

Mischief and Mimicry: Phyllida Barlow

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'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, Bruton, England,
25 May 2024 – 5 January 2025

The setting for the show is unusual. A visitor needs to get a train heading to Bruton, a town in the southwest of England, with other people, some of whom the visitor saw on the earlier train coming in from London. On alighting, the public walks down a path for around ten minutes until they arrive at what used to be a derelict farm, now renovated and transformed into a farm shop, gallery spaces, Education Lab, bookshop and sculpture park. I learn that someone I meet on the Bruton train used to be Phyllida Barlow's assistant. As we walk to the venue, he tells me that with five children it was no wonder that, for Barlow, trying to forge a career in the precarious world of art took a backseat to earning a living as a lecturer at the Slade for forty years. The day I visited there was a jolly atmosphere, with the feel of a summer festival, the sun shining, live music with a folk-rock band playing in a tent, free drinks and burgers, sausages, salads and sorbets, and middle class parents and their offspring running around with the wind in their hair, their shrieks in the air, all surrounded by Phyllida Barlow's colossal creations. Various people in the British artworld were there as this was a day Hauser and Wirth, one of the world's four mega galleries, had chosen to launch the exhibition in grand style, with not only free food but free experiential learning delivered by local art students in the Education Lab. I spotted the critically acclaimed British sculptor and performance artist, Thomas J Price, and stopped briefly to chat to uber-curator and mensch, Mark Godfrey, who was there with his wife and their dogs.

The exhibition's title 'unscripted' derives from the fact that Phyllida Barlow's experimental practice was largely improvised. A notable work that greets the audience before entering the galleries is *untitled: stacked chairs* – a bunch of chairs spill out in a disorderly fashion from a structure built originally to store grain, as if propelled by a force from within the building. I notice the chairs are painted red (the colour of fresh blood) and in my subsequent interview with Francis Morris, the show's curator, I learn that Barlow began her career as a painter, so it was never far away from what she did, and that the artist saw all surfaces as capable of being activated through painting. She also liked 'the way things collapse and disintegrate, which are

great metaphors for the human condition'.¹ Could it be that the work is a comment on the way harmony in any society is disrupted by malevolent forces? Britain has just had a general election as I write this, so the media is full of the divisive rhetoric politicians spew out. In addition, 2024 is the year that the greatest number of general elections are being held worldwide, so there is news of far right and nationalist politicians stoking up antagonism and fear. *untitled: stacked chairs* reminds me of a site-specific work Doris Salcedo submitted for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial in 2003. *Untitled, 2003* consisted of 1,550 wooden chairs chaotically stacked on top of one another in the empty lots between a pair of buildings. Salcedo was inspired by the empty lots she noticed when walking around a neighbourhood in the city and later found out that the neighbourhood was once home to people who had been expelled due to ethnic and religious discrimination. Not only was it an evocation of the aftermath of an assault; by using the kind of domestic furniture used by nearly everyone, it strongly suggests the absence of those persecuted victims. Salcedo, perhaps the foremost chronicler of violence and its aftermath, deals in metaphors as opposed to graphic depictions of injustices, while Barlow saw art as a way to depict the absurdities of the modern age, so it is likely that the latter had some instance of violence in mind when she created her piece.



Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: stacked chairs*, 2014, timber, plywood, cement, paint, sand, PVA and varnish, 150 x 640 x 455 cm, installation view at 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard

¹ Conversation with Frances Morris, 25 May 2024

In the first gallery, works ranging from the artist's beginning as a sculptor are juxtaposed with more recent work. *Shedmesh* is a remix of a work made originally in 1975. Constructed from stretchers, canvas and upholstery foam, it is emblematic of her post-minimalist approach, and the resources used are reminiscent of Arte Povera with its insistence on unprocessed, pre-industrial materials, and a dominant movement at the time *Shedmesh* was originally conceived.



Phyllida Barlow, *Shedmesh*, 1975–2020, installation view at 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard

In the installation *folly*, which I encountered in the British Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennial (and the first time I had heard of Phyllida Barlow) I bent, twisted, turned, gazed upwards and peered at the work whose epic scale matched her American counterpart, Mark Bradford (coincidentally also represented by the same gallery), both contemporary art titans rising to the challenge of having work on display in the world's premier art biennial. There is a version of that work in this exhibition called *untitled: folly; awnings; 2016/2017*. It is a smaller iteration and while I can see how it stands for fallen monuments and the ravages of war, it has less impact in Somerset, maybe due to it being on a smaller scale. A work sprawled on the floor, consisting of tarpaulin, polystyrene, scrim, cement and paint – *untitled: tarpaulins/rocks/sticks* – does bring to mind the detritus after a battle. It was inspired by memories of bombs being dropped on London in the artist's childhood during World War II.

Visitors have to go through a curtain to enter a darkened room in which a documentary on the artist is shown. There, viewers get a glimpse of how Barlow created the larger works as she directs her assistants as well as her thoughts on sculpture. The following gallery has a large table on which maquettes, created during her teaching years and in lockdown, reside. The curator, Francis Morris, told me that the liquidity of the materials used meant the artist had to work fast.



Installation view, 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, with *untitled: tarpaulins/rocks/sticks*, 2012, in the foreground, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard



Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: double act*, 2010, plaster, cement, wire, plywood, spraypaint, dimensions variable, installation view in 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard

On the walls are also maquettes and paintings. The next gallery has two large spheres with a ring and a disc sticking out; their title, *untitled: double act*, refers to Barlow's acknowledgment of the fact that her work is presented as if on a stage for the audience.

