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PHYLLIDA BARLOW, OBLITERATOR

THE 71-YEAR-OLD BRITISH ARTIST WANTS
TO CHANGE YOUR MIND. (AND SHE
HAS COME TO DALLAS TO DO IT.)

by RICK BRETTELL
photographs by NAN COULTER

can think of no couple with more evocative names than those of the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow and her artist-writer husband, Fabian Peake. They evoke the utterly English worlds of Charles Dickens or Elizabeth Gaskell and seem delightfully anachronistic in today's Dallas. Yet, it was an almost chance encounter with Dallas in 2003 that led, inevitably, it seems, to Barlow's new exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

At that time, the university where I am an art professor, the University of Texas at Dallas, was administering an exciting artist's residency at South Side on Lamar. I had heard about Barlow's extraordinary work from her sister, Camilla Whitworth-Jones, whose husband, Anthony, was then the general director of the Dallas Opera. In 2003, Barlow was known primarily as a teacher of soon-to-be-important young sculptors at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Yet, for me, it wasn't Barlow's teaching but her profound — sometimes disturbing — sculpture that led me to invite her to Dallas.

Barlow and Peake were midcareer artists who had never been to the wide-open spaces of Texas and to an automobile city like Dallas. When I picked them up at the airport, they had just traveled from an ancient house in London, where they had raised five children. They came with little more than two suitcases. I took them to the South Side loft they would inhabit for the next three months. It was a large, single space with nothing but two chairs, a table and a mattress placed on a wide stretch of shiny hardwood floor, with a big west-facing window. It was as empty —

CLOCKWISE, from below: Two views of Barlow's studio in North London. (The forms at right were made for the Nasher Sculpture Center show.) Barlow's "GIG" exhibit, at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2014.



Barlow employs commonplace materials — wood, plaster, concrete, cardboard, and strips of colorful cloth or tape — in extraordinary, monumental, ramshackle, hand-built structures that expound a dizzying array of novel sculptural forms. Towering, bulky accumulations of matter “elbow their way into the room,” as the artist puts it, filling the space and looming over viewers.

—NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

and full of possibilities — as their London house was crammed with stuff and people and other kinds of promises.

Barlow and Peake took to South Side and to Dallas like ducks to water. For them, it was as exotic as Singapore or São Paulo. They learned, with the help of others, to negotiate Dallas’ freeways and to make their way to then-distant grocery stores and supply shops. Peake painted on paper and gave a memorable poetry reading in the gallery at South Side.

Barlow worked with artist-lecturer Greg Metz and his students at UTD to create one of her then-largest and most adventurous installations in the university’s Art Barn. She goaded Metz and the students to take her to big-box building stores such as Home Depot, where she stocked up on lumber, large sheets of plywood, fabric, foam and paint. With a student crew, she worked collaboratively to create an installation that consumed virtually the entire space of the Art Barn, forcing viewers to walk around what seemed to be a wobbly stepped structure made of painted plywood and a huge, soft object that hung from the ceiling. At the mobbed opening, there was almost no place to stand.

