away the associations of domestic furniture. It's something much more ambiguous, more sculpture than stand. Their circular shape literally takes the edge off any space you create. They are like holes. I don't think a square or any other shape would have the same function. There is something about how circles and rings replicate, they can become almost imperceptibly bigger or smaller like organic forms. They create a sense of architecture with its own dumb kind of logic: the bird figurines high up in the sky on the wall pieces, the people on stands that act like buildings and the animals on the ground. Ultimately the change came about as a way of making a kind of architecture for the figurines that wasn't rooted in the real world, so they could be freer from the domestic and also the tradition of the feminine that comes with it.

mm Yes, I could see that could become a trap or at least add a layer of meaning that isn't intended.

rc It's also the same problem with kitsch. People are always saying "what do you think about the work being seen as kitsch?", yet I have never been interested in making a value judgement on people's taste. I think some of the figurines are really beautiful objects and I understand why people think they are kitsch, particularly when I was using the black tables with the tassels, but it's really not something I'm dealing with here.

mm The figurines are a recurring motif in your work. Can you tell me how you select them? Is there something particular to a Claxton figurine?

rc Yes there is – you won't believe how wrong people get that when they try and buy one for me! When I first started to use them I was interested in the Internet and mediated forms of information and I made a piece of work called How the Universe Works (2001). It came from a text found on the Internet about a 'rain shadow'. I kind of liked the idea, that you could picture it very literally. I also wanted this dumb allusion to a hierarchy, so I bought ornaments that represented nature or people within in it. All of these figurines are the stuff that you could find if you were brought up in a semi-detached

house in Lancaster as I was; an ordinary middle-class, 'first generation to go to University' kind of house. That's where I started to use them. I like the way they are a cultural leveller as everyone's grandmother had one. Obviously some had expensive versions, others had the cheap imports, but they are incredibly familiar objects. They have a relationship to most people's personal histories, which is useful as it means people immediately assume they know what they are looking at when they see them in the work.

- mm They are symbols of the Romantic era that travelled into the 20th and 21st centuries.
- rc Absolutely, but a kind of bastardised version. Not only are they Fragonard paintings made into ceramic, but they are Meissen made into the cheapest thing you can get out of a mould really fast. They are generalised versions of culture. The ones I was using initially are reduced to the lowest common denominator, versions that anyone could have in their home. As objects they can have a relationship with each other, and with you, to do with gesture and the gaze. They are all trying to engage you, which is quite odd for objects. I suppose other things that do that are dolls, but I think the figurines do it in a very different way; dolls are not animated in the same way as some of these figures are.
- mm Dolls represent childhood. These are grown-up figurines that have aspirations to dance or entertain.
- rc Yes. They enable this fantasy world that you can construct and have complete control of. You create their relationships and a coherent space where all these people are enjoying whatever romantic activity they are engaged in – a mini utopia on your mantelpiece.
- mm I notice there are particular types that you use; there are more ladies than men for example and more birds than animals. What factors influence this?
- rc Partly it is pragmatics – what I can find – but it's also their formal qualities: colour, scale, modelling and of course how they interact with each other. I have often started to buy more expensive objects now, for example Karl Ens birds. They are really sculptural and beautifully painted but the tree trunks that they stand on are glazed gloss white. I like the junction between the two surfaces – one decorated one blank. In terms of categories it's actually really difficult to find men; presumably you only need one man to hold court with all your ladies. You also tend to get wonderful birds but few really good animals. It's to do with their potential as objects more than anything else. I am also playing a little bit with twinning them now, so I buy them in pairs where possible.
- mm They are seductive objects yet equally they are disturbing; they are not returning your gaze because they are in some way blinded.
- rc I don't think they are blinded in any aggressive way. I think of them as enraptured by this thing that is literally in front of their eyes. They are gaily carrying on with their dance or whatever it is they are doing but it's almost like they don't realise what has happened. They are not being traumatised or frightened, they are just continuing. It's definitely an altered psychological state but it's very passive, not one of fear.

