



Latest: Nick Hornby's *Twofold*, the 100th public art work to be unveiled in Harlow

Roundabouts, concrete cows and the Moore that lost its head

As Harlow unveils its 100th work, *Christopher Howse* surveys our new towns' public art

As I stood by Lynn Chadwick's 10ft three-legged bronze sculpture *Trigon*, in the Broad Walk of Harlow's shopping precinct, a cheery woman said: "What do you think of that, then?" I threw the question back at her, and she replied: "I'm no expert. It's unusual. That's the closest I'm going to come to saying I like it."

Since its transformation under the New Towns Act of 1946, Harlow, in Essex, has bought sculpture through its idealistic and widely admired Art Trust. I had come to see its 100th commission, *Twofold*, which is curious. From one angle it shows part of the outline of Michelangelo's *David* (1504), and from another it exemplifies a curve drawn by Wassily Kandinsky in his *Diagram 17* (1923). I wouldn't have got the Kandinsky reference without prompting, but then it is obvious.

Twofold is made of steel, with the even rust-coloured surface of corten (corrosive-resistant steel with tensile strength) and 17ft tall, the same as *David*. The sculptor Nick Hornby (an admirer of the better-known novelist of the same name) was momentarily annoyed that the work's surroundings were still a bit of a building site, but he soon enthused about his materials, saying that the work is sheared from a 36ft sheet of corten by a laser cut less than a millimetre wide, "like a stiletto".

Another of Hornby's works, *Muse Offcut #1* (2017), stands on the grass at Glyndebourne. In Harlow the juxtapositions are rather different: "Rodin's *Eve* is near TK Maxx," Hornby laughed. His own piece stands at Maypole Boulevard, in an open-sided courtyard of the new science park, which the council hopes will improve Harlow's employment profile.

Harlow, I think, has been a crime against those sent to live there. It was the town planner Patrick Abercrombie, who, in 1944, seeing the Blitz as an opportunity, hatched plans for half a million Londoners – including 40 per cent of the East End – to be moved out to eight new satellite towns. A 1947 master plan by Frederick Gibberd for a town of 60,000 at Harlow swelled to 80,000 by 1952, when it was nicknamed Pram Town after the prevalence of young mothers.

The East End may have been no idyll, and in Essex there were fields and trees, but the newcomers had lost their community spirit. JM Richards, the architectural critic, spoke of "inhabitants marooned in a desert of grass and concrete". In the Eighties and Nineties they lost the manufacturing employment set up for them (the best-known being the biscuit factory, which closed in 2002). The population actually fell by 7,000 in the Seventies. Thirty per cent of housing is still owned by the council.

New towns at first enjoyed the sort of



FE McWilliam's statue of Elisabeth Frink and, right, Henry Moore's *Family Group* in 1958

utopianism satirised by Peter Sellers in *I'm All Right Jack* (1959): "All them cornfields and ballet in the evenings." In a British propaganda film, *Home of Your Own*, made in the year of the Festival of Britain, the character actor Harry Locke played a bricklayer who falls in love with the idea of Hemel Hempstead new town. After they move there from London, his wife says: "It was like the end of the nightmare."

The shared presumption of new towns was that public art is good – both for their inhabitants and their image. Milton Keynes has recently put a lengthy cultural strategy into print. With 250 pieces of public art, it issues

Rodin's 'Eve' is near TK Maxx. Elisabeth Frink's 'Boar' looks out over a 1,200-place car park

the challenge: "We will once again be known as a city that champions the radical and commissions the unknown."

Unknown it may largely remain, but nothing in new town public art can rival in popularity the Milton Keynes concrete cows, an idea of the Canadian artist Liz Leyh in 1978. Many people have forgotten that the cows have changed colour and that legs and heads lost to vandalism have been replaced.

The new town of Basildon boasted a sculpture popular enough to gain a nickname, "The Pineapple" (1977), a spiky spherical corten steel fountain commissioned from William Mitchell by Ford. It has been missing since 2011.

Another corten sculpture that has so far survived is Ray Smith's 20ft *Flying Spiral* (2001), the first of Crawley new town's "art on roundabouts" series. Not only are roundabouts demeaning places to display sculpture, the standard of much art on them is so poor that the jaundiced driver's eye tars any new attempt with the brush of disappointed experience. Some Crawleyans call Smith's sculpture "The Wooshy Man", which may at least show affection.

Peterlee in Co Durham went as far as appointing an artist, Victor Pasmore, as a planning adviser. He objected when residents chose curtains that affected the purity of his concept.

At Harlow, the Arts Trust, starting

Arts

Then, in 1989, someone knocked off the child's head and stole it. *The Telegraph* reported a little weirdly that the value of the £4million sculpture had fallen by £1million. Once the head was recovered, the sculpture was placed in the lobby of the Civic Centre.

Harlow has seen other trouble with theft and vandalism. Part of Gerda Rubinstein's slender 7ft bronze *City* (1970) was stolen in 2003, and three or four other bronzes. Elisabeth Frink's engaging *Boar* (1970), meanwhile, stands safely in a 250-yard rectangle of water on a terrace designed to look out to the countryside but now commanding a view of a 1,200-place car park.

Gone, to the outrage of the 20th-Century Society, is Gibberd's high-rise town hall of 1958, replaced by the Civic Centre and usual-suspect food outlets.

