

Going Out Arts

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SIMON TAIT reports

Barging into the big time

MIXING art, politics and a life on the billowing deep can be a risky venture. Unless you are very careful, you may end with a beautifully made, but rather soggy, manifesto. Happily, 43-year-old Max Couper, artist, navigator and friend of the politically potent, is a very careful man. Although his works on paper are unconventionally made, they look precise. His large sculptures are often made from scrap, but put together with mathematical exactitude. Couper may not know how many pieces of work he has stored in his barges — "hundreds, I suppose, we're just getting round to an inventory" — but, even so, they are stowed as if filed away in a cabinet, and you wouldn't know that they were there. The whole ethos of his work, you might say, is shipshape.

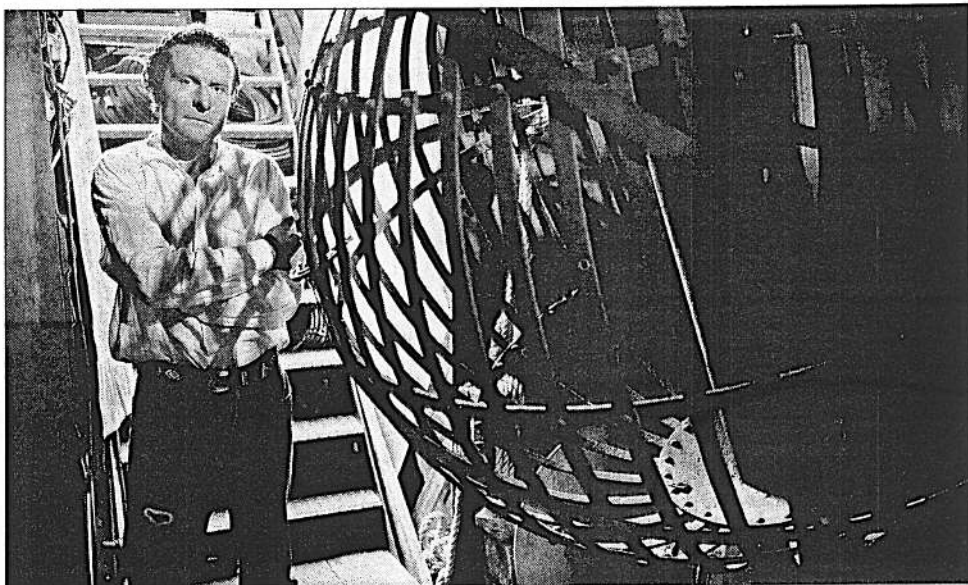
From 31 May — provided the tide is right between Albert and Battersea bridges — Couper's work comes into the public domain as part of the String of Pearls year-long millennium festival. He has given his work, the Max Couper Collection, in trust to the London Borough of Wandsworth — "things I couldn't bear to sell but wanted the public to be able to enjoy" — and it is displayed on three barges moored on the Thames a short step from Battersea Park. This is close enough to the riparian HQ of Lord Foster for the great man to drop in for tea now and then.

On board, there is every chance that this venerable architect might run into other Couper chums. These include the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, Mo Mowlam and even Jack Straw. The president of Amnesty International is also a frequent visitor, and Couper's assistant at the moment is a big-time lawyer on secondment from the United Nations, a specialist in humans rights law. But Couper reserves his own politics for his performance works.

Aboard the first barge, Hope, which Couper bought on a whim through a small ad in the Evening Standard 20 years ago, is his static art — well, as static as anything on a large tidal river can be.

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Shipshape:
Max Couper
with one of
his massive
sculptures



Tony Buckenham

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The massive sculpture consists of steel structures and carved wooden panels hinged like battened-down hatches, which open to reveal stark, drawn, organic shapes.

In the next hold are his large charts, 16 ft by 5 ft, for all the world like the navigational maps that might get you safely across the Dogger Bank. They are actually made by pouring dried pigment on to the paper and sucking it off again with a vacuum cleaner,

with composer Trevor Wishart. It will be performed by three Royal Opera singers, three Royal Ballet dancers and three Covent Garden Orchestra musicians.

The narrator will be Dame Judi Dench. Dame Judi Dench? "I was fascinated to read about the Couper Collection and would love to participate in the event on the Thames," wrote Dame Judi in response to the invitation. "I should have a gap in filming in July so, all being well, I looking forward to taking part."

