

## Jonathan Ellery – A Partial View

Dr Jules Wright, Director/Curator,  
The Wapping Project, 2009

"You see, all art has now become completely a game by which man distracts himself; and you may say it has always been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is fascinating now is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all." Francis Bacon.

When I looked at Jonathan Ellery looking back at me I saw a hint of nervousness about the eyes, which revealed a feeling that he might be challenged – about his new exhibition, his performance piece, *Constance*, about his attitude to sex and women, his use of difficult images and his ability to take responsibility for using them. And so we proceeded – which game was Ellery playing I wondered.

Was he, like Helmut Newton, unprepared to reveal what made him tick? Would he side step questions? Not own up to the powerful role he played in relation to the work he made? Not admit that *Constance*, in which a young woman carefully undressed in front of an audience and then dressed again, slowly, precisely, in an orderly progression, exactly as directed by Ellery was an exercise in power?

Ellery talks remotely of his work. He appears to be detached, removed and distanced from it. He describes himself as an observer, watching the audience respond. This doesn't ring true. This seems like a game. So how does one get inside where he is really coming from? It's not easy. He doesn't give much away until we begin to talk about the performance of *Constance*, "She was entirely my creation. Everything. From the clothes she wore and the colours she chose down to her shaved pussy." A work that Ellery determined had a life in a gallery, in a book and in another format in a soft porn magazine; art and commerce. What struck me about *Constance* was that it was an exercise in control, a performance which left nothing to chance, an event dictated by a puppeteer. What makes the work interesting in retrospect is Ellery's role, not the performance.

So is Ellery's art the expression of a fetish? Must it always be a process which is controlled – in the case of his brass works, industrial technology is bent to his will, to make his mark, and if the brasses don't meet his exacting standard, they are rejected? Is it always an exercise in technical perfection, whether it is complete domination over the sequencing of a woman stripping or the total control of a line as it is machined into brass? Is it the illusion of controlling something pure – brass – woman? Is Ellery making a mark in different ways – the machines scratching and scarring the brass – in order to achieve something over which he holds total sway? As he manipulates the surface of the brass, so he controlled the shaving of the pubic hair from the body of his performer. In both there is the attention to finish, to precision, to detail but also to restraint, oppression and the need to keep in check.

Of his new work, *Ellery's Theory of Neo-conservative Creationism*, he writes: "The Neo-conservatives aren't very keen on the Big Bang scientists, the Big Bang scientists aren't very keen on the Creationists, the Creationists aren't very keen on Darwin, Darwin's not too happy with the Catholics and the Catholics don't seem to be too happy with anyone." All of which may or may not be true, but does this take us to the heart of the work. I don't think so. When pressed to say what the 16 brasses add up to, Ellery says, "This is where I stand at this point in time and time is important. I use brass because it has longevity and I want to leave something behind." Which is about as simple and as deep and as honest as any artist can be? Political and provocative, Ellery's work is above all else personal. So as an audience we must challenge him with his decision to show a 'crosstika' and juxtapose it with a brass inscribed with the words "Mike Goldberg saying goodnight until the next time." Or the cheese grater in all it's brittle ugliness, set, Araki-like, against a crude and obvious image of a woman's genitals, a blackbird dominating the sky, perhaps over Iraq, with the light touch of Jasmine and a wispy blossom as a delicate counterpoint. We will make of this collection of works what we can from our own perspectives, but in contemplating each one, we make something of what drives this artist to put this work in front of us now. Revealing it is. A game it is not.