

*overground*



Ewen Coates



The monumental structure of the classical head set in the round of twelve creates a potent dynamic—reminiscent of megaliths and stone circles, shadow clocks, secret societies, Arthurian knights and inquisitions. The precision and regularity is tainted by associations of distrust and betrayal.

Outside the circle all is thrown into doubt. Here, a section of the back of the replicated head has been removed to expose twelve miniature rooms, each lit by a tiny yellow bulb. Cavernous and coarse as though formed in molten rock, the burnished bronze gives the effect of dampness or of being water logged. Inside the combatant's heads worlds are chaotic and active. We are immediately drawn into this luminous micro world, mesmerised by the meticulous scenes played out in miniature.

Coates has configured the sculpture so the viewer can only look into one diorama at a time. Moving anti clockwise, the theatres play out ritualised actions from offensives through to maintenance. Located among the more routine tasks, the two 'action' scenes – the raid and the man resisting the bulldozer blade – seem to represent an underlying element of intrusion. The combatant's Herculean effort to resist the bulldozer blade is seemingly hopeless, perhaps indicating the ongoing and absurd nature of the conflict. Compositions concerned with upkeep such as checking an engine or changing a lightbulb verge on a kind of absurd automaton, epitomised in the diorama of the airmen standing about dreamily inspecting the walls. The soldier genuflecting at the foot of part of a giant statue, which could be of an army general or a political leader, seems to indicate some kind of conversion has taken place. Perspective is amplified further here with the little figure set against a disproportionately larger figure (located within the life-size head), reminiscent of the toppled oversized effigies of Saddam Hussein.



The upstanding torturer guarding his victims depicts a dutiful blindness – another job. The diorama of the man suspended in a block of resin is perhaps the most enigmatic of all. His arms unnaturally bent, he looks as though he's been caught in the middle of some laborious task; a hold put on his activity. The transparent block also preserves him and his pose, at the same time creating a macabre display. It is perhaps a magnified moment of reflection, putting oneself under close scrutiny. In the next diorama three identical figures reach out for what could be their reflections or doorways to black holes. It is a primal act, a Lacanian stage of defining the self through the language of the other; a movement from antipathy to empathy. Completing the circle, the diorama of the soldier looking through a giant telescope is ambiguous. Whether he is exploring his own head or the Heavens is a moot point. Instead of suggesting liberation, we are left in two minds.



There is something resigned about the way he is firmly seated – he isn't going anywhere, even if he is searching for something higher. Whether he is content because he has surrendered his expectations and come to accept his existence by living for the present moment, or is still yearning for some other purpose or meaning, is debateable. This ambivalence permeates the work.

Ultimately, the circle can be approached from any direction. Each composition has its own internal logic as well as the whole embodying strong intersecting currents of suffering and restoration. Ritualistic qualities are also apparent in the circular configuration, associated with unity, magic, ceremony and life cycles.

The name *Overground*, like the work, plays on expectation. It appears that much in the piece takes place underground, or at least out of sight, and rather than being above board is, in the guise of terrorism and in some of the internal machinations, subversive. It seems to be an ironic comment that real battles do not take place over ground at all, but inside and out of view. Furthermore, Coates immortalises the unmentionable, the so-called terrorist, provocatively playing on the bronze bust used over centuries to sanctify heroes of the day. It is, however, the paradoxical psychology driving the terrorist that is significant here. In *Overground*, the desire for revenge set against and inextricably linked to a yearning to fit in, is captured in a kind of suspended rumination. The viewer is led to a cycle of internal processes neutralising any potential retribution. Rather than leading to self destruction, a different kind of awareness is reached.

The ambiguity and darkness in Coates' work spring from a subjective world of dreams and the subconscious. This is set against a slavish existence and inevitable suffering in the objective world. From this view the key lies within, and external reality becomes illusory. This transformative quality in the work is manifest on several levels; shifting the viewer's apprehension as potential victim of the terrorist's gaze to a state of contemplation and curiosity, as well as the focus of the heads from a state of embattlement to one of self-containment. The work evokes passages in existential as well as Buddhist thought, both viewpoints finding contentment in the persistent acceptance of the present moment, the former condemning us to a solitary life played out through the absurdity of the daily grind, the latter breaking down 'false' boundaries, offering a cycle of rebirth. Coates' work shifts between the futility and transcendence, a tussle between the ego and self-denial.

*Ruth Learner*

