

# WORKPLACE

Frieze  
'Eric Bainbridge'  
1 Nov 2008  
By Jonathan Griffin

# frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

Issue 119 November-December 2008



*More Autopsy Than Diagnosis*

THE ARTISTS' REPRESENTATION SOCIETY (ARS) IS A REGISTERED CHARITY IN ENGLAND AND WALES. THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTS ARE TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE INTERESTS OF ARTISTS AND TO PROVIDE A PLATFORM FOR THE DISCUSSION OF ART AND CULTURE. THE SOCIETY IS A MEMBER OF THE ARTISTS' REPRESENTATION SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

## Issue 119

Nov - Dec 2008



frieze



Featured in  
Issue 119

## Eric Bainbridge

Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, UK



BY JONATHAN GRIFFIN IN REVIEWS | 01 NOV 08



Eric Bainbridge, *The Hole Through Which All Things Must Pass*, 1987

The larger than life-size icon of a praying Virgin Mary in the centre of the room holds my attention not with the purple fake fur fabric fixed to her every surface, nor even because of the chin-high, yellow fur-covered plinth on which she stands, but because the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of God, is suffering the indignity of having five equally furry, football-sized spheres attached to the sides of her body and head. Behind her, a disc of dark chipboard framing a single wan pink light-bulb is fixed to the wall high above, its wrinkled cable hanging slackly to the floor and plugged into a socket to one side. These two works, *The Hole Through Which All Things Must Pass* (1987) and *Bangkok Flower* (2006), frame the 20-year period through which Eric Bainbridge travelled from the alarming, hilarious conglomerations of enlarged and upholstered found objects for which he became known in the 1980s to the melancholic, quietly dignified and gently humorous work that he has developed over the last decade.

My neck cricked, I realize I have spent the first five minutes of my visit to the exhibition looking up. Bainbridge is an artist whose work asks for engagement not just with the eye but with the whole body. Many pieces invite touching (specifically, stroking or squeezing), sitting or being picked up; others warn us away with the precarious balancing acts they perform. *The Tallest Sculpture in the World (Noilly Prat)* (2008) comprises six pieces of wood and melamine screwed

together to create a skinny tower with a plate balanced at its peak. With a bottle of Noilly Prat vermouth placed on a ledge at waist height and a splodgy, sentimental painting of a rural vignette fixed at its base, the piece seems to encapsulate the anxieties of artistic ambition, class aspiration, failure, self-conscious absurdity and embarrassment that course through Bainbridge's work. The fact that *The Tallest Sculpture...* is overshadowed by the confidently massive and red *From the Roof of my Mouth to the Tip of my Tongue* (1990) only adds to its bathetic load.

*New Modernist Post Bangkok* (2007) sketches, with just the barest of means (four strips of iroko wood and two slats of white melamine), the dimensions of a small room. On an inside edge, as though to demonstrate that someone is at home, a single light bulb flashes from one colour to another, its excessively long cable slung in three slack loops over a wooden support. For a while it seemed to me that the bulb's colour changes were timed to be just slow enough to make it impossible to remember how many colours there were, or what their sequence was. It was the humblest, most forlorn quotation imaginable of On Kawara's affirmative proclamation: 'I am still alive.'

Kawara's unlikely spectre was summoned in the opposite gallery, with *Six Chinese Paintings* (2006). A row of small, rapidly executed paintings of a house at the mouth of an estuary were hung on the wall, each one different in tone (and, implicitly, climatic conditions) from the next, but each bearing the same composition. Bainbridge has purchased one of these paintings each year for the past six years from a small shop in France. In fact, the scene is British, but it proves so popular with European customers that a Chinese painting factory maintains a steady supply. We follow this trail of displaced desire with wry amusement until we find it leading to ourselves, standing in front of paintings in a northern English city art gallery. Nearby is a handsomely large brown canvas with urgent calligraphic marks over its surface. I peer at the title label: *We Went to the Natural History Museum* (1992), it reads and so do the marks on the painting, which look like the wayward script of a pre-literate child.

Bainbridge seems to relish not so much disappointing the viewer as deflating our expectations. *From the Roof of my Mouth to the Tip of my Tongue* beckons us with the hint of a functional entrance, or at least the revelation of a front and a back. On circumnavigating the structure, we realize there is none. Likewise *Clad* (1997), a box constructed from rectangles of battered wood-effect melamine, reveals no way in and no indication of the material's former purpose. It is as shut up and sealed like a clam. Near the gallery's exit a television on a plinth glows as though cooling down after recent use; a second glance reveals it to be an old Philips 'Cooktronic' microwave oven, with its door painted violet. Such manipulative effects are partly the result of Bainbridge working through traditional sculptural problems of surface and support, structural integrity and illusion. However, he manages to imbue them with a potency that stretches beyond the formal or theoretical and presses up against issues of emotional, psychological and even moral significance. All that glisters is not gold, he says. But that's not to say it's not valuable.