

This show is called “Totem Motif” and all the work deals directly with monuments or notions of ‘public art’?

Yes, this show is made up of three different works - I’ll describe each of them to you.

“Study of Blackpool Tower”: I did this in December last year. I’d gone to Blackpool to interview the band Sleaford Mods for *Arena Homme+*, a magazine I write for occasionally. The band were playing a short tour of the North of England and Scotland, and I became very fixated on seeing them in Blackpool. It made perfect sense to me: Sleaford Mods make songs about the minimum wage, cultural disappointment and ‘social entrapment’. Blackpool is officially Britain’s second poorest town, it’s a completely broken, downtrodden and rough place, but also a very famous seaside town, a place that was essentially invented by Victorian industrialists for the workers from Lancashire’s cotton mills to go on holiday for one week each year and, well, go mad. It was, and still is, a sort of ‘safety valve’ for the working classes, a place where people can go to behave very badly ... get drunk, fight, fuck each other. It’s an incredible place, but also deeply sad - and I was attracted to this dichotomy. I went up there the day before the band were due to play - I wanted to photograph the semi-derelict streets, the neon, the drunks and the sad-fun. Unfortunately, all the photographs I took were terrible, sub-Martin Parr clichés of Northern working class misery ... my photographs looked like Morrissey’s holiday snaps. But as I flicked back through the images, wondering what to do, I noticed that almost all my pictures had Blackpool Tower in the background ... and I realised that this was the whole point. The Tower is virtually inescapable, no matter where you stand in the town, no matter how rotten the street is that you’re on; you are almost always confronted by this majestic and beautiful mini-Eiffel Tower. It struck me that Blackpool Tower (built in the 1890s) was perhaps an early example of a monument being ‘deployed’ in the same way that the British government now commission the likes of Anish Kapoor and Antony Gormley to build enormous public sculptures in poor or post-industrial areas. That is: they erect these enormous ‘tourist attractions’ like Temenos in Middlesbrough or Angel of the North in Gateshead as ‘spectacular symbols of positivity’ in the hope of regenerating these areas that were wilfully rundown under the Thatcher government of the 1980s. So, the Tower became my focus. I decided to walk around Blackpool and photograph the Tower at every point that it became visible within a half-mile half-circle, the Tower always the same size and in the same position in every shot. I had a few things in mind: John Baldessari’s *Aligning: Balls* (1972), the Situationist ideas of ‘dérive’ and ‘psychogeography’ and Victor Burgin’s *UK76* (1976) ... but ultimately, I felt that I’d found a way to objectively photograph the misery of Blackpool without having to focus on it or seek it out ... the framing of the Tower always dictating the content of each image. So, the framing of the Tower has this duality: it is at once a study of this majestic tourist attraction, this arguably cynical deployment of a super-structure, but also a way to

objectively photograph the sadness that surrounds it.

“Anish and Antony Take Afghanistan”: This work stems from an idea that I had to make ‘sculptural transplants’ of public artworks by Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor to Afghanistan. The idea was a fantasy - I imagined myself being the head of a United Nations-commissioned ‘think-tank’ that would donate existing public artworks from the UK to Afghanistan. The idea being that if the work of these two sculptors can be used to ‘regenerate’ poor areas like Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Stratford et al, then surely it might help to re- generate a poverty-stricken, war-torn and economically broken country like Afghanistan. So, I had someone make me images of huge public sculptures ‘transplanted’ into the vast planes of Helmand Province; but it didn’t really work, it just looked too trite, too easy and flippant. This led to me think more about the scenario of Anish and Antony being deployed by the UN to ‘save’ Afghanistan than the actual images of what they might do there. So I invented this story, I imagined what might go on behind the scenes and I thought that this could only really work as a sort of graphic novel or cartoon.

I was very lucky to then work with an artist called Will Henry - he took my sketches and words and turned them in to these great images ... this very concise fantasy that is probably nearer to reality than we’d like to imagine.

“A Balloon for Spandau”: This is part of an on-going series of works that began with A Balloon for Britain (2012). In A Balloon for Britain, I imagined myself (again) to be a gov- ernment employed ‘think-tank’. I imagined that the current Conservative government had offered me millions of pounds to devise a scheme that would regenerate Britain’s 10 poorest towns and cities. Now, obviously, the government are happy to pay my think-tank several million pounds to come up with a spectacular and highly visible ‘solution’ which demonstrates that they care about these depressed and failing communities, but they don’t really want to spend billions on building a new infrastructure that involves creating manufacturing indus- tries, hospitals, schools or social housing. Essentially, they just want to ‘cheer up’ these places - they don’t want to deal with the real problems, but they want to be seen to be doing ‘something’. With this as my brief, I came up with the idea of floating gigantic (50 metre tall) party balloons across each of these 10 poverty stricken cities ... and of course my idea was a hit. The government got lots of positive press, and the people enjoyed having enormous party balloons float over their towns. My concept was so successful that I have since been employed to create A Balloon For America (2013) - floating balloons over the 10 poorest cities in the USA and A Balloon For Sélestat (2013) - 10 balloons floated over a small and quite nondescript town in France. So, having visited Spandau and realising it was not so much poor as just a bit dull, I decided to propose floating a balloon over the area near the train station in the

hope that I might bring both joy and ambition to the people who live and work there. Early market research shows that of the 100 people asked to express a 'pro' or 'anti' balloon opinion, 67 people said they welcomed the idea, 29 thought it was potentially hazardous to both motorists and aircraft and 4 people said they did not care either way.

Finally, there is one more work - Totem Motif - from which the show takes its title. This is a 'found' photograph from 1964. It shows two young women admiring a recently erected Henry Moore public sculpture in the 'new town' of Harlow, Essex. Moore, like his progeny Kapoor and Gormley, was a master of the banal public artwork.

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