

TRANSCRIPT

Podcast for the Feast of the Ascension

St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow

13th May 2021

Dr. Deborah Lewer on Cornelia Parker's

***Cold, Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), Tate Collection**

1.

Welcome to this podcast from St Mary's Cathedral in Glasgow. My name is Debbie Lewer. I am an art historian at the University of Glasgow, and a member of the congregation at St Mary's. We celebrate the Feast of the Ascension today. It's a time to reflect on the very beginnings of the missional life of Jesus's followers. The Ascension is decisive and momentous. But the traditional forms of the history of art, can seem a little less so. The words that tell of Jesus ascending from resurrected life into heaven have led to images that are at least a little odd: most commonly, a pair of feet, disappearing into the clouds above a gaggle of astonished apostles.

So today, let's look at a work of art that is not 'about' ascension, but might still open up a new way of seeing its dynamic potential. In 1991, the artist Cornelia Parker made a memorable installation. She called it: *Cold, Dark Matter: An Exploded View*.

2.

How was this remarkable work made? Cornelia Parker collected everyday objects and put them in an ordinary garden shed. Then, she enlisted the help of the British Army to carry out a controlled explosion of the shed and its contents. The charred remains from this destruction were then raised, on fine wires in the gallery, into suspended animation. With the fragments elevated in this way, the artist noticed that, as she put it: "they began to lose their aura of death." And finally, she lit the whole thing from inside with a single light bulb. It created, from the ordinary, an extraordinary play of light, shade, space and substance.

This matter is broken open. The violence of the explosion has made fragments of the old body. Transformed in the light, they are no longer earthbound, but every wounded shard plays its part in the light and shadow that makes this work.

3.

This work has a subtitle – it's an 'exploded view'. The artist took her inspiration not just from the violence done to this matter, but also from those technical diagrams that explain how something works – a car engine, say - by 'exploding' it visually into its parts on the page. It's not a senseless scattering, but more a way to a lucid new knowledge of something never seen in such a way before. The exploded view brings new understanding, new perception.

It makes me think about how the apostles must have struggled, really struggled, to grasp, rationally, what the ascension they were witness to meant. What the resurrection meant, how the man from Nazareth could also be one with God in all eternity. It must have exploded the everyday nuts-and-bolts workings of their minds.

4.

This Ascension, in 2021, so much of what is homely, habitual and familiar to us has been shattered. *Cold Dark Matter*, this 'exploded view,' might challenge us, to think about and beyond the things we shore up, the images entrenched in our minds. This is a work made of real, commonplace things. What could be more prosaic than a garden shed? It's a place for tools, implements, the means to make repairs, or to till the garden. Some people go to sheds for solace, escape, or for inspiration. Perhaps the Ascension challenges our imaginations because unsullied glory is not of this world. But, yet, in changing light and dark, in contrasts, in everything we know blown apart, the broken messiness of it all, we might see God undoing and re-doing creation, all the time. Perhaps, looking at this work and thinking about ascension, we might gain an exploded view of what it can mean for us beyond our habits of seeing – feet, clouds or anything else.