Next to that gallery is a courtyard with sculptures in the shape of balconies hanging on the walls. They evoke alien architecture, the kind of home the predator from Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* franchise might relax on after a day of fighting. Then on to the sculpture garden, actually named the Oudolf Field, where visitors can see the artist's *PRANK* series: angular steel assemblages with white bunny ears on their corners, they refer, according to Frances Morris, to Barlow's love of cartoons and Bugs Bunny. Although the *PRANK* works here were made in the last two years, she first made them in the 1990s, with a smaller version *Object for the Television* evoking Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* in the way she places bunny ears above a television, also on display in one of the galleries.



Phyllida Barlow, *PRANK: mimic*, 2022–2023, steel, fibreglass and lacquer, 457 x 411.5 x 325 cm, installation view in 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard

But back to the sculpture garden. Frances Morris enlightened me further on these works' precedents in the artist's oeuvre. Her work in the 1960s included many biomorphic forms that were married with geometric forms as part of her rejection of minimalism. It was part of her exploration of sculptural forms, and so the bunny ears were a return to that. They remind the audience of the hallmarks of Barlow's art – the possibilities inherent in being disruptive – with

their evocative titles (*antic*, *hoax*, *jape*, *jinx*, *mimic*, *stunt* and *truant*). The works are humourous (who doesn't find Bugs Bunny funny?) but vulnerable, perched in the way they are on the edge of each steel structure. They were her first works made specifically for the outdoors, and their epic scale brings to mind Richard Serra's gigantic sculptures. Serra's *Nȳ-1* is made of rusted sheets of steel over thirteen feet high and has been described as 'remarkable'² and 'impressive'³ by critics who have walked through it. Serra himself described his aim as a sculptor as being 'to do away with the object, to get sculpture off the pedestal and expand the space of the field, to open up the container and to foreground time and bodily movement in relation to the intensity of place and context'.⁴ In other words, Serra was not aiming to provide works with specific messages, but sculptures that emphasised the phenomenological aspects of appreciating art, the awe and knowledge that come from the embodied experience of interacting with an artwork.



Phyllida Barlow, *PRANK: truant*, 2022–2023, steel, fibreglass and lacquer, 340.5 x 419 x 358 cm, installation view in 'Phyllida Barlow: unscripted', Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2024, courtesy of the estate of Phyllida Barlow and Hauser & Wirth, photo by Ken Adlard

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- ² See Thomas Micchelli, 'Lessons in Gigantism: Richard Serra Makes It Work', *Hyperallergic*, 14 May 2016 <https://hyperallergic.com/298921/lessons-in-gigantism-richard-serra-makes-it-work>
- ³ See James Meyer, 'No More Scale: The Experience of Size in Contemporary Sculpture', *Artforum*, vol 42, no 10, Summer 2004 www.artforum.com/features/no-more-scale-the-experience-of-size-in-contemporary-sculpture-168860
- ⁴ See Kristina Nazarevskaia, 'Top 5 things you didn't know about Richard Serra's sculptures', nd, *galleryintel.com*, <https://galleryintell.com/top-5-richard-serra-sculptures-gagosian-new-york>

Another exhibition with gigantic sculptures that comes to mind is Simone Leigh's presentation at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. The African American artist's *Last Garment* was an exercise in self-determination as it adapted what was originally a racist vintage depiction on a postcard of a female Jamaican labourer washing clothes on a rock into a bronze sculpture. The work – graceful, colossal, radical – depicts dignity in labour when reframed through Leigh's lens. Leigh's parents are Jamaican, which lends an autobiographical element to the corrective sculpture. James Meyer, when writing about the trend towards gigantism in contemporary art, highlights the fact that the demand for such work is driven by museums that increasingly wish to deliver spectacle on an epic scale and thus increase their audiences. Barlow, on the other hand, once stated 'I enjoy the idea of reaching into the space of the space, beyond the human scale, exploring overhead or underfoot – my work is often parasitic or antagonistic to the building. I see each space as something to be explored, rather than just a place to put something.'⁵ She was clearly not averse to working on a large scale and started using assistants to help her realise designs from the 1990s. And Hauser and Wirth certainly have a lot of outdoor space to fill, so Barlow's larger works enable them to do so in a playful, engaging manner.

There are so many art-historical references in Phyllida Barlow's work. *Object for the Television*, for instance, not only brings to mind Nam June Paik and his obsession with television sets, but also artists keen on rabbits, from Joan Miró to Jeff Koons. The breadth of her influences ranges from highbrow art to Looney Tunes's Bugs Bunny. She believed the artist's role was to respond to the world around them, so it is unsurprising that *folly* (2017) was seen as a comment on the colossal error Britain made in leaving the EU the previous year.⁶ Phyllida Barlow worked as an artist for sixty years. Like many women artists, she was largely neglected for a chunk of that time, and only began to gain prominence roughly around the time of her Venice Biennale presentation in 2017. On until 5 January 2025, this exhibition, with its constellation of a bucolic setting and playful works belying serious themes, make it well worth visiting.

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⁵ See 'Dame Phyllida Barlow RA (1944–2023)' on the Royal Academy website: www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/phyllida-barlow-ra

⁶ See Larry Achiampong, Sutapa Biswas, Louisa Elderton and Andrew Renton, 'Remembering Phyllida Barlow (1944–2023)', *Frieze*, 24 March 2023, www.frieze.com/article/remembering-phyllida-barlow-1944-2023#:~:text=Phyllida%20Barlow%2C%20who%20passed%20away,the%20detritus%20of%20urban%20decay