

CHANGING PLACES

CLIFFE CASTLE MUSEUM, KEIGHLEY

21.10.17 - 19.11.17 TEXT BY STEVEN BODE

It's no exaggeration to say that Cliffe Castle Museum in Keighley is one of a kind. One of those places that defies categorisation and confounds expectations, it feels enjoyably unconstrained by conventional museological boundaries – those abstract lines of systematic classification that fence off the world and its myriad contents into separate, isolated fields. Like the building in which it is housed, an imposing Gothic pile designed by George Webster in the 1820s and extended, in hotchpotch fashion, by the wealthy Butterfield family thereafter, the Museum is a fantasia of eclectic influences, bringing together objects and artefacts from different disciplines, cultures and eras. It is an incredibly open environment (a random foray through its rooms and corridors might lead you past old master paintings, antique clocks, examples of classic French furniture, shelves full of pottery figurines, even bee-hives, with live-in colonies of bees!) and an incredibly crowded one. It is a space that gives the imagination license to roam, and encourages the mind to free-associate, even as it funnels you down a jam-packed route thronged by display after display of visual and textual material.



Cliffe Castle Museum



The Grand Drawing Room at Cliffe Castle, hosting the soundwork *Trespassers will (not) be prosecuted* by Desire Machine Collective

Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones

Cliffe Castle's Grand Drawing Room provides an appropriately atmospheric setting for the audio installation, *Trespassers will (not) be prosecuted* by Desire Machine Collective. At first, the presence of sounds from the natural world (bird calls, babbling water) penetrating this plush inner sanctum is mildly disconcerting; a reminder, perhaps, of the thin line that separates outside from inside, and how the living spaces that human beings carve out are temporary, vulnerable, permeable. After a while, though, this subtle carpet of sound starts to fit snugly and seamlessly with the rest of the décor, echoing the exotic, repeating patterns of the traditional Bengali wall hangings that adorn the room, and adding its own lush layer to this oasis of comfort. The audio consists of field recordings made by DMC's Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya in the forests of Meghalaya in Assam – a wildlife sanctuary where visitors are welcome, but animals and birds are protected and sacred. As you walk around the Drawing Room, the sound sources shift in volume and location, as if alert and alive. When you exit the space, and turn a couple of corners, you hear birdsong again; but this time in a room stuffed full of stuffed animals and birds, each stiffly

posed inside glass cases – a very different kind of preservation.



Dust to Dust, Imran Channa, installed at Cliffe Castle
Photo: Mariam Zulfiqar

Museum curators are a bit like gamekeepers who are acutely aware that many of the items that have passed into their care have been amassed through acts of 'poaching' – removing them from their native habitat and transplanting them to a distant showcase site. Imran Channa's intervention in Cliffe Castle's main gallery, in which samples of dust that he has swept up from the various heritage buildings on the *Changing Places* tour are presented in small glass specimen jars, might be interpreted as a parody of this mania for collecting, and the deeper melancholy at its heart. Standing in line, like doleful urchins from the downstairs cellars pressed into service in the chandeliered upstairs world, there is a Cinderella-like pathos to the dust-jars, made more so by their proximity to Cliffe Castle's impressive collection of rocks and crystals from around the globe. A cat may look at a king, but can a pauper ever become a princess? The spoken-word narrative that Channa has recorded to accompany the installation suggests that it might be possible, at least in the realm of the imagination. The stories of his pilgrim's progress across Britain to gather up his handfuls of dust are always brightly illuminated with a prospector's glint of gold, or an alchemist's gleam of hope. Matter-of-fact exchanges and routine encounters are transposed into a kind of

mythic quest, where municipal museum buildings are wondrous palaces, slag heaps are fairy-tale mountains, and helpful assistants are beautiful maidens. I was reminded of the fantasy worlds that the Brontë sisters and their brother Branwell created to amuse themselves, as children, a few miles away in their father's parsonage at Haworth, although the tenor of Channa's story clearly caricatures Kipling, and other examples of Victorian colonial literature, where the outposts of empire acted as staging points on a Grand Tour of acquisitive exploration or as scenic backdrops to a privileged journey of self-discovery.

There is a stranger-than-fiction footnote to Channa's contribution to the staging of *Changing Places* at Cliffe Castle. As before, he is showing his large-scale drawing (partially erased, as if faded over time) of the 'Crystal Palace' – the enormous glass edifice that acted as the shop-window of London's Great Exhibition of 1851. It was interesting to discover that Cliffe Castle possesses one of the original artefacts from that first international expo: a malachite fireplace that stood at the heart of the Russian pavilion, catching the eye like a debonair emissary bringing a flicker of the grandeur of imperial St Petersburg to London. Anyone who's had a hearth will tell you that this is no ordinary chimneypiece. Shaped from emerald green rock mined from deep under the Urals, it is extraordinarily colourful and extraordinarily beautiful.



Dust to Dust, Imran Channa, installed at Cliffe Castle
Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones

There is an equally remarkable back-story behind its arrival at its latest home in Keighley. Commissioned by a Russian count before going on public display in the Crystal Palace, it was bought by an Italian prince who installed it in his palazzo in Florence. After the prince's death, and the break-up of his collection, Henry Isaac Butterfield acquired it at auction and made it the centrepiece of the Drawing Room at Cliffe Castle. After Cliffe Castle was sold, it was re-located in 1950 to the family's other mansion, Thoresby Hall near Nottingham. After that too was sold, the fireplace was feared to be lost, before turning up in the Nottinghamshire



Still from *The Mixer*, Ravi Agarwal

bungalow of one of Butterfield's great-grandchildren. If Imran Channa had told this fireside tale, we might have wondered whether he was making it up.

At the time of the Great Exhibition, Britain was widely celebrated as the 'workshop of the world'. These days, many of the sites of industrial manufacture, and the infrastructure that supports them, have gone East (to India or China) – a phenomenon highlighted in Ravi Agarwal's two videos, *The Mixer* and *Machine*. There is a concrete mixer churning outside in the Cliffe Castle car park – albeit in service of new renovation work supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Cement dust swirls on the autumn breeze – although, thankfully, not the choking, polluted smog that currently hangs like a pall over Delhi, and which used to loom large over this part of Yorkshire in the 19th century and beyond. The fires that stoked the engines and smoked the chimneys of Britain's industrial revolution have largely gone out. There are heirlooms on the mantelpiece and cinders in the grate.

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Changing Places in the Bracewell Smith Hall at Cliffe Castle. In view: *The Mixer* and *Machine*, Ravi Agarwal and *Dust to Dust*, Imran Channa
Photo: Jerry Hardman-Jones

Changing Places is a Film and Video Umbrella touring exhibition, supported by Arts Council England, Canal & River Trust, National Trust, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Phoenix Leicester, Feltech, Links Signs and Heritage Lottery Fund. Curated by Mariam Zulficar. Imran Channa's residency, during which he visited the tour locations in preparation for *Dust to Dust*, was kindly supported by Delfina Foundation.