If I were to say that, for Tony Carter, his work was a matter of life and death, my remark would be doubly true, with reference, that is, to his absolute dedication to that work on the one hand, and to its essential theme on the other. He gave that theme an abiding contemporary reference in response to the events of the first Gulf war. The very word ‘war’ seems to cry out in exclamation, yet Carter’s sculptures are the opposite of declamatory, they seem rather to radiate silence. They draw us close, away from the public stage, the auditorium, with its hollow rhetorical echoes, to invite us to focus reflectively on the near at hand, a familiar or recontextualised object, say a wine bottle, a torch; and in so doing to sense, as if by oblique deflection, the paradox at the heart of life.

From the outset, that is from the point at which, as an MA student at Reading – where fellow students included Stephen Buckley, also ex-Newcastle, and Nick Wyndham – he turned from painting to the fabrication of objects, the things of his making were beguilingly elusive. Consider for instance the genesis of his first three-dimensional piece, ‘The faithful one’ (1967–8): it was a rendering in material form of an impossible object depicted by Picabia. Although Tony Carter was certainly counted as a sculptor, and one of high standing, his work falls readily under no single heading – unless it be trompe-l’oeil, since that practice entails causing to appear, by precise means, things that are not simply what they appear to be. Duchamp was assuredly a source of inspiration here, and it is relevant to note that Tony studied Fine Art at Newcastle, under Richard Hamilton, graduating in 1966. While there is no detectable influence of either Duchamp or Hamilton in even the early three-dimensional pieces, what is unmistakably present, and an abiding inheritance, is a sensibility that combines intense reflection with an equally profound and sensual engagement with the material means, with process.

In 1993, Carter tellingly entitled the essay introducing an exhibition of his work in Lyon ‘Process and Process: Stillness and Still-Life’. ‘At another time I might have been a still-life painter’, he once wrote¹, and in this essay he says of a still life by Oudry, illustrated in the catalogue:

The dead, white bird in Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s painting, ‘The White Duck’, has a label attached to its leg bearing the artist’s signature. The candle in its holder is the bird in the coldness of death, but the flame which animates these shades of grey does not have to be there for us to know that it could be. None of the likenesses of things so carefully contrived is the subject of this picture. The matrix of energy from which the candle draws its flame and by which the bird’s vitality is reclaimed is the subject and it is a process not a thing. The silver and white of the candle and holder is the enigma of life and death of us all, in a more accessible form.²

Accessible, that is, as the graspable *memento mori* symbol so common to still life; but the intimation of mortality is more subtly pervasive. Later in the essay, he writes of the anxiety entailed by his own persistent need to really see or to see reality … My instinct, like that of Jean-Baptiste Oudry, says that the object can only really be understood as part of some greater process, but sense perception insists on an either/or choice: you can see the object or you can infer the process but cannot experience the two in one. Time will never move in quite the right way for that.

What he here identifies as the dilemma or paradox that possesses him is epitomised in the French term for still life, as he notes: ‘It is as if the object of attention must be sacrificed in some way to this necessity of seeing, become “nature morte.”’ Life is not something we see, and so the objects of still life, and by analogy those of his own art, are mere ‘containers of a kind, or conduits’ for the animate energy they may only invoke. Among his exhibits was a series of facsimiles of birds’ eggs, the patterning painstakingly rendered onto plastic ovoids of the correct size for, respectively, eagles, hawks, ospreys and falcons, each ‘collection’ mounted on board. These eggs that will never hatch, definitively lifeless, were for the artist, and may become for the viewer, a means to meditatively summons their absent living subject:

These eggs … were not fashioned in the body of a bird but in the hollow of my hand and in creative reverie. An intimate act of empathy, they were for me a way of dreaming eagles; an act of solidarity with wild birds.

Process and process: the work of art, the object as constituted, is a caesura between time past and time present, the processes of life and of the artist’s work, of the artist’s sustained attention and the viewer’s.

As to the viewer, Carter was concerned to stress, he said in an interview:

the non-intellectual part of experiencing the work. Unashamedly, I want the spectator to engage with something beautiful or charismatic … A work of art isn’t a puzzle to be solved … I’m using familiar objects but I want them to speak in a symbolic way to the emotional, psychological life of the spectator.3

Something beautiful, yet familiar, matter-of-fact: there is in Carter’s selection and deployment of what were often factory-made objects an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the simple manufactured thing (an appreciation Duchamp shared on one famous occasion with Brancusi and Léger, on visiting an industrial exhibition). Take as an example the milk pan suspended by its handle in what is probably the artist’s most celebrated individual work, ‘By bread only – for the demise of icons’ (1978). The pan is there as its plain self, yet, in being suspended on a planar, rectangular wooden support, painted white and formed to resemble a frame, and mounted on a paint-spattered easel, it appears also as its own icon – or trompe-l’oeil representation.

