UNEASY PIECES

CORNELIA PARKER HAS A PARTY TRICK: WEAVING THE EVERYDAY INTO SOMETHING ASTONISHING. **JANE CORNWELL** IS CAPTIVATED.

There is something fantastical, something a bit Mary Poppins-ish, about British artist Cornelia Parker, OBE. Her brown eyes are warm but her manner is no-nonsense; her hair, a sharp auburn bob that finishes above her ears, is as edgy as her vowels are polished. The projects she pulls from her metaphorical carpetbag dazzle with their variety and ingenuity – and they just keep coming.

A meteorite shot back into space. Bullets stretched into lengths of wire. A "ghost orchestra" made from brass instruments flattened by a steamroller (driven by Parker). A 13-metre-long embroidery of the Wikipedia page for the Magna Carta, hand-stitched by more than 200 individuals from Jarvis Cocker and Edward Snowden to incarcerated violent offenders. The recent acclaimed *Transitional Object (PsychoBarn)* installation – a scaled-down version of the set used in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 thriller *Psycho* – on the roof garden of New York's Metropolitan Museum. Parker's art, like her curiosity, feels boundless.

"People think of me as a conceptual artist but I'm actually very intuitive," says Parker, 60, sitting in her airy upstairs study in the Kentish Town, north London home she shares with her husband, American painter Jeff McMillan, and their teenage daughter. "I'm just trawling my unconscious all the time and experimenting with thoughts and feelings I have."

She barks a laugh. "Oh, and I'm also interacting with the world."

This year Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper featured Parker in its second annual Visionaries list, described as "a celebration of the boundary-pushers, rule-breakers and innovators shaking up the luxury landscape". It's a fitting accolade for one who, in the course of a three-decade career, has continued to innovate and surprise. Who has always seemed both of the establishment – institutions from the British Army to the Royal Mint have helped create her art, and she's an academician of the salubrious Royal Academy of Art – and outside it.

Which suits Parker just fine. Incongruity, fundamental opposites and cognitive dissonance are central to her thought-provoking aesthetic, which uses chiefly sculpture and installations to touch on the fragility of human experience. She's known for the deft way in which she transforms the familiar into something else entirely: there was Rodin's *The Kiss*, say, on loan from the Tate, that she wrapped in a mile of string. For a show about the Turin Shroud, an iconic Christian object, she included Mia Farrow's pale-blue nightie from *Rosemary's Baby*, a film about giving birth to the devil.

"Good and evil. Passive and aggressive. Up and down. Poison and antidote. I guess that's my territory," says Parker, inclining her tall frame towards the open laptop on her desk and pulling up photos of her work – 2004's *Poison and Antidote* drawings featured black ink containing rattlesnake venom and white ink containing anti-venom.

The white walls of her study are decorated with new work by herself and pieces by famous friends, including a drawing by David Shrigley, the man behind the giant thumbs-up sculpture in Trafalgar Square; a crown of thorns she bought in East Jerusalem, made by an Arab man for Christian tourists ("He'd been doing it for 33 years, which was the same age as Christ when he died, and in this place surrounded by barbed wire"), rests against a disused fireplace.

"I like making connections, tweaking history," Parker continues brightly. "In the early '90s I had this Oliver Twist doll that I'd bought in Brick Lane market, and I chopped it in half using the same guillotine that chopped off Marie Antoinette's head."

She flashes a smile. "Charles Dickens set *A Tale of Two Cities* in London and Paris during the French Revolution. It doesn't matter if people don't get all this stuff. I want them to make patterns of their own."

But she'd very much like us to think about the environment; in 2007 she interviewed renowned writer and theorist Noam Chomsky about environmental catastrophe, for a film titled *Revolutions: Forms That Turn*, which screened at the 16th Biennale of Sydney in 2008. Her large-scale work *Edge of England* was made from chalk collected after a storm-induced cliff fall at Beachy Head, with the white fragments suspended like a cinema screen.

"When I showed this chalk piece in Melbourne [at the inaugural Melbourne International Biennial in 1999] for the first time, they said 'Oh, this is a post-colonial statement, bringing down the coastline of England to Australia, how dare you'." She raises her eyebrows. "I wasn't even thinking about that at all. But the Australians were reading a political message into it. Depending on where I show, different pieces will have different meanings, and I love that."

Parker emerged in the early 1990s alongside Young British Artists such as Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst, nine years her junior. Her work shared the YBA's slightly surreal realism: the piece with which she made her name, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, comprised fragments of a garden shed (blown apart by the army's ammunitions unit) that seemed to float magically, acting as a metaphor for Hollywood's fetishisation of bombs, her own creative process and whatever else the viewer cared to post-rationalise.

But Parker was never a proper YBA. Unlike Hirst et al, all Goldsmiths, University of London, alumni, she went to college – Wolverhampton Polytechnic – in the West Midlands, and grew up on a small farm in Cheshire, the second of three sisters. Her father, she says, was "a barely literate peasant farmer" with anger issues; for the young Cornelia, working the land alongside him, life was fraught with apprehension ("I think I've channelled this implied violence into my work"). Her German mother was middle-class with academic aspirations interrupted by World War II. War stories, spoken and unspoken, informed her childhood.

When she first came to London she lived in inner-city areas long since gentrified. Much of her work references the British capital: she's made earplugs from dust gathered in the Whispering Gallery at St Paul's Cathedral (1997), and in 2013 fashioned bronze casts from cracks in the paving around William Blake's grave in Bunhill Fields in East London, then did the same in East Jerusalem ("and did those feet"), smuggling the latex casts home in her suitcase.

Last year, for a retrospective show held at Manchester's £15 million refurbished Whitworth Art Gallery (crowned Museum of the Year in 2015), Parker teamed up with Russian emigre and Nobel prize-winning scientist Konstantin Novoselov, co-discoverer of the world's first 2D substance, graphene, a thin form of carbon thought to be 100 times stronger than steel and a better electricity conductor than copper. She asked Novoselov to make graphene from the loose graphite specks on pencil drawings by Blake, Turner, Picasso and Constable. The graphene was then used to make a sensor that triggered a firework display. "A Blakeian firework display," beams Parker. "I was inspired by Blake's poem, *America: A Prophecy*, with its lines about 'terrible wandering comets'."

Science and art aren't so very different, she says: "People at the pointy end of professions are creative, and Kostya is as creative as any artist, if not more so. It's all about thinking outside the box and not falling into the same received idea.

"I'm very fond of science. I love the fact that scientists are basically discovering new things all the time, that they don't spend their whole lives honing one facet of their craft."

Neither, indeed, does Parker, whose forthcoming April exhibition at London's Frith Street Gallery will include her new series of photogravure images inspired by scientist and photography pioneer Henry Fox Talbot. Some of these are framed on her wall: ice cubes spilt on a plate, captured in surreal still life using ultraviolet-light exposure. The same procedure applied to Fox Talbot's original 1840 set of glassware, which she borrowed from the Bodleian Library.

"Look at this one; it hasn't been seen in public yet." A click of her mouse reveals an image of glassware in contrasting focus. "So I'm playing around with historical processes. Which is what I do."

"It's not magic," she adds a little brusquely. "But almost."

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MAIN: *Edge of England* features chalk pieces from a cliff fall at Beachy Head.