

Gill Perry - Roger Hiorns, Seizure

GILL PERRY: I'm Gill Perry, and I'm Professor of Art History here at The Open University. Recently, I've been researching on the role of homes and houses in contemporary art, looking at the ways in which ideas of the home, and the house, and the domestic have been represented in modern and recent art. And one of the areas that I have been researching is the work of some contemporary British artists, including the work of someone called Roger Hiorns.

Now, today, I want to look at an object that came from an extraordinary installation that Roger produced in South London. It was called Seizure. It was completed in 2008, and it was supported by the arts charity called Artangel. What I have here is a tiny piece of this remarkable installation. It's a tiny piece of blue copper sulphate crystals. What Hiorns did was he poured tonnes of copper sulphate crystals into an abandoned ground floor flat in Southwark in South London.

The project involved an enormous amount of research and engineering, and Hiorns spent a long time researching the effects of the crystals, what happened when they solidified. It was a risky operation. And in preparation for this project, Hiorns produced a whole series of plans, many of them kind of sketchy plans, many of them more carefully composed that show how he conceived the copper sulphate solution actually entering the building through a kind of tank and how he planned to reinforce the building so that it would withstand the strain of tonnes of heated copper sulphate solution.

The crystal solution slowly solidified as the temperature dropped. And what happened in the end was that the walls, the floors, the sink, the lavatory, all parts of this internal space were covered with this carpet of solid blue crystalline structures. They were faceted. They protruded from various corners and angles, and it looked quite extraordinary.

So why did the artist use crystals? Well, crystals have powerful metaphorical associations. They're often seen to be somewhere between the organic and the inorganic. They have a kind of liminal role. The copper sulphate solution started as a solution and ended up as this very strong, firm, encrusted material.

It was also blue. Blue is a very evocative colour. Through the ages, blues had all sorts of symbolic meanings and associations. And to place this bright, almost iridescent, blue in the middle of what is traditionally seen as a rather grey so-called sink estate, had a very powerful effect. It's an effect that the artist himself saw as what he called a kind of re-staining.

He saw this environment of a rather dilapidated estate scheduled for demolition as a rather sad, grey environment that spoke of social deprivation. And he liked the idea of enveloping it in this bright, metaphorically loaded substance that is copper sulphate. Crystals have inspired many artists and, I think, particularly that idea of transformation that is part of the whole crystalline process when it goes from a heated solution to a solid. It's also a substance that did have some kind of a bleak association with the neighbourhood in that this estate was famous for its gang warfare, for its drug problems, and of course, crystals and chemicals have a close association.

We all are familiar with the term crystal meth, one of the perhaps most dangerous drugs that was used in this environment. The title, Seizure, references the idea of a shock or in this case obviously, a sudden transformation. And this dramatic contrast that I've been emphasising between the environment and the work did seem for some to represent a kind of shock, a seizure, as the artist framed it. But a key aspect of this work is that it's, I think, a really interesting piece of installation art.

Installation art has now become ubiquitous in modern and 20th century art. It seems to be the medium of choice for so many contemporary artists. But it also represents a movement away from what we call medium-specific forms of art practice, that is sculpture, painting, drawing, and so on.

And installation art often involves a combination of media, of sculpture, sometimes sound, sometimes architectural structures. It also removes the frame. This is, I think, a strategic aspect of installation art. The viewer is expected to move around it, to have a kind of physical relationship with the installation, with the space that is part of the artwork. So there's no longer a single viewpoint that you find in a framed painting.

As a piece of installation art, it was, again, a work that you had to enter. You had to enter the space and walk through the various bits of the flat, the openings, experience the strange ways in which the crystals had covered the various surfaces and the floor. You were asked to have or you were invited to have what we call an embodied experience, an experience that enables you to relate physically to the environment that you're entering.

Like many works of installation art, Seizure was only a temporary structure. It was only there for a few months. After that, the crystals were stored. But I've got some good news. If you'd like to see or get an idea of what it looked like, Yorkshire Sculpture Park has reconstructed a room of those blue crystals, which you can actually go and experience. I recommend that you go and see it and experience those extraordinary blue copper sulphate crystals for yourselves.