

Exhibition Information

Mirosław Balka tied to the toe

25 August – 20 October 2002

Humble substances become powerful symbols of human life in the remarkable work of Mirosław Balka. Using well-worn objects, the basic dimensions of his body and suggestive materials such as salt, soap and ash, his sculpture invites us to explore the passage of time, memory and the traces each of us leaves in the world.

Growing up in Catholic Poland and under a Communist regime where Western popular icons were absent, the artist recalls that his childhood heroes were saints and martyrs. As a result, a sense of the sacred pervades his work, as do recollections of the most painful episode in recent Polish history: the Holocaust.

Over the decade covered by this exhibition, Balka's work has continually navigated a passage between darkness and light, life and death, remembering and forgetting, presence and absence. These evocative, poetic works, at times humorous, at others disturbing, but frequently moving, embrace diverse experience and personal history.

To heighten the intimate experience of his works, DCA's galleries have been transformed into a series of rooms, deliberately slowing the pace at which the works can be encountered.

The sculptures, drawings, video works and installations included in this exhibition are typical of Balka's fusion of abstract forms with a deeply poetic sensibility. His apparently minimalist forms and carefully chosen objects are in fact imbued with

potent significance through particular materials and personal references.

'For me the history of materials is more interesting than the history of art.'

Mirosław Balka

Many of the works in this exhibition are indicative of the way in which Balka uses aged or worn materials to convey the effect of time. Outside the entrance to the gallery is **280 x 10 x 10** (2002), a multi-coloured chain of used soap provided by people visiting DCA in the weeks prior to the exhibition. Soap is a recurrent material for Balka, exploiting its instant association with the intimate, personal space of our bodies and our daily rituals.

Inside the gallery, in the installation entitled **2 x (190 x 60 x 11), 2 x (190 x 60 x 1), 2 x (40 x 30 x 11)** (1992), one element is two rectangular sections of carpet cut from that which covered the floor in his studio. The carpet's underside shows traces of its use and damage. It is a typically atmospheric piece in which a certain dignity is given to such impoverished, worn substances.

'the remains of everyday activities .. are made to seem dignified, timeless, infinitely precious'

Stuart Morgan in *frieze*

The house that Balka has used as a studio since 1992 also features in **Teddy Bear + Kitchen** (2002), a recent series of images of Balka's own aged bear. This work conflates the present and Balka's current life as an artist with memories of his youth. The house in the small town of Otwock, outside Warsaw in Poland, had been his grand-parents' home

and is where Balka grew up. His grandfather was a tombstone cutter and his father engraved the names on tombstones. Otwock once thrived as a haven for people with respiratory illnesses due to its favourable micro-climate. This is one of many works to incorporate the material of this house / studio and draw on this rich, unique personal history that nonetheless has universal resonance.

Of his works Balka has said:

'Even if they look abstract, there is a shadow lurking behind that is realistic.'

Indicative of this is **2 x (250 x 10 x 17)**, which marks the extent of his arm's reach at full stretch. As simple as its first appearances may be, its scale and subtle form together suggest a body.

A similar approach is evident in **Ø1 x 1250, Ø 1 x 775** (2001), two white-painted steel cables that stretch taut across the main central space in the larger gallery. The higher line again indicates Balka's own reach while the lower is that of his son. Each cable is coated lightly with some of both Balka's and his son's hair.

In one of the rooms adjacent to this space is **536 x 434 x 5** and **The Walk** (2001), one of the most recent works in the exhibition and one of the first in which Balka has made use of video. A characteristic transpiration of the history of one space onto another, the wooden floor in this piece is a replica of that of a room adjoining the gas chamber in the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland. The darker section of wood visible at the front edge of the floor is comprised of strips cut again from Balka's studio floor. Projected onto this is video footage of the artist walking through the actual space in Majdanek as it is preserved today. Retracing the steps of the camp's many victims, the piece offers an experience of a space which may at first appear to be neutral but is contaminated with our knowledge of its horrifying history. The

salt that lies between the wooden slats serves, as in many of his works, as a metaphor for the very essence of human suffering – sweat and tears.

Balka's work has often focussed on the limits of his own body, the boundary between himself and the world. His recent video work **The Fall** (2001) shows this awareness of boundaries in a different yet related way. In it we see two unknown substances (in fact sand and water), one light and one dark, that shift and gradually exchange places, the membrane between them constantly changing. Over the passage of time, dark becomes light and light becomes dark, before the cycle recommences.

The series of **Partly Burned Drawings** at the far end of the gallery bear the traces of a fire in the artist's studio in 1993, while a corridor-like space lined with ashes evokes layers of history and an unknowable past. The way in which the past remains present in the traces and scars left on the objects and surfaces that permeate our daily lives is an enduring subject of Balka's distinctive, poignant and often moving work.

Miroslaw Balka was born in 1958 in Warsaw. He lives in Warsaw. He began to exhibit internationally in the early 1990s and represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 1993. Since then his work has been included in some of the most important international exhibitions. In 2001 alone he had solo shows at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Zachęta Gallery, Warsaw Stedelijk Museum voor Actuelle Kunst, Gent and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

'**tiedtothetoe**' is the first time Balka's work has been shown in Scotland since he participated in *Polish Realities*, at the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow in 1988. It is his first major solo show in the UK since *Dawn* at the Tate Gallery, London in 1995.

There is more information about Balka and his work in the books and catalogues to be found in the **Information Room** next to the gallery entrance.

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