Through arranged lighting, the pan casts a reflection resembling a wing, given celestial association by the engraving, in the bottom of the pan, of the head of a Leonardo angel. To view the work is to pass between disparate registers of presence and absence, immanence and transcendence, to the point of hallucination; yet the title sounds the notes of materialism and iconoclasm, as if to check this flight of fantasy in reminder of the plain facts. It’s still a milk pan.

Tony Carter was a much-exhibited artist, in numerous group shows and in solo exhibitions at galleries including Anthony Reynolds Gallery in London and Claudine Papillon in Paris, as well as at public locations including Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge (1991) and the Imperial War Museum (1992). He was included in British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century at the Whitechapel in 1981; Fenella Crichton’s essay in the catalogue discusses his work in association with other British sculptors whose bond of affinity she encapsulated under the heading ‘Symbols, presences and poetry’.4

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Among those selected, Carter would appear at the time to have had most in common with Carl Plackman; Michael Sandle was another sculptor in this grouping, but Carter’s concern with warfare came some years later, and Sandle’s approach to the subject was very different. Carter’s most notable showing in an international context came through his inclusion in the Hayward Annual of 1986, *Falls the Shadow: Recent British and European Art*, organised by Barry Barker and Jon Thompson. Among the other sculptors included in this deliberately heterogeneous selection were Barry Flanagan, Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz (Richard Hamilton came into the frame as well).

It was during a period as Henry Moore Artist Fellow at Kettle’s Yard and Christ’s College Cambridge in 1990–91 that Carter developed the war-related work he was to exhibit at Kettle’s Yard in 1991 and a year later at the Imperial War Museum. His fellowship spanned the period of the first Gulf war (Operation Desert Shield, August 1990–January 1991; Operation Desert Storm, January 1991–February 1991), to whose events he responded with works bearing titles at once direct and suggestive: ‘American Dream/Arabian Night; Desert; Black Flag’. The first of these works, and a larger one, entitled simply ‘American Dream’, present arrays principally of two objects, spread in juxtaposition on a plinth: water canteens and wine bottles. The canteens, empty and uncapped, are covered in a red, white and blue striped fabric (a serendipitous find – the manufacturer happened to cover a particular batch with this material). A constellation of stars painted white on black rises above, stars to match the stripes and form the desert sky. The whole, with its row and cluster of canteens and full or empty wine bottles, is suggestive of a memorial. In ‘American Dream’, a vertical polished bronze sheet bisects a row of alternating wine bottles and canteens, the bottles empty on one side, save for one containing water (absent from the canteens), filled alternately with red and white wine on the other. On the ‘empty’ side, all canteens save one have been cast in bronze from moulds, all uncapped; on the other, the canteens, all intact and capped, save one, uncapped with the cloth removed, are oriented in the direction opposite and away from the others. A blurred reflection of either row appears in the bronze sheet. A long Maglite lies across the anomalous canteen on either side, one silver, the other black. A simple description evokes the connotations of ritual, both military and sacramental, inherent in the work. Far more than most actual memorials, it does actual memorial work on our feelings and imagination, as we inwardly unfold its meaning. As with Carter’s work in general, but here most evidently, the relationship between the elements is dialectical, thence to open up a silent dialogue with the viewer.
A serious artist, without doubt, but by no means a solemn or reclusive person, far from it. Tony’s style of greeting was an arm-clasp, as if to include, and his ease with others and appreciation of individuals and their differences made him both a warm and trusted friend and colleague and, throughout his working life until his retirement, a gifted teacher. More than simply a means to support his practice, teaching was for him a dedicated pursuit in its own right. He held the post of Principal Lecturer, and then Programme Leader at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts from 1986 to 1989, resigning, along with the Head of Fine Art, Wendy Smith, when the directors of the corporate body running the formerly independent London art schools announced the closure of the Camberwell Fine Art department. Though offered employment at Chelsea, they made a principled decision to resign. It was Camberwell that had brought them together, and their marriage was a bond of kindred spirits, distinct as they were temperamentally and in their respective practices. Tony returned to part-time lecturing, principally at Goldsmiths, where he had already made a major contribution as a teacher. In 1998 he was appointed Head of Fine Art at City & Guilds of London Art School, becoming Principal in 2000; he retired in 2014. He saw the Art School through a difficult transition to more secure financial and institutional standing, while preserving and building on its unique character, which he strongly appreciated, as a rare surviving independent art school. To meet him there, in a setting where each individual might have a sense of belonging to the community, was to see someone perfectly at home – even if his office appeared to be a coffee table in a small room shared with his personal assistant.

His attempt as an artist to enter into the life of wild birds, mentioned above, reflects his love of nature and lifelong dedication to walking in open country, for preference in the rugged and uncultivated setting of the moors and heaths of his native Yorkshire, and in the mountains of Scotland. It was an enthusiasm Wendy came to share with him. In her moving tribute to Tony at the very well-attended funeral, Wendy recalled an early walk in the Scottish Highlands where after toiling upwards they arrived at a still steeper gradient. ‘What do we do now?’ she asked, and he replied, ‘We just go up.’ I can hear, and recognise, and miss, the undernote of humour, the quiet assurance.

Brendan Prendeville
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