

TrueLove





True Love

new work by
Michael Petry

Westbrook Gallery

Essay by Iain Robertson



Above: *BB58*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver object
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It was clear from the moment that I first met Michael Petry, that not only is he passionate about his work, but that the objects themselves are remarkably intense, seductive and intellectually complex. Born in El Paso, Texas, and living and working in the UK since 1981 as an artist, lecturer, curator and writer, such complexities are perhaps not such a surprise.

This exhibition at Westbrook Gallery exhibits for the first time in London a new series of works employing a diversity of materials and processes. *The Lovers* series forms the main body of work; molten glass and vintage silverware are conjoined to produce objects with overflowing associations of love, memory, passion and desire.

The Lovers sculptures, formed from Victorian *Objets trouvés*, filled very exactly with molten glass, appear delicate yet, made out of solid glass, are remarkably robust. Each piece is charged with a hidden history of its former usage, whether this is romantic or sexual in flavour. There is certainly an erotic element to the shape of most of the objects. The hot glass, blown and poured using traditional methods, creates materially enriched objects where chance and chaos fuse in an instant, contained within the physical space these objects inhabit.

The objects themselves produced towards the end of the nineteenth century are base metal substitutes for silver and their moulded forms are the highly crafted objects of an earlier period. By re-introducing a craft element to the piece in the form of glass and the chance of a kiln 'accident', the artist is re-interpreting the meaning of the object. More than this, the amorphously shaped glass reminds one of pools of water contained and restrained by man-made elements. The artist revels and plays with association and the tension between natural and human forces, metaphorical and literal meaning. The hot molten glass is literally bare backing on, in and through the undulations and crevices of these hard silver vessels with such seductive sensitivity that imparts an almost Zen-like reverence for material and form.

The second body of work is from the series *Tie a knot in it*. Like *The Lovers*, this series also appropriates everyday items. Gold, leather, rope and twine are manipulated and crafted to produce tactile sculptures evoking a number of emotive, physical and intellectual responses. Each of the works invades the gallery's space and by definition our own.

These jewel-like objects crafted from common place materials, all draw from the artist's conceptualist installationist vocabulary. Although at first the knot works appear compulsive and at times macabre or masochistic, as with *Rough Neck*, where knots are spaced at neck-width intervals along a hangman's rope, the process is in fact closer to therapeutic knitting. The artist undertakes his great labour on suburban train journeys, so it is much more John Betjeman than Sweeney Todd. Word play is once again to the fore. The series entitled *Tie a knot in it* can be seen as a reference to sexual behaviour but equally to memory, the past and to history. Petry's appropriation and re-organization of everyday objects manages to reveal 'other' nuances of the human condition. In the piece *Sowing Seed V*, everyday garden twine is used to create a remarkably tactile rope, its title implying physical encounters once again, whether sexual, intellectual or memories of pastoral past-times is disorientating. *Le Petite Mort III* is made from 100 metres of leather, knotted over and over, it recalls the French slang for orgasm, but the work itself appears to never end or climax as no end line or thread can be seen, it implies a never ending (perpetual?) process of finishing and untenable closure.



Above: *BB09*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver object
Right top: *BBL11* (front view), 2006, glass, EPNS silver objects
Right bottom: *BBL11* (side view detail)
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Similarly, *The Golden Age*, knotted from 24 carat gold wire and while small and intimate it is laden with potential meaning. In ancient Western symbolism, knots often indicated the power of knowledge, most famously the Gordian knot that was severed by Alexander the Great. Such intellectual and physical intervention and tensions, brings to mind the readymade bicycle wheels and urinals of Marcel Duchamp.

The importance of these knotted pieces lies in a number of areas. Firstly, the contortion of the materials demands that we handle and touch them. The tensile qualities of the object are also strongly emphasised. The formal qualities of these the works of art, cylindrical in shape, add a further pleasing dimension to each object. The combination of all three elements; manipulation of material, a tactile quality and the spherical form, imbue each object with a charm-like quality that it shares with miniature jade sculpture. Zen-like in intensity and attention to detail, the artists' knotted forms have a spiritual dimension that lifts them beyond the material and physical.

