

## TIMELY GHOSTS

**Nick Hornby thinks a lot about ghosts and dates.**

For his 2020 series *Zygotes and Confessions*, the artist dipped a group of resin sculptures into liquefied images. The images comprise photographs of male bodies – some, Hornby's lovers – and the resulting artworks present distorted body parts stretched onto humanoid-shaped forms. The effect is hallucinatory, as if you are in the presence of animated ghosts.

Hornby's mother died when he was 30; ten years later he made *Zygotes and Confessions*, the same year in which his Alzheimer-affected father no longer recognised him. Turning 40, indeed on his very birthday, was also the moment he split up from his long-term partner.

Ghosts are literally everywhere in the world: you can't move a muscle, think a thought, without a ghost involved in the process. Ghosts are the micromanagers