

## Cornelia Parker: *History Painting*

16 May–5 July 2025 | Golden Square

### Press Release

Frith Street Gallery is delighted to announce an exhibition of new works by Cornelia Parker. For this show Parker has created a series of paintings: seemingly abstract oil-on-canvas works inspired by historic newspaper and magazine covers and the colour analysis charts of American artist Emily Noyes Vanderpoel (1842-1939). Also shown are a series of colour plots, made with home-made pigments produced from objects she has used over decades of her practice.

Vanderpoel's pioneering 1902 volume *Color Problems: A Practical Manual for the Lay Student of Color* presented colour analysis in a way that appealed across disciplines, breaking down key theories in a series of experimental and visually striking illustrations that were easy to understand. While it was underappreciated in its time, her expression of colour anticipated major developments in modern art by nearly half a century, inspiring abstract artists like Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers.

Parker was drawn to Vanderpoel's collection of coloured grids, geometric expressions which deconstruct the colour palettes of everyday, antique and natural objects. Egyptian sarcophagi, Assyrian tiles, early Greek vases, butterfly wings and leaves were all under inspection, their palettes scrutinised in 10 x 10 grids of coloured squares, where shades were laid out next to each other in a method of colour analysis that was revolutionary at its time. Parker was struck by Vanderpoel's maxim: 'Until our attention is called to it, we are unconscious what apparently unpromising material may yield new and beautiful motives for colour-harmonies.'

A website dedicated to Vanderpoel's methodology includes a generating algorithm that allows one to take any image and break it down into an analytical colour grid. Using well-known newspaper headlines, magazine covers and iconic photographs as her source, Parker used this to create her own colour charts. The headlines themselves are from over a century of tragic, awe-inspiring and shocking events, from the sinking of the Titanic to Martin Luther King's famous speech, through the death of Princess Diana to the trial of Donald Trump. Newspapers have appeared in the artist's works before, in her *News at* series in which children copied headlines onto blackboards and the films *Left, Right and Centre* and *Election Abstract* produced when she was the UK's official Election Artist (all 2017). This source material highlights absurdity, humour and tragedy of the human condition at a time when print 'heritage' media is in decline.

The artist's paintings are abstract but tied to representation by the narrative in the appropriated headline titles. Her colour charts are rendered in impasto oil on canvas, using a palette knife, an incongruous technique, not readily associated with the precision of modernism. She exhibits the paint palettes used for each painting, its formal alter ego, displaying conscious, versus unconscious mark making, to be considered as equal.

Throughout her career Parker has also created her own pigments. In her *Explosion Drawings* (1999-2004) she used the ingredients of gunpowder; fine charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur for their potential, (when combined) to explode as well as for their hue; black, white and yellow. Over the years she has amassed her own table of very curious elements including snake venom and anti-venom, charcoal from a Texan church struck by lightning, 70-million-year-old fossilised dinosaur bones, Hoover bags from the House of Commons and Lords, burnt cocaine, chalk from the White Cliffs of Dover and beachcombed bricks from a house that has fallen off those cliffs, turned into pebbles by the churn of the tides. For this exhibition she has revisited some of these materials, grinding them up to make paint, creating a series of abstract colour charts which map the curious histories of their constituent parts.

**Cornelia Parker** was born in Cheshire in 1956. She studied at Wolverhampton Polytechnic and Reading University. Over the last three decades, she has presented numerous major commissions and solo exhibitions nationally and internationally, including a career retrospective at Tate Britain (2022); at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (2019); Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster (2017); Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2016), The Whitworth, the University of Manchester (2015), British Library, London (2015), BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2010), Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru (2008), Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2007) and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2006).