

Nick Hornby Sculpture (1504-2017)

Sculptures Nick Hornby Words Joe Hewitt



ART FEATURE

A wonderland of bourgeois play, Glyndebourne opera house offers a modern mecca for the traditional art form. Here, vaulted, sonic architecture extends from Jacobethan brick and a riddle of ornate gardens is pulled into soft focus by heat and champagne. It's a pleasure to wander, like stepping beyond the penthouse of Ballard's *Highrise*. Past suited fawners, and lawns of merry-makers, black ties, Pimm's, iced hampers, and ruddied, sunburnt men hitching at tartan trousers.

It is the opening night of *La traviata* and the start of Glyndebourne Festival 2017. I am here to meet Nick Hornby, a British sculptor whose works, collectively titled *Sculpture (1504-2017)*, are exhibited throughout the house and gardens as part of the festival. Having spent time working and presenting in LA and New York, this is his first solo exhibition in the UK since 2010.

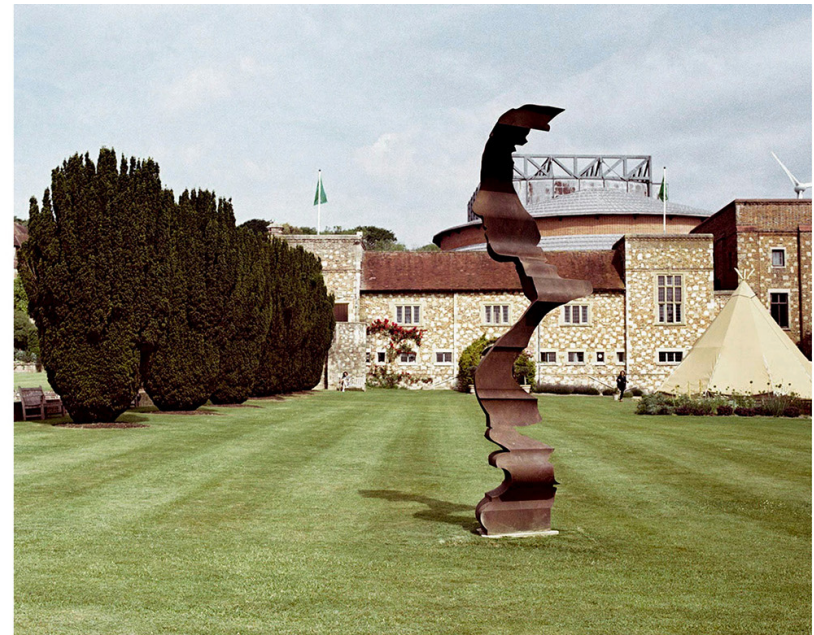
I find Nick in the teepee. Before we get started, he's waylaid by two women asking about pricings on behalf of concerned parties. He's courteous, socially adroit, efficient. He seems familiar with this environment, although asks if I'm any good at tying bow ties. Later in the day, one of the staff asks me, "Who were you with earlier?"

"Nick Hornby, the artist", I replied.

"Ah! I thought so", he said. "I wish I'd known. I would have liked to ask him a question."

I saved myself from playing surrogate. As Nick and I toured his works, I'd become increasingly doubtful of my own certainty of phrase, and unsure whether to blame the tricks of Glyndebourne, the heat, or Hornby himself. His works ask for precision description, and yet resist a single frame.

"My interest is in decoding things, deconstructing things," he began, "and trying to understand the construction of meaning." Created from bronze, marble, or resin, each sculpture can be seen as a meeting point of digital technology, art history, abstraction and figuration. For each piece, a subject, or fragment of historic art – works by Michelangelo, Rodin, Brâncuși and Matisse – has been digitally modelled to produce perspectives both recognisable and abstract. In these surroundings, the work could be seen as games for those educated in the canon: spot the Rodin, find the Brancusi. Perhaps a reflection of the stereotypes of opera, to be penetrated only by the elite?



Is your art only for those familiar with art history? Does it require an understanding of previous works?

In short, no. In fact, quite the opposite. I don't want to be elitist. I'm not choosing Bird in Space and Rodin for the audience to then spot their particular meaning within the canon, but more because anyone, without any art historical knowledge would see the difference between something which is figurative and something that is abstract.

