

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Adrian Searle, "Beauty in a sack of beans," *The Guardian*, December 21, 2004

The Guardian

Beauty in a sack of beans

Jumbled together as though at a flea market, Jannis Kounellis' works give startling new life to everyday objects, says Adrian Searle

Adrian Searle

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I have only wanted very beautiful things," Jannis Kounellis once wrote. One might imagine some pampered aesthete in a silk dressing gown waddling through a gilded salon, pausing now and again to admire his rare orchids, his Chinese porcelains, his collection of Fabergé eggs. But think instead of a man who, in his art, has presented us with sacks of coal, spilled tar, a candle, an old sewing machine hung from a meat hook, toy trains shunted into tunnels and cuttings bored into perfect cubes of marble. Are these beautiful - more than that - very beautiful things?

Unless we are capable of finding the beautiful among the everyday, life isn't worth a candle. Poetry has always found itself in the quotidian. A poem, a work of art or a novel can just as well begin with a sack of coal as with the fall of an empire, or the hand-painted sign over the door to a tobacco shop rather than the mythological meddlings of gods in the lives of men. In fact, it is all the better when stories and artworks begin with the close at hand.

We shouldn't really need reminding of this but we still sometimes find it difficult when it comes to bricks or soup cans, urinals or lumps of lard presented as art. When William Blake talks of worlds in a grain of sand or Mr Bloom cooks his breakfast kidneys in Joyce's *Ulysses*, we are grateful that the kinds of experiences we all share have been acknowledged. So should we be when an artist makes us look at things afresh.

Kounellis, a leading figure of the *Arte Povera* movement, opened his first British show for more than a decade last week, at Modern Art Oxford. This is a generous and rewarding exhibition, treating us to new work, made with the gallery in mind, and to a retrospective survey by the Piraeus-born artist, who has lived in Italy for almost half a century.

Laid out as a sort of flea market retrospective on dozens of shunted-together trestle tables occupying most of one gallery, Kounellis' show brings together works from his whole career. This arrangement resembles a raft, or a rickety stage populated by props and personages. A big black sack containing who knows what. Empty booze bottles. A circle of burlap sacks filled with coal, and more sacks filled with pulses, beans, potatoes and dried peas. A bubbling aquarium with live goldfish, more fish swimming in a big white dish, which also has a kitchen knife resting in the water.

Standing there, I felt like a theatrical prompt waiting for one of the characters to fumble their lines. But whatever one recalls about *Arte Povera*, and Kounellis' career to date, is less interesting than to see these works as though for the first time - not so much to recognise them as to be startled by their conjunction.

It is worth bearing in mind that Kounellis has worked for the stage - creating scenographies for *Lohengrin* at Die *Niederlander Opera*, and, in Berlin, for Heinrich Müller and the *Berliner Ensemble*. He has always had a great sense of the theatrical, for the *mise-en-scène*, never more notably than when he tethered a number of live horses in a Rome gallery in 1969, or included a funeral cortege, with actors and a horse-drawn hearse, in a work for *Documenta 7*, in 1982. One gets the feeling here that he wants to surprise not only us but himself as well, both to return to his past and to make it new again.

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Kounellis treats each work in what he calls this "hypothetical" retrospective as lines and images from the same poem, the one life in art. It is also as if Kounellis wished to confound those who would curate him, clean him up and tidy him away. He refuses the standard museological arrangement, the paraphernalia and spotlights with which chronological exhibitions dissect an artist into early, middle and late, or interesting, important and expensive periods. It is also, perhaps, a way of denying the sanctification of a living artist in late middle age.

It is much more than so much stuff, however iconic, but, then again, so much stuff is mostly where art begins. One of the things about Arte Povera, or "poor art", was that much of it was founded in the local, yet also made appeals to a kind of universality, to the viewer's curiosity, to our own chains of associations.

Other works - such as the installation of seven steel panels with lumps of coal attached to them, resting against the wall and raised on old chairs - are more obdurate and unyielding. This installation, from 1991, fills a downstairs gallery. It reminded me of an unfathomable lesson in an impromptu classroom. Does it matter exactly how many lumps of coal there are on each steel sheet - is this an algebra of coal, a lesson to be learned by rote? Does it matter that the disparate collection of chairs have had to be levelled using little lumps of wax under their legs? Perhaps the little model train, whirring endlessly around a circular track, which girds one of the building's pillars upstairs, is a clue. Or the photograph on the invitation card, in which Kounellis has a model train stuffed in his mouth, reminding us of Magritte's surreal image of the train in the fireplace, and the fact that the tongue is a sort of engine, burning words, issuing steam. Anyhow, think of the uses of coal, its organic and geological origin, its elemental nature, the transformation of coal into energy, a language of coal.

Enough of this. Where's my coat, where's my hat? Kounellis' are hung at the far end of the biggest upper gallery, from one of the huge steel crosses that fill half the gallery like a giant tank-trap. Each steel cross has a third, angled section fixed to it, so that they all rest canted and aslant. It is as if the crosses have all been set down for a moment, a station on the route to crucifixion. Yet this metal maze of struts and crosspieces is also like a nightmarish suprematist junkyard, or a heavily militarised border, a defence of criss-crossed steel.

The crosses rest on a field of Turkish rugs. That elegant hat and coat, which Kounellis has used in his work before, notably in a piece called *Tragedia Civile*, is a wonderfully rich motif; a great image, hung from an arm of a cross, in a gesture at once formal and fastidious, casual and almost blasphemous. This, to my mind, is a haunting and deeply sorrowful image, funny though it might first appear. I thought of the elegant apparel of a man about town, or a man of the world, of the generation that would wear such a hat, such a coat, and of nakedness, a man who no longer needs his hat and coat. For some reason, this is an ineluctably European image in terms of history, manners, disasters. I can think of Kafka in that coat, and of millions of the disappeared.

Perhaps this is to go too far. But silhouetted near a far window, the hat and coat are also an image of a man suspended at some final border. The soft Turkish carpets with their colourful patterns, a woven memory of an entirely different culture, are homely and warm. Everywhere is someone's home, even with all this metal marching over it.

"Wherever I left my raincoat last night is also where I left my housekeys, and my memory of this slowly slips away," Kounellis wrote once in a short text. The text ends with a recollection of harbours and ports, with their "pain and instilled sense of adventure". Kounellis' own journeyings and departures, and his bringing together of so many of his earlier works here, remind us that we never return to the same place twice. After all, the world moves on. And if you think you know about Arte Povera, or Kounellis' art, or goldfish or sacks of coal, trains, carpets and crosses, perhaps you don't. This show is incredibly rich and memorable, and an occasion, above all, for gratitude.

• Jannis Kounellis is at Modern Art Oxford until March 20. Details: 01865 722733 or www.modernartoxford.org.uk