Also exhibiting, as part of this show at Michael's studio/gallery, is one large slice of lovingly planed, polished and suspended timber where the knot has instead been subtracted, carved out from the trunk. The slice of wood, cut vertically into the tree rather as one would a cake, is one of a twelve piece installation entitled, *In the Garden of Eden*. Each trunk ranges in height from 12 feet to 12 inches over Michael's exact height. All suspended from the ceiling interrupting our physical space, each with a perfect circle cut into each sheet. These apertures provide the viewers with voyeuristic opportunities as they wander through the gently swaying, tactile forest. The installation is pregnant with metaphor and art historical allusion as well as being very physical (we are encouraged to stroke the work because the oil from our hands nourishes the wood) and beautiful. In a more overt fashion they refer to the 'glory holes' of illicit encounters. It is tempting to see a reference to Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in the hole motif. Constantin Brancusi should also be recalled in the forgiving way in which the material is treated, but more than that, this twelve-piece forest of chestnut, cherry, lime, cedar, oak and yew is a contemporary 'Books of Hours' – each object representing a month in the seasonal calendar.

Michael Petry's oeuvre is characterised by a reverence for the object, its material and its form. It is loaded with metaphor and innuendo, he deftly manages to focus on the crossing of human endeavour and behaviour with emblematic natural materials we are all familiar with. Its underlying seriousness, which has much to do with references to memory and sexual energy, as well as its seemingly formal simplicity, is married to a bawdy sense of humour that makes each piece intellectually digestible and sublime.

Iain Robertson

Right top: *BB37*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver object
Right bottom: *BB106*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver objects
Overleaf: *BB52*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver object
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Left top to bottom: *BB06, BBMT, BB28, BB35, BBL03*, all 2006, glass, EPNS silver objects
This page top to bottom: *BB45, BB41, BB38, BB43, BB39*, all 2006, glass, EPNS silver objects





Above: *Le petit mort III*, 2006, 100 metres of continuously knotted black leather cord, 13cm in diameter

Right: *The Golden Age*, 2006, knotted 24 carat gold wire, 8mm in diameter

Overleaf page 14: *Sowing Seed V*, 2006, knotted green garden nylon, dimension and shape variable

Overleaf page 15: *In the Garden of Eden* (detail of one piece of twelve polished and suspended planks), 2006, yew wood, steel cables, 8 feet tall



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Cover image: *BB59*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver bowl
Inside front cover: *BB50*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver object
Inside back cover: *BBL09*, 2006, glass, EPNS silver objects

Michael Petry was born in El Paso, Texas (1960) and has lived in London since 1981. He received a BA at Rice University (Houston), an MA at London Guildhall University, and is finishing his PhD at Middlesex University. He is an internationally exhibited multi-media artist, and co-founder of the Museum of Installation. He lectures part time at the Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy Schools and was Guest Curator at the Kunst Akademi, Oslo, and Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton. Petry co-authored *Installation Art* (1994), and *Installation in the New Millennium* (2003), and authored *Abstract Eroticism* (1996) and *A Thing of Beauty is...* (1997). *The Trouble with Michael*, a monograph of his recent artistic practice was published by Art Media Press in 2001. Petry's book *Hidden Histories: 20th century male same sex lovers in the visual arts* (2004) is the first comprehensive survey of its kind, and accompanied the exhibition *Hidden Histories* he curated for The New Art Gallery Walsall. Petry is the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) London, and the curator of the Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey.

Works in the following Collections: Museum of Arts and Design, New York, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, British Museum, London, The New Art Gallery Walsall, Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany, Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, Norway, Leopold Hoesch Museum, Duren, Germany, Bellerive Museum, Zurich, Private collections

Glass Hot Work by Anthony Harris

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