

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
A review article by Christian Weikop

"Mount Zion" by Will Corwin at *George and Jørgen*
3 May 2012 - 27 May 2012

In 2009, I wrote about Will Corwin's subtle and sometimes elusive art when reviewing the group show *The Young and the Restless* at the Gordon Parks Gallery in the South Bronx. I had first seen the artist's intriguing acrylic and graphite works on ruined plaster panels some three years earlier on a studio visit to 5 Pointz in Queens, a converted warehouse covered in sprawling and imaginative graffiti. Sadly, this important landmark of hip hop culture (itself an art of fragmentation) is set to be torn down in 2013 to make room for high-rise luxury condos, a victim of gentrification and an architectural 'development' of which the architect-turned-artist Corwin would not approve, and might well memorialize in his own inimitable style. For the 2009 Bronx exhibition, Corwin created and then partially effaced plaster panel portraits of Mendelssohn family members, which suggested the impossibility of Jewish assimilation by a certain point in German history, and which alluded to the attempts of the National Socialists to erase all memory of the contributions made by this famous Jewish family and thousands of others to German cultural life. Since I reviewed this exhibition, Corwin has continued to explore the suggestive possibilities of plaster in relief and fully sculptural forms (both polychromatic and bare bone white), working as an artist-in-residence in Hamburg, London, and elsewhere; and he has continued to address matters related to Jewish cultural memory, as well as a whole host of other issues, using this pourable and castable material to create his art objects.

The title of his latest London solo exhibition, *Mount Zion*, held at the new George and Jørgen gallery, certainly promises much in terms of prophetic revelation, contemplation, relics and ruins. In ruminating on ruination, erasure, and presence, there are certain threads of thematic continuity with his Mendelssohn paintings and the diorama exhibit *Diet of Worms* staged at the Guild Gallery 2, NYC in 2010, and displayed at George and Jørgen in their previous venue on Princes Street, London in 2011. The diorama touched upon many ideas and attested to the desecration by the Nazis of Europe's oldest Jewish cemetery in Worms. In his near obsession with exploring the suggestive and sometimes dark traces of history, Corwin's imperfect and inchoate sculptural plaster forms have often brought to my mind at least the poetry of T.S. Eliot. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' states a disembodied voice in Eliot's masterpiece *The Waste Land* (1922). This striking line appears in the fifth and final part of the poem, entitled 'What the Thunder Said', and it is a thought that seems to reverberate through Corwin's artistic practice, where fragmented forms allude to many things whilst never quite providing coherent or conclusive answers.

Much earlier in the first part of *The Waste Land* in the third stanza of 'The Fire Sermon', Eliot writes: 'By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept ...' This refers to both the lament of the poet by the side of his 'leman' (mistress) and Lake Lemman (Geneva) where he recuperated from nervous collapse. But it is also worth remembering that Eliot appropriated the line from Psalm 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered *Zion*' (my italics). In an interview for *Bomb Magazine* Corwin has stated that he has relied on the process of plaster casting to help him 'work out' his 'own neuroses', but clearly it has also given him a vehicle to work or sift through the rubble of the past. That said, in critically surveying the show, it is not immediately apparent why Corwin chose *Mount Zion* as the title. Besides from the possible biblical and rather more obscure Eliot associations, it may have something to do with archaeology.

Archaeological excavations conducted by Yigal Shiloh on the eastern hill of two hills extending south of the Old City of Jerusalem revealed an Iron Age building identified as the remains of 'fortress Zion', thus indicating it to be

the original location of Mount Zion. Excavating layers of history also seems to be Corwin's calling. In this sense there are some similarities between his work and that of his acknowledged hero, Anselm Kiefer. Corwin's deployment of makeshift shelving systems for many of his plaster objects in recent exhibitions only enhance this idea of the artist as archaeologist, identifying and classifying fragments of the past, although the aforementioned sense of inchoation is still present. In the last room of the George and Jørgen gallery, there is an exhibit entitled *Lucy*, a fragmented skeletal work made out of plaster and laid out on a board. *Lucy* refers to the the 3.2 million year old fossilised skeleton discovered by Donald Johanson, an early indication of bipedalism, symbolizing the theory of evolution. Of his plaster 'reconstruction' of the only partially complete *Lucy* skeleton, the Corwin has written 'It's amazing and touching that this little 3 foot 8 inch tall ape-like person has become the mother of us all, as much a symbol of the triumph of science as she is a symbol of the triumph of walking upright'. But we should leave *Lucy* and return to Eliot as there is yet another part of *The Waste Land* that seems to connect with Corwin's body of work.

The second part of Eliot's poem is entitled 'A Game of Chess', an idea that draws on the comic satirical play by the early 17th-century playwright Thomas Middleton, and first staged in 1624 at the Globe Theatre, not so far from the current George and Jørgen gallery. Chess is an interest of Corwin's too – the tension between control and creativity is something he finds compelling. In the first large space of the gallery is the altar set piece. Oversized and barely recognizable chess pieces *King* and *Blue Boy* flank this altar. As George Binning has observed 'At two feet tall chess pieces start to look like chess players, with their own goals and ideas about where they might move'. The chess pieces have their own discrete identity in this gallery space, but they recall an earlier Corwin show at the Clocktower Gallery in New York, which featured a fluxus-like performance, an unwieldy chess match between International Master Irina Krush and Grandmaster Robert Hess, which according to Mónica de la Torre of *Bomb Magazine*, 'was on a chess set built out of components from and referencing Corwin's installation *Auroch's Library*'. Given Corwin's time working in a studio at 5 Pointz, it was entirely appropriate that the MC at this event was Grandmaster Maurice Ashley (the first black Grandmaster) who is closely connected to the beginnings of the New York hip hop scene, and who has discerned links between the creativity of hip hop culture, chess, and art. In thinking about these curious associations, one cannot help but recall Marcel Duchamp's chess game with a nude Eve Babitz at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. In the context of the George and Jørgen gallery though, Corwin's chess pieces take on another quality, a chapel-like sense of contemplation and quietude supplants the dynamism of the earlier fluxus performance.

The experimental George and Jørgen gallery is just around the corner from the new White Cube space, the largest of that gallery's three London sites, and now there is clearly more than one reason to explore the Bermondsey art scene. Just like in Eliot's poem, a crowd should flow over London Bridge, but this time in the opposite direction and down St Thomas Street (followed by Bermondsey St and Morocco St) to where the gallerists Ingrid and George happily keep the hours for Corwin's excellent exhibition.

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George and Jørgen, 9 Morocco Street, London, SE1 3HB

Wed-Fri 10am-6pm; Sat 11am-6pm; Sun 12 noon-5pm