A thief stole a head from Henry Moore's 'Family Group'. It was later moved inside the Civic Centre

That's the smart end of town. Walk 300 yards past two pawnbrokers, a Poundworld (closed) and the public library (open), and you reach Market Square. There is no open market now, and the desolation is only emphasised by empty concrete pairs of seats flanking tables inlaid with chessboards (as at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).

Yet here a great piece of sculpture does redeem the bare waste. This is Ralph Brown's 7ft bronze *Meat Porters* (1959), showing two Smithfield bummares heaving a carcass of beef. Strong and dynamic, the work embodies memories of Francis Bacon and Rembrandt.

Placing sculptures in pedestrian streets and housing estates, not gathered in a sculpture park, as if in a gallery, is championed by Andrew Bramidge, Harlow council's head of environment and planning. We went to see Barbara Hepworth's *Contrapuntal Forms* (1951), a double lump of Irish blue limestone 12ft high and penetrated by two smooth apertures. It had figured in the Festival of Britain on the South Bank in London. Today it looks tranquil next to a tree outside three-storey flats.

Mr Bramidge says how proud residents are of their sculpture. "Generations remember how they played as children on Willi Soukop's *Donkey* [1935]."

The anarchist social historian Colin Ward in his book on new towns declared: "If anyone wanted to see contemporary public sculpture in Britain, it would be necessary to tour, not our historic old towns, but our New Towns." That's not quite true. The Hepworth on the side of John Lewis in Oxford Street in London is said to be seen by 200million a year (though I couldn't immediately picture it). Visit Harlow and see more.

'Harvey Weinstein wanted me in a miniskirt and high heels'

Jemima Rooper survived Weinstein and is now one of our best actresses

I know a few older women who are with younger men and it's really great," says Jemima Rooper. "It's working out really well for them." It's a bright morning, and I'm in a little café in north London with the star of *Lost in Austen*, *One Man, Two Guvnors*, and hit new play *[BLANK]* – and we've been chatting about a topic that is sure to be much discussed when the BBC One drama *Gold Digger* airs this week.

Rooper may not be a household name but, at 38, she has been racking up stellar performances on both stage and screen since her teens, from a Bobbie brilliant enough to match Jenny Agutter's original in the 2000 TV remake of *The Railway Children*, to a highly acclaimed Ann Deever in an unforgettable production of *All My Sons* in 2010.

In *Gold Digger*, she plays Della, the lesbian daughter of newly divorced Julia (Julia Ormond), who, on her 60th birthday, begins a love affair with a man

half her age (Ben Barnes), to the horror of Della and her brothers.

"I can understand how, if your son was the same age as your lover, they would think, 'What does that man want with my mother?'" Rooper says. Julia's children assume he is the gold digger of the title, but "at the centre of the story," she notes, "is a woman who's going, 'My life is not over'".

Della, meanwhile, is fixated on a woman she used to be with, masochistically scrolling her ex's social media feed. It is a typically subtle, edgy performance from Rooper, who, thanks to her distinctive looks – raven hair, off-world angles – is often cast as an outsider. This unconventional style might also explain why she is not better known.

Many expected her TV career to take off after she played the lead in *Lost in Austen* – a 2008 ITV miniseries about a twentysomething who finds herself thrown into the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* – but, instead of breaking through on screen, she has been embraced by the theatre. She's currently performing at London's Donmar Warehouse in Alice Birch's powerful, provocative play *[BLANK]*.

In its standout scene, a guest rages against the liberal feminists at a dinner party in their "bleeding heart bubble of hypocrisy", with their skin-deep political engagement and recreational drugs. Has Rooper – who has a four-year-old son with her partner, writer and director Ben Ockrent – been to parties like that?

"Yes, probably a few," she says. "It was the hardest to rehearse because there's a lot of recognition, sort of, 'Ooh God, that's me.'"

In 2013, she appeared in a Harvey Weinstein film – *One Chance*, the true story of *Britain's Got Talent* winner Paul Potts. She met the producer, but was never alone in a room with him, and has a surprising insight from the shop floor. "Controversially, there's this feeling, when someone who has the power to make careers doesn't really give you a second look... it's incredibly annoying. Not that I wanted that kind of attention."

On the first day of filming, she says, "his PA appeared with a whole load of new costumes and it was all massive high heels, short skirts, basically sexing up the character. I was supposed to be the weird, funny girlfriend... She was sent to do it, to make me feel comfortable about it. If Harvey himself had come along and said, 'I want you in a miniskirt and high heels', I'd have been, 'Excuse me?' Then you hear these awful stories of these girls and because it was probably a woman who said, 'Harvey really wants to meet with you,' those women were really sort of complicit in allowing that to happen."

The moment she found most embarrassing, she says, was when she was cast in Brian De Palma's 2006 adaptation of James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, with Scarlett Johansson. She played a pornographic actress and had three scenes. "I was 22 and when we did the porn element, there was a point when Brian was asking if my pants could come off, and I was like, 'Oh my God, what do I do?'"

"When you're doing a small part, you don't feel like you can just go, 'Hang on, I need to call my agent.' You want to be amenable. Luckily, he saw I had two tattoos on my back and said they'd take too long to cover with make-up. I was so happy."

Chris Harvey

Jemima Rooper: embraced by stage



Gold Digger starts tonight at 9pm on BBC One

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