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POLYSTYRENE ENOLA GAY WORKS

There are some continuities between The Enola Gay Works on wood and the Polystyrene Enola Gay Works. The most obvious one is the persistent use of the motif of the Enola Gay itself. But similar colours are common throughout both series of works. Using the pinks, yellows and overall monochrome bright primary colours on many of the Enola Gay Works, I attempted to reference childhood – for example the colours of toys, of sweets, of candy and cake, of ice cream. Perhaps the sparkle and brightness of some of the metal paint Enola Gay works, I would argue, fringes into this specific area of aesthetic consumership. Both the consumer habits of children themselves, and, not least, the consumer choices adults make on behalf of children. In 1991, one of the two years in which I made the Enola Gay Works, our two daughters were aged 16 and 13, old enough to have started to sense and experience the species-wide heritage and glowering debt of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – the possibility of a future annihilation of all things human, including childhood. This inheritance went back to all the generations that had appeared since 1945 and weighted their view of the future. This phantasm has continued to incubate in every succeeding generation and will undoubtedly incubate in all generations in the future since, obviously, the 1945 genie cannot be put back in the 1944 bottle.

Past works may slip in and out of focus. For example, in the case of my own work, the big Union Jack Grease Works I made in the years 1986-89, have shifted foreground/background focus according to the patterns of, for example, various British general and local elections. The recent 2026 British local elections are a case in point. Post-Falklands War my dominant preoccupation in greasing the motif of the Union Jack was a reflection upon how much more insecure the identity of being British had become in the ensuing years1982-1986. The Scottish National Party (SNP) continued its emergence, and Anglo-Irish relations had been explicitly brutal and unrelenting since 1968. In modern times Ireland had threatened British unity and rejected Ireland being a British dominion since 1916. This hostility went back three centuries.

The 2026 British local elections saw Sinn Fein increase its vote in Northern Ireland, continued the SNP's majority in Scotland, and, for the first time, produced the emergence of the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, as the largest party in Wales. Aspiring to and being British seems, at a minimum, to now be more problematic in contrast to how it appeared to me, and I think my generation, to be so secure when I was a child in the 1940s and a teenager in the 1950s. My late 1980s image of the Union Jack as a greasy pole has come back into focus for me with the recent surge of Welsh nationalist support. The Enola Gay works have a similar pattern of recount.

In the past two decades specifically the disaster of nuclear annihilation has acquired couple of serious companions – climate change, and, in recent weeks, warnings concerning the reach and development of AI. For me the Enola Gay motif continues to gather much to it.

Now consider the material base of the series the Polystyrene Enola Gay Works, the polystyrene itself. The idea that the species is disposable is a theme that occasionally preoccupies the species, accordingly as the foregrounding and backgrounding of the spectre of nuclear extinction, the concrete effects of climate change, and now the possible lack of control of AI, appear as threats to species survival. I sought a relatively disposable material on which to imprint some of the Enola Gay motifs, as a kind of echo, a reminder, of the precarious position in which the species finds itself. When I first mentioned I intended to use polystyrene it elicited a number of reactions from other people. A frequent one is that the material is not an appropriate material for art works, it is too fragile to sustain the ambition of producing a permanent record. A second criticism, was that the polystyrene would absorb the colour thus making it fade in a relatively short time. The first criticism I dismissed out of hand, relying on what I considered to be the authentic claim made by sixties artists that art practice had become more complex and expanded, not least the new array of materials that could, from then on, be used to make art works. In respect of the second criticism both my critics and myself had to wait and see. Today, late 2026, 35 years later, the colour on the polystyrene seems to have retained its initial quality.

The interface between the Grease Works and The Enola Gay I have thought of quite a lot over the years since I made the work. But each series of these works has links to other series of work I have made. I guess it is a characteristic feature of my practice and a characteristic of the way I reflect upon my practice. A main contention of my practice is that the 1945 genie cannot be put back into the 1944 bottle.

- Terry Atkinson, 2026