I think I could sit someone down who knows nothing about any of the art historical references, and just ask them some questions. If I'm making a hybrid that juxtaposes two extreme different modes of representation and abstraction and figuration, I think people can get them.



So why the historic references?

I feel they're 5% safer than my own personal subjective, because they're in the past, they're historic, so they have some locked meaning, although at the same time that meaning is as fluid, arguably, as anything. But I just feel a little bit safer, I feel like I can defer a little bit of responsibility to some of those meanings.

The work is taking something recognizable – a Rodin, a Michelangelo – and rendering it abstract?

I would want to challenge that. Because I don't think I would be happy to say that anything is definitively abstract or figurative, and I'd happily argue until I was blue in the face that anything is both, simultaneously, in equal measure. I can't imagine anything that isn't figurative, i.e. which doesn't exist and have real association. And I also can't imagine anything that isn't completely abstract.

I'm just 'cooking' it. In the [Claude] Levi-Strauss way. It still has the same potential quantity and volume of legible figurative meaning, it's just gone through a filter. Which is either me or something else. So I don't think it's abstracted.

And technology is, to some degree, that filter?

This all about challenging the question of your own personal subjective. Why do you use a robot to carve your stuff, why don't you show the artist's hand? Well, because I don't know if I trust my own opinion. Because even I did have an opinion, would it be based on what's good now or what's good in the future? And what's more important? What I'm trying to do is pose a question: is it ever possible to step outside of your own authorship?



We enter the rose garden and circle a corten bust Hornby has derived from a 1951 Matisse cut-out. "I've just taken a citation of a plant, and reversed engineered it to look like something that is a bit architectonic", he tells me, realising his role as guide and author. "It's also a bit like an atomic mushroom cloud, and it's a got a bit nose, I've got a big nose." But then he shifts, perhaps even inching outside his personal subjective, allowing the work to still surprise him. "I just find it really weird. From here, it's obviously a bust. Here, there's a nostril, that's *definitely* a nostril there."

God, Bird, Drone is another piece that offers something new from every angle. The audience can only make out the fragment of Michelangelo's *David* if they view it from above, as God, a bird or a drone. Is this piece about power?

God and the drone puts it in the territory of Bentham, Panopticon and surveillance. I've already admitted that I'm guilty and Catholic, and insecure, that comes from the Catholic sense of surveillance. The power of an internalised sense of surveillance, so you behave properly.



So why is the interest in the personal subjective so important to you?

It's not my fault, dad was Catholic and I was in the closet. No joke, I have a real problem with understanding the personal subjective because I spent twenty-two years pretending to be a macho heterosexual. So if someone says to me: "what do you want?", I still have a significant voice in my head saying, "I want a girlfriend, I want to get married, I want to become a lawyer". If someone says, "what do you really, really want?", I don't know, to be a Spice Girl? I haven't got a fucking clue.

We all suffer from that same condition, and I think it's exacerbated a little bit if you're in the closet because you build up quite a significant persona, which you do everything in your power, through to your core, to buy into. Not everyone, but I did. I not only created the persona, but I desperately wanted to believe it, because it would have made life so much easier.



You explore drones, 3D modelling, computer automated machines. Rodin, Michelangelo, historical artefacts. What's the dominant narrative?

I will happily tell you this is all about computers. I will happily tell you this is all about 19th Century marble busts and the V&A. I have reframed my work in many different ways, which I find interesting to do. This stuff can either be contextualised through art history, technology, or through all sorts of narratives. I will allow those contexts to change.

Sculpture (1504-2017) challenges viewpoint, reference and frame. And while some of Hornby's work has been exhibited elsewhere, the sculptures take on a new, extra layer of meaning at Glyndebourne. Created with precision software, from the fragments of canonical art, the pieces could be seen at home among flowerbed edging and scored strata. And yet each piece, a playful cipher, houses a message of confused perspective, thereby subtly challenging ideas of the Grand Narrative.

We sit on the lawn. Jollied guests stir at the sound of a bell from beyond the country house, signalling the start of the opera. It's a place that works hard to make sure everything makes sense. And so offers something special adjacent to Hornby's work. "Everything is confusing, definitely." He concludes, "I'd hope that the work is open. I'm not trying to present any answers, just pose a few questions."



See more at nickhornby.com, maxbarnett.co

Photography Max Barnett



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