‘Witness’

The Jerwood Space, 171 Union Street, London

4 June – 20 July 2008

The tension between Twomey’s palpable delight in the materiality of clay and a delicious subversion of the properties of that medium is tangible across her oeuvre. In *Witness*, the work proposed for the present exhibition, this is manifest in her treatment of the intrinsic fragility of the work. An architectural intervention in the foyer of the Jerwood Space, *Witness* will see the full height of the gallery walls temporarily coated with a thin layer of finely-sprayed clay dust to create a faultless, sumptuous, light-absorbent surface. The velveteen softness of the clay powder defies both the malleable solidity of raw clay and the hard brittleness of fired ceramic. It is a different kind of fragility, soft and ephemeral, conjuring delicate butterfly wings or pollen-covered stamen.

The butterfly is an appropriate metaphor, for Twomey’s creations often undergo transformation during their time-bound existence. Often this change is the direct result of interaction with the viewer as in *Consciousness/Conscience* 2001–2004, where exquisite white porcelain box-tiles covered a gallery floor and the visitor was faced with a dilemma: whether or not to step on them. Stepping on the tiles evoked the sensation of crunching across virgin snow, or splitting a tablet of fine chocolate, the moment of breaking simultaneously evoking both agony and relief.

With each scarring gesture, the porcelain dust will yield to reveal glimpses of glimmering gold, for beneath this fine layer, all the adornments and imperfections of the gallery wall will be democratically enveloped in varnished gold lacquer. Twomey’s faux-gilding of the quotidian and ordinary at once evokes the kitsch and the precious. But this simulacrum of the bespoke and the beautiful associated with gilding is straight from a paint tin. Twomey also subverts the function of gilding – rather than a sparing adornment, this excess of gold forms the backbone of the work.

It is Twomey’s intention that the accidental scrape of a handbag or brushing of a passing shoulder will bruise the vulnerable surface. This element of chance, often an aspect of Twomey’s work recalls the accidental mark-making that occurs in the firing process. Twomey’s oeuvre is shot through with a tension between her intense, almost scientific, search for the most appropriate method or constitution of her chosen material, and this surrender to chance to determine how the work metamorphoses over time.

Some may consciously choose to touch the work, seduced at first by its sumptuous surface and later, in response to the marks of others, by the twinkling gold beneath. The surface of the work will respond in kind to each marking gesture, a gentle caress creating a subtle impression, a sharp scratch a more graphic mark. When the porcelain layer is worn-out, the gold wall laid bare, *Witness* will cease to be interactive. A series of marks will remain, traces of human involvement, bearing witness to the people who had previously encountered the work. Twomey is fascinated by how viewers respond to one another and the marks they have made, creating an unconsciously collaborative result.

Twomey’s adventures in theatrical spectatorship often explore the taboo in terms of museum etiquette, inviting the visitor to touch, break or take, acts usually forbidden in the gallery context. In *Trophy* 2006, a temporary installation of four thousand Wedgewood Blue Jasper birds in the cast gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, visitors were invited to take a bird away and both *Consciousness/Conscience* and *Witness* rely on what Twomey describes as the “act of destruction through human curiosity.” 1

Edmund de Waal has identified the significance of the clay wall in the work of Isamu Noguchi, John Mason and Andy Goldsworthy. In the work of these artists, he describes a displacement of the outside, embodied by the idea of clay as earth, into the interior, “a messing with the prescriptive cleanliness of the studio or museum.” 2 This interpretation of the clay wall oozes a heroic physicality notably absent from *Witness*. Twomey’s ethereal clay wall deliberately solicits intimate gestures, signaling a different transgression, for these are inscribed in the faux-gilded, decorative stuff of the domestic in the public context of the art gallery. Twomey’s use of scale is crucial to this transgression: the large scale of her installation prevents any sense of “preciousness.”

Amy Dickson, Curator, Tate Modern

1. Clare Twomey quoted in Edmund de Waal, *20th Century Ceramics*, Thames and Hudson 2003 p.186

2. Edmund de Waal “High Unseriousness: artists and clay” in Groom (ed) 2004 op.cit p. 42