

Alice Anderson at the Wellcome Collection review

Wellcome Collection, London From old TVs to obsolete telephones and even a staircase, Alice Anderson mummifies things in copper wire. It may sound banal – but it's an art that gets some very curious and uncanny results

Jonathan Jones



Friday 17 July 2015
15.09 BST

Their funeral wrappings glisten fierily in the spotlights that pick them out in a theatrically darkened space. All our yesterdays are here, the things we use and throw away, lost and found in spidery cocoons.

Alice Anderson wraps things in copper wire. It is a banal description of an art that gets some very curious and uncanny results.

This might be in a museum a thousand years in the future, dedicated to the strange artefacts of the 21st century. Why, archaeologists will ask, did the people of that time choose to mummify their old TV screens, obsolete telephones and loudspeakers? Was it a bizarre religious attempt to apologise for the culture of waste that was at that moment eating up the planet?

An electric guitar has been swathed over and over again, the thin thread, wrapped tighter and tighter, entirely containing the instrument so you can see its shape but, up close, cannot make out its strings or fretboard. In caring for it, Anderson has muffled it. This guitar will never wail another solo. Nor will the pipe she has swaddled in copper wire ever again be smoked. This is not a pipe – it is a mummy. It is a ghost.

Anderson is hardly the first artist to have wrapped up everyday objects. Wrapping is in fact a great modern tradition. Anderson's guitar recalls the shamanistic German sculptor Joseph Beuys who wrapped a grand piano in grey felt – in both cases a musical instrument is swaddled and silenced. Wrapping is eerie, it is macabre. Rene Magritte portrayed lovers with their faces wrapped in deathly shrouds. Man Ray turned wrapping into a recipe for sculpture as early as 1920 when he created *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* by covering a sewing machine with a blanket and tying it up with rope. The sewing machine is unrecognisable inside its swathing: the imagination plays darkly on what might be in there – a rock, a dog, a human torso?

So Alice Anderson is working in a tradition almost a century old when she conceals charger plugs, coins, a telescope, a kayak, spectacles and even a staircase in shrouds of wire. But her art is glutinous in the memory. The reason it works is because she takes the whole thing so stupendously seriously. This is passionate, obsessive, intensely concentrated work. The exhibition is huge. Just when you think she's wrapped everything there is to wrap, she discovers something else, including human bones – real or fake, it is impossible to tell through the veiling wire.

This repetitive, primitive craft of preservation feels like the work of an outsider artist with no links with the conventional art world. It is not, of course. Anderson is no marginal outsider – she has exhibited at the Venice Biennale. But like the Facteur Cheval who built a palace in his back garden or Simon Rodia who built the Watts Towers in his yard out of wire and scrap, she seems to be pursuing a personal need, a compulsive drive. There is a cult-like quality to it all, the fetishistic mystery of modern supernatural totems. A tagine and a transistor radio, wrapped in wire, both take on the black magic of witches' bottles or voodoo dolls.

Too much art that gets feted today is rationalistic, making an obvious political point or chewing dully over the legacy of conceptualism. Anderson though is a shaman, a tech age Beuys apprentice. She subjects ordinary stuff to a sea change, creating something rich and strange. Her art is not rational. It is incantatory and mystical. It is a weird – and wired – work of redemption. Visitors to this exhibition are invited to join in wrapping an entire 1967 Ford Mustang in copper wire. Will this collective ritual of mummification awaken the gods of mass production? Can things come to life if we love them and respect them as Anderson does?

Her spooky funeral rites for the modern world left me listening for the ghosts in all our machines.

At Wellcome Collection, London, from 22 July to 18 October [More reviews](#)