There will be two performances, one for the crowds in Battersea Park on 26 July, the next the following night in front of Westminster Palace on what should be the last night of the parliamentary session. "When opera started it was just for the court, so I thought we'd let the people have first go this time and then give it to the modern equivalent of the court, Parliament," Couper said.

The UN lawyer Dean Leslie is on board to examine another Couper conception, the Pearl Discussions. "The idea is to see how different strands of society interconnect, and in the next piece we will set them to debate."

This debate, a performance work scheduled for September, will be called The Shrinking Beach. A real bishop, a government minister and a Fleet Street editor — they have all agreed — will stand on the Thames foreshore in front of the House of

Commons at low tide and debate how best to make the land sustainable for the future. "They have to come to an agreement before the tide comes in and, well, drowns them."

Another Pearl Discussion to look forward to is The Mariner's Banquet. In this, barges will become a neutral territory, as they were for Churchill and Stalin, Harold Wilson and Ian Smith, for a dozen citizens to debate the way forward for international statesmanship. Lord Irvine has said he'll take part but, instead of there being an audience, this time the event will be photographed and recorded.

"The open sea has no ownership, the same for the river. Places like the Physic Garden opposite are for the public good, not private ownership, and so is art. I think the river is the perfect place to give public ownership to some of the debate on matters that concern us all," said Couper adding, as I left by a gangway as steady as Battersea Park, "Mind how you step. Take care."

● Max Couper Collection, Hester Road, SW11, from 31 May. *Fleeting Opera*, Battersea Park, 26 July, and *Westminster Embankment*, 27 July.

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leaving curious organic shapes which are set off by spray paint bought in an auto parts shop in Burnham on Crouch — "Vauxhall Nova Blue and Ford Blue".

Couper has lived and worked here since 1980, and from time to time takes Hope or his tug, Pablo, down the river for an adventure. Sometimes he anchors off Foulness, one of the most secret bits of land in the country, but never near enough for the patrol boats to keep any more than a weather eye on him.

Last year he returned from what turned out to be a two-year adventure when he took Pablo and Hope 2,000 miles through France and Germany, creating works of art wherever he went, attracting interest and selling most of what he made.

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NATIONAL
PORTRAIT
GALLERY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

LAST WEEK

OPENING TONIGHT

ALBERT
SPEER

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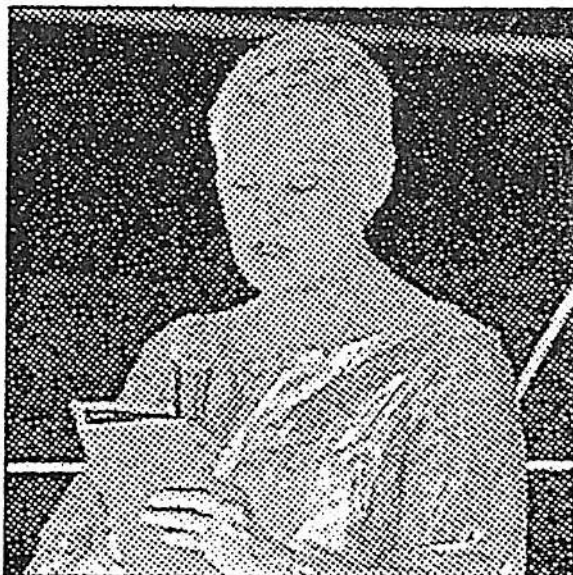
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Fleeting SUCCESS

DAME JUDI Dench narrated the Royal Opera House's experimental *Fleeting Opera* from a barge on the Thames at Albert Embankment last night, setting sail from Lambeth Pier and docking at Westminster Bridge. Staged as part of the *String of Pearls* festival of events along the river, the distinctly avant-garde perfor-

mance features Dame Judi delivering a series of cryptic incantations before the illumi-



Dench last night: believes the Thames is under-used

nated backdrop of the Houses of Parliament, where clusters of MPs gathered on the balcony to observe.

“Any opportunity to be part of this waterborne artwork — bringing together opera, ballet and the spoken word — I find irresistible,” Dame Judi commented. “The last time any serious artistic statement was performed along the river was Handel’s *Water Music* in 1717. I passionately believe the Thames is under-used, and this draws attention to it in a spirited way.”