- mm Your postcard works follow the same principle in that the gaze is withheld. Do you see these works as a kind of drawing or sculpture?
- rc I see it as a bit of both. But then I see the stands as a bit of both too. The postcards are a way of extending the work into two-dimensions. In a way the postcard is a similar object to the ornaments; it's a collectible souvenir, a substitute for the artwork that you can see all the time. They are also reproducible images that can be altered. Helen Legg summed the cutting process up really succinctly, saying "the image divorced from its material base becomes the cause of blindness."
- mm Are the postcards more spontaneous works than the figurines?
- rc Adapting some of the figurines is a really painstaking process. Carrying the pattern over the surface or duplicating intricate detail can take ages. Then sometimes it is about being spontaneous and getting a bag of rubbers and sticking them on with a glue gun and I quite like this difference. It's the same with the postcards: you can make three cuts and peel. That's it. Then other times you are sitting there cutting meticulously and they tear; there is an inbuilt failure in this process. It makes me engage with the physical limitations of the object.
- mm I've always been glad that you didn't scale-up the figurines themselves. Are you tempted to have them specially crafted or is their ordinariness still part of the work?
- rc The only thing I am tempted to do is re-glaze found figurines so that they are totally white. I quite like how when objects have form and modelled texture but no decoration they become a visual hole. I am definitely not tempted to make them bigger; Jim Lambie did it pretty well already anyway. I don't like the idea that if I did this the whole installation would become entirely 'crafted' rather than include these elements from the everyday. What's important is this familiar thing has been changed into an extraordinary thing or something that isn't quite what you thought it was; it's been gently shifted, so it undermines your initial perceptions of it.
- mm As the stands have developed, the figurines have been used more sparingly in your work. Could you ever anticipate losing them completely?
- rc I can anticipate that could happen, but then at the moment just using the stands is not really enough. I think it will be about finding another object to replace the figurines that will be doing something else, rather than just using the stands on their own. I think mine is a slowly evolving practice, that's why selling things is so strange because you suddenly don't have them anymore. I would like to sell things with the condition that if I realise there is a better way of making the work, then I would be allowed to reconfigure it. People assume this kind of work, because it looks like proper sculpture, is static. I think it is something to think about for the future although it might be that I never want to see that object again in a year's time. It's hard to tell isn't it? I also think you have to look at the work several times over, like the audience pieces. The audience ornament pieces carried on for three or four years possibly and Lands End has been developing for about

a year and a half. In my head it's like one continuous thing that goes on and at some point...

mm It exhausts itself?

rc Yes and it stops.

mm Given your increasing ambitions in terms of co-opting space into the work can you ever see it increasing to Turbine Hall proportions?

rc I think it would be great, can you imagine? I do want to make a big ceiling at some point. It could look like chandeliers, with elements hanging down. Maybe there are figures in there but they would be kind of obscured so that everything is inverted. I think I would probably be able to fill any space you gave me. In all seriousness it has been really exciting to work on the scale of Lands End. There are also a whole set of practical issues; big sculptures also take a lot resources, people and space but equally I imagine that this kind of project could continue and expand. The idea that you could make a world is fantastic, a totally immersive environment that you couldn't see the edges of.

mm When you are envisaging how a work might function in the space, is there the fear, as there is with any artwork, that it could fail, that there will be too great a difference between the image in your head and the work in the space? Or having taken on larger projects, are you more confident that you can predict how it will operate?

rc This current work is harder than others I think, or at least what is particularly hard is envisioning it for Ikon. I can imagine it in Spike Island because of smaller versions tested during the residency. But at Ikon there is the new challenge of three interlocking rooms; you can enter from two sides, making it more difficult to control the audience through setting up those vistas. I also don't think you are every really confident because you are always critical of yourself. It's not enough that people could walk in and go, 'wow' at the scale, if you, as the artist are aware all the bits aren't quite right. But then that's what is interesting isn't it? At some point everything you make should fail on some level, personally for me anyway.

mm Or you start to replicate?

rc And why would you carry on? You are always going for that thing that you just can't reach and with this show I don't know what it is yet. I anticipate taking far too many things to all of the galleries and editing there. I have ideas of how things could look but it is about physically being in a space with the work. You can't picture it fully so it is beyond you in that way as well; it's exciting and slightly terrifying at the same time.

Marie-Anne McQuay is Curator at Spike Island, Bristol, UK. This interview was originally printed in the catalogue published to coincide with *Lands End* at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham.