REVIEW

Right: In Landing on Earth a wheel is hung with 231 elements, while in the foreground strips of red rubber hang and trail to the ground

Below: Kris Ruhs and assistant Caterina Amato prepare each raku element individually in his Milan studio

>>EXHIBITION

LANDING ON EARTH

by Kris Ruhs

Wapping Project, London

Review by Herbert Wright

From 1893 the Wapping Hydraulic Power Station used to power lifts across London. It is now the Wapping Project, and this autumn, artist and designer Kris Ruhs built quite different suspended structures there, in a work called Landing On Earth.

Preparing it at his studio in Milan he had said: 'I don't want to take the space away from the space'. Instead, Ruhs' ensemble of installations added an extraordinary new dimension that made for an almost religious experience.

The deep, dark space beyond the restaurant and industrial relics of the Wapping Project is entered from a platform one storey above the floor. A vast permeable screen 4.5m high and 11m wide floated before it, glinting metallically across a relief field of organic shapes. Its triple-layer metal mesh was mounted with film curls, splattered white. A hint of cascading crystal lights beyond peeped over the screen.

These lights were set in spiky ceramic elements in a great one-tonne chandelier above a stainless steel mirror bowl, the only piece attached to the ground. The 231 elements hung from a 3m spiral wheel were baked in Ruhs' Milan studio and shocked, raku-style. Beyond it, barely lit in the shadows, another structure was also suspended in the unfathomable darkness, this one a dense curtain of hanging red rubber strips. They hung 4m and trailed on the red-splattered floor, and a spiral trail penetrated into the thick, smothering strands. At the far end of the room, a doorway revealed a painted beam suspended on a distant brick wall, spotlit to shine like a bar of organic light in an inner sanctum. Deep ambient music by Lee Ranaldo, once guitarist with Sonic Youth, filled the air, enhancing a sense of profound mystery.

Ruhs had said he wanted 'a bit of mystery'. Talk about understatement – it must be his most mysterious work since he was a young musician who drifted into the New York School of Visual Arts in the early Seventies. 'I knew that was the place for me to go', he recalls. 'It was a totally free school. A lot of artists became professors there and taught classes.' They included Mel Bachner (the conceptual artist whose dense, textured fields of words and patterns still echo in Ruhs' work) and perceptionist artist/sculptor Richard Artschwager. Ruhs studied graphics, painting and fine arts, and after school hung out in the artistic underground boilerhouse of Max's Kansas City. Proto-punk emerged there, and Ruhs recalls that 'the New York Dolls were literally our school band'.

After graduating, he did 'a ton of illustration for a lot of journals in New York. I continued to paint and I was involved in theatre.' He had a studio in Chelsea and grew a crew that could fabricate anything fast.

He became a troubleshooter for architectural projects with problems and low budgets. 'That's how I got more involved in doing architecture', he says. 'In a sense I was an artisan... I can weld. I experimented a lot with early resins and plastics.'

In New York in 1989, he met, first editor-in-chief of Elle magazine's Italian version, Carla Sozzani, and they have been partners and collaborators ever since. Moving to Milan, they realised Sozzani's dream to 'do a kind of shop bazaar, introducing everything – my collection and stuff I find and like'. They transformed a garage in a street of local bakers and metalworkers.

The premises at 10 Corso Como is now the epicentre of Milan cool – a gallery, restaurant, the 3 Rooms boutique hotel, and the chicest shop in town. It sells fashion as well as random things from books to designer wares, and not least Ruhs' own designs with his trademark black and white patterns and swirls, and his jewellery of metallic components in organic shapes.

The complex transformed the entire street into a shopping and nightlife hotspot, but centred around a leafy internal courtyard it remains shielded from what Ruhs calls the 'noise and craziness'.

The reputation of 10 Corso Como attracted Eastern attention. After collaborating with Comme des Garçons in Tokyo, Samsung brought Ruhs and Sazzani to Seoul to open 10 Corso Cormo in unlikely bustling modern settings. Projects in China are now underway.

Back at the Wapping Project, a crucial ingredient echoing back to New York was Ruhs' hands-on workmanship. For him 'the most relaxing thing in the world is to have the freedom of finding and exploring and making something'. He laments that 'as we get into a more digital, more computerised world... you see the artisans disappearing'.

Landing On Earth is an artisan work, but its gothic quality contrasts with 10 Corso Como, full of light and fancy. For Wapping, Ruhs scrawled a placard declaring: 'The darkness offers a backdrop for LIGHT'.

Landing On Earth made a temple to not just that, but the metaphysical power of imagination realised by working hands.

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