

## Magnificent man and his flying machine

He famously dumped a pool of sump oil in a gallery. Now he's playing with battered aeroplanes. Charlotte Higgins meets Richard Wilson



▲ Wilson's crushed Cessna 150 being unfolded. Photo: Richard Wilson

by Charlotte Higgins

Can we move that ladder over to the left a bit? And has anyone seen the visor for the welder?" This might be a building site, what with the lengths of cable, the blokes in hard hats, the heavy-duty winches, saws and drills. But the man keen to get on with the welding is sculptor Richard Wilson, whose most famous work is *20:50*, the disorientingly reflective, gorgeously sensual pool of sump oil formerly in the Saatchi Gallery, soon to be reinstalled at County Hall, London. And the five men at work are lavishing their attention not on a new apartment building or office block, but on repairing a wrecked Cessna 150 light aircraft.

The site is the Wapping Project, the boiler house of a former hydraulic power station in east London. Tourists and art students wander around, watching the men at work. The aircraft is suspended, in an arrested nose dive, from a complicated cat's cradle of strops and ratchet straps. A week ago, the plane was a shapeless lump of metal. But, after days of patient care, one of the craft's wings has been stretched out into an approximation of its original shape, and the holes have been patched up with ovals of metal riveted on to the body work, like a large-scale piece of darning. The other wing, and the plane's tailpiece, hang limp and useless. But, despite the love and workmanship being applied to the machine, it is clear that it will never fly again. So what is going on?

About 18 months ago, the germ of an idea came to Wilson. He imagined a piece of paper being screwed up and thrown away - and then rescued from the wastepaper bin and smoothed out again. While the idea was brewing he was asked to make a work for the Wapping Project.

Looking at the lofty, utilitarian boiler room, with its rusting metal pillars and pipes snaking around the ceiling, he realised he could suspend a large object from them, and use their strength to stretch something out. Toying with using a car or coach, Wilson eventually settled on the idea of an aircraft. So he bought the Cessna, minus engine, from a scrapyards, for £2,000. He stripped off the paint and polished the aluminium shell, getting the feel of its structure and shape. Then the plane was taken into a car park at the University of East London, and forklift trucks were repeatedly driven into it until it was crushed into a shapeless boulder. After that it was moved to Wapping, and the painstaking, month-long work of unfurling it was started. The project is called Butterfly, and the metaphor is immediate: a splendid winged object is soon to emerge from a lumpen chrysalis.

However, in some ways the plane is itself the chrysalis. For above it, fixed to the ceiling, is a camera taking a bird's-eye-view shot of the proceedings every five minutes. As the plane is finally reconstituted, explains Wilson, "We will cartwheel it out of shot and let it drop to the ground - and discard it. It won't be needed any more." The idea is that the work on the plane, this "creative act of recovery", is just a step on the way. The real butterfly will be a time-lapse film, showing the opening up of the plane compressed into 100 seconds - the plane metaphorically crushed once more.

When visitors come into the Wapping Project next week, the room will have been blacked out, the plane will be a broken metallic hulk in the corner, and the film will be showing. Wilson is still trying to figure out whether the Cessna, "which will just be an empty, useless husk", could rightly be regarded as part of the resultant work, or whether it is merely evidence of the process that got them there.

Crushing, smoothing out and crushing again: this is a characteristic act for Wilson, who is fascinated by the idea of taking things apart. For the Millennium Dome, for instance, he sliced an old Thames-going sand dredger in two from top to bottom. It is not a destructive urge so much as an interest in metamorphosis. "I think one of the reasons 20:50 has been so successful," he says, "is that it transformed hazardous waste - you can be arrested for pouring sump oil down a drain - into something beautiful." Things never come back quite as they were: you can never get rid of the creases, once you have screwed a piece of paper up.

Wilson has always been taking things apart: his first victims were the toy cars of his boyhood. But he was a great maker, too: "I was raised on Meccano, on toys that informed my hands," he says. "And my dad made every Christmas present I ever got. He even offered to make me a bike out of wood and wire." The dismantling and remaking is a form of investigation: "I am not happy to accept being told things. I have to ask why and how. My world is governed by what I see, and if you don't break it or dig under it or take it apart or look behind it you don't familiarise yourself with the whole. I think of George Stubbs, the great equine artist, who would have dead horses opened up on racecourses so that he could know them totally - and so paint them better."

A week later and the craft is now poised as if in mid-swoop, about a metre from the ground. Things have come on: the tailpiece and fins are now in place and the other wing has been unfurled. There are just odd bits of patching to go. Another group of art students is in, and Wilson is giving them a talk, telling them how a jumbo jet crash inspector visited and identified at once that the plane had been crushed deliberately rather than crashed - the sort of technical detail that he appreciates. With his workmanlike attitude, and his pleasure in a job well done, you sometimes wonder how he didn't end up as a builder or engineer. "As a child I was terrible at fads," he says. "I was always flitting from one idea to the next, dreaming. Being an artist gives me the freedom to examine my world in the way I choose. Engineers solve problems - I like to pose questions."