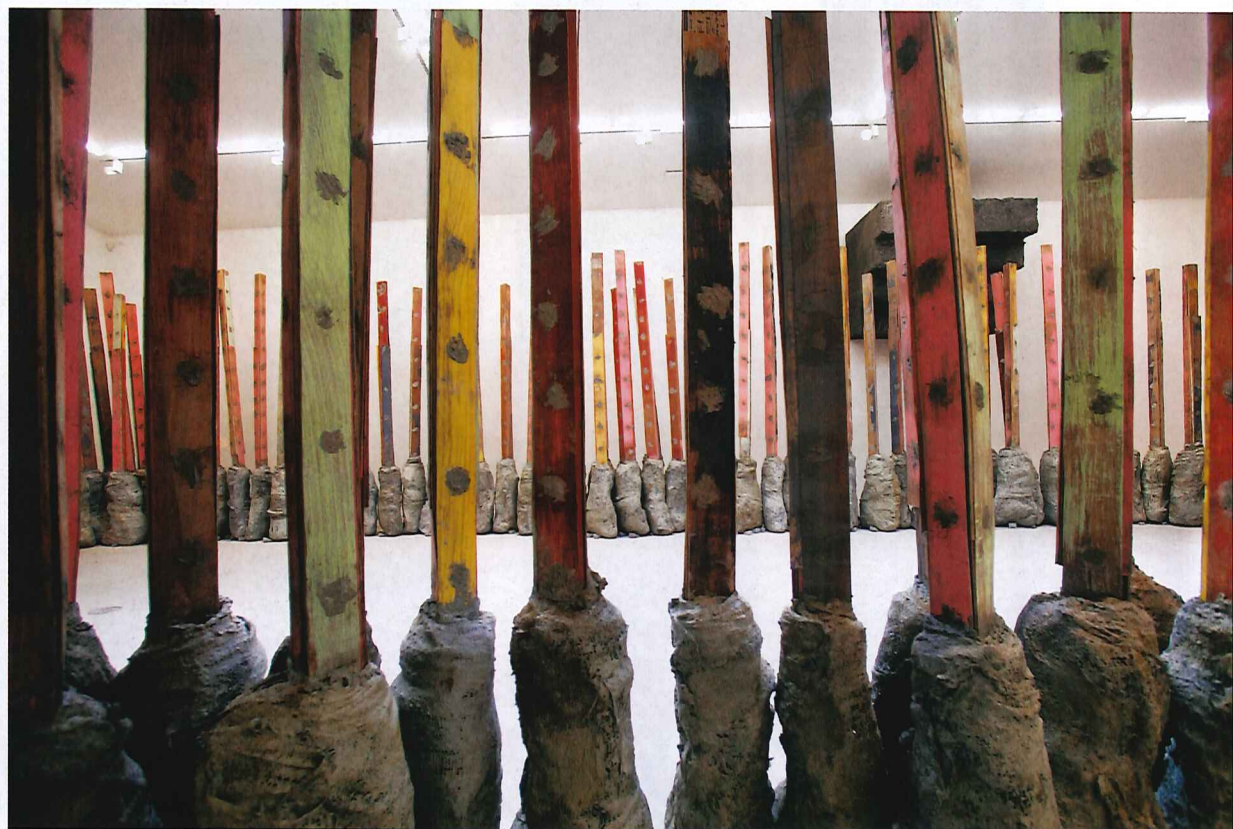
Barlow hung out with David Quadrini at his Angstrom Gallery, where she had a small exhibition, and she worked eagerly with the students at both UTD and the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, where she also displayed her models. When she left Dallas, we packed up more than 13 large boxes of her paper-and-cardboard models made at Angstrom and at the schools and stored them in the Highland Park attic of the late arts advocate Nash Flores,





ABOVE Part of Barlow's commissioned installation in the Duveen Galleries at the Tate Britain in London, 2014

CLOCKWISE, from below: Two views of Barlow's "GIG" exhibit, at Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 2014. Part of Barlow's commissioned installation in the Duveen Galleries at the Tate Britain in London, 2014.



"Barlow riotously but cheerfully challenges our expectations."

—JEREMY STRICK, DIRECTOR, NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

and in architect Gary Cunningham's ample storage space in the Design District.

While the boxes haven't been opened since 2003, during that time, Barlow's career as a sculptor has soared. She is represented by the prestigious global art dealers Hauser & Wirth, she employs numerous assistants, and she has had solo and group exhibitions at some of the leading institutions in the world: the Tate Britain, the Royal Academy of Arts and the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace, all in London; the Kunstverein Nürnberg in Germany; the City Art Centre in Edinburgh; the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in the Netherlands; and, in the U.S., the New Museum in New York, the Des Moines Art Center and the Norton Museum of Art in Florida. In 2013, she exhibited at both the Venice Biennale and the Carnegie International. She has also caught the attention of Nasher director Jeremy Strick and Nasher chief curator Jed Morse, who were so blown away by her work that they courted her and secured an important exhibition at the Nasher, now through August 30. While arranging the exhibit, Barlow assumed that Strick and Morse knew all about her earlier stint in Texas, and the men assumed they were bringing Barlow to Dallas for the first time. Little did they know that 13 boxes of work from her previous stint in Dallas were ferreted away in spaces around Dallas.

Sadly, the UTD piece, which Barlow called *untitled: Dallas*, exists today only in memory and, thankfully, in photographs. The boxes of paper and the cardboard models remain unopened. Barlow is worried about the condition of the fragile paper pieces, but, as she returns in triumph with Peake for her Nasher exhibition (Barlow is also a juror of the inaugural Nasher Prize for sculpture, whose winner will be announced this fall), the 13 boxes await her, and her many Dallas friends will give her a real "opening."

"Phyllida Barlow: tryst," a monumental new exhibition created for the spaces of the Nasher Sculpture Center, is May 30 to August 30. nashersculpturecenter.org

Barlow's husband, the artist and writer Fabian Peake, will give a poetry reading at the Goss-Michael Foundation on May 30. g-mf.org



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ABOVE Barlow's studio assistants in England, during the construction of the installation for the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Clockwise from top left: Frances Drayson, Vito Walker, Ben Doherty, Daniel Lambert, Rachel Marshall and Adam Burge.