

Washing Line Review, Julie McCalden Writer

Best known as the landing site of the 2003 finale of *Concorde*, Filton is a town otherwise unremarkable in its suburbia. Situated in South Gloucestershire on the edge of Bristol, somewhere amongst its 12th century church and sprawling 1930's semi's lies the Shield Retail Centre: A 1990's shopping precinct built on the site of a long-forgotten history; the Shield Laundry.

Established in 1869 this Victorian laundry quickly became a large employer of women, notable in this for its time. The laundry was a place of work that served a social function in fostering a community amongst the local women workers.

By contrast, The Shield Retail Centre is a conglomeration of characterless, purpose-built warehouses for fast food outlets and superstores, offering the type of homogenous shopping experience that is familiar throughout the country. It is a fast-paced space for consumerism whose only concession to community is the small library nestled incongruously between the estate agents and the motorbike repair shop.

This is the context of two site-specific art works by Rod Harris.

Marking the edges or gateways to the site lay *Washing Machines* and *Washing Line*. *Washing Machines*, the older and bolder of the two works borders a pedestrian entrance. The labour intensive hand-made process is at odds with the image painstakingly depicted and the labour-saving convenience that the representation evokes. This opposition is mirrored through other binaries in the works; the domestic vs the commercial, the decorative vs the functional, and community vs the individual. These idiosyncrasies are not jarring; they invite a slow, gentle and peculiarly British humour that is augmented through the familiarity of the image and its charming execution.

The more recent and more subtle of the two works depicts a washing line replete with clothes modelled on the artists own, carefully and flawlessly camouflaged into the brickwork of Home Bargains. The works simultaneous in/visibility operates this time on the boundary of binary oppositions, oscillating between public and private in relation to the domestic space and what we're not supposed to do with our dirty laundry. Embedded here, within a space that sells a sanitised, commercialised notion of home, Harris makes visible the disjunction between looking and perceiving and restores to the surface what is historically repressed: the dirty linen is on display.

Both works are rendered in clay, a material so visceral and loaded with history that it seems the opposite to the relentless nature of the contemporary consumerism that the retail centre brings to mind. There is something so simple in its materiality that we forget that it is all around us, in the paving stones and brick facades of the retail centre itself. But the use is different: The retail centres use of clay is purely functional. There is no decoration, no fancy brickwork or pride in appearance. It is cheap and practical and this is made ever more

evident by the presence of Harris' works and their comment on the versatility and potential of the material.

Harris reminds us what clay can be. The works' presence is as much a comment on the efficiency of the retail centre's dreary aesthetic as they are an acknowledgement of the hidden history that lies beneath. Through a quirky humour that surprises, engages and amuses passers-by, the works pay homage to the Shield Laundry, recognising the importance of remembering the historical significance of the laundry to the Filton community. They invite a spirit of curiosity as local inhabitants attempt to make sense of this strange juxtaposition, promoting a renewed sense of community through conversation, enquiry and pride in what can be considered as two new landmarks for Filton.