

## STUART BRISLEY

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REVIEWS &gt; EXHIBITIONS



Stuart Brisley  
*Touching Black Ice* 2008

■ **Stuart Brisley: Crossings**  
John Hansard Gallery Southampton  
February 12 to April 5

Over a career of almost half a century Stuart Brisley has come to the conclusion, as stated in his recent novel *Beyond Reason, Ordure*, 2003, that 'what goes down comes up'. Although often hailed as the 'godfather of British performance art', Brisley is a more complex figure, whose practice extends to painting, community projects and pseudo-curatorial installations. Uniting all these working methods is a concern for things that have fallen down (debris on the streets, human excrement), or have been otherwise marginalised (miners, bin men). 'Crossings' is no exception. Here he explores the return of the repressed and suppressed through the motif of two famous maritime disasters, RMS Titanic in 1912 and the passenger ferry MV Estonia in 1994.

Nowhere is this 'return' more explicit than in the case of the Titanic, whose very name has become shorthand for hubris and blind overconfidence in technology. Brisley's installation and soundwork, *Touching Black Ice*, 2008, consists of an otherwise pitch-black room in which a small sailing boat sits atop a plinth, prow pointing towards a penumbral, purplish light shining like a dim moon on oily water. Its simple, efficient construction contrasts with the imagined bulk of the Titanic crunching into the seabed below; its loneliness and inadequate lifesaving capacity contrasts with an imagined seascape of dead bodies bobbing in frozen waters. There is another return here too: this exhibition is located in Southampton, the city that launched the Titanic. Significantly, the dinghy itself is on loan from a local shipbuilders' yard, which – to some extent – rescues the memory of the event from the generalised mawkishness of James Cameron's movie

*Titanic*, 1997, and puts it into a local, more suggestive context.

If *Touching Black Ice* refuses to reduce memory to ill-fitting metaphor, it also refuses hypermediation, tracing instead an index of actual things. An eerie soundtrack, pumped in through wall-mounted speakers, marks out a litany of presences: bodies of water, bodies of ships, human bodies. Swelling waves wash forward and recede gently, intermingling with bleeping Morse code signals; clinker boards creak and hull metal groans. Brisley's measured voice emerges from the tangle of sounds to provide death-count statistics and a nautically precise breakdown of events. At times, these descriptions transport us to the event itself; we are inside the ship, in steerage, the lowest class accommodation, scrabbling to open locked doors. Next, a survivor, Eva Hart, a young girl at the time, recalls the terrible sound of the drowning passengers and the subsequent silence when 'the cries weren't there'. Absence, here, is a sort of negative presence, and *Touching Black Ice* is both empty and weirdly full of bodies, in all shapes and guises.

The film *Estonia*, 2007, meanwhile, examines catastrophe as a traumatic rupture of workaday habits. The MV Estonia was on a routine cruise when it sank in the Baltic in 1994, with the loss of 852 lives. Although conspiracy theorists speculate on the cause of the accident, Brisley focuses on the known. The film begins in Tallinn with ferry commuters sitting bored on wooden benches as cold rain flecks against tempered glass; out to sea, a storm spits lightning. Brisley's voice emerges, giving facts and figures. A computer graphic illustrates the final moment, while a recording of the ship's last radio transmissions provides a haunting narrative: MV Estonia calls 'mayday', which is answered by two nearby ships; communication frequently breaks down; the ferry lists and sinks. Search parties, unable to pinpoint their target, are baffled. *Estonia* recalls Tacita Dean's *Disappearance at Sea*, 1996, and taps into a basic, primal fear. However, while Dean's work reflects on an idiosyncratic case (the amateur yachtsman Donald Crowhurst), Brisley's is more unnerving – this could happen to any of us.

Perhaps there's a danger here of equating catastrophe with performance – as gallery director Stephen Foster notes in conversation with the artist, this is the implication of Karlheinz Stockhausen's reference to 9/11 as the 'greatest work of art'. Brisley, however, places reality before art – his seminal *Artist Project Peterlee* (1976-77, reactivated 2004), even dissolved itself into a standalone community project. Indeed, while his performances from the 60s onwards were physically demanding, any excess was reined in by a governing sense of sociological enquiry. Many of these works include asides to the camera, analysing events in a cool, thoughtful voice – this for instance is one of the most compelling aspects of the durational 'fasting' performance, *Ten Days* (1973 and 1978). In *Crossings* this same voice calmly dredges up the debris of bare reality from the deep – after all, what goes down comes up. ■

COLIN PERRY is a critic.



PAUL P. *When Ghost Meets Ghost*

PETER HUJAR

12 April – 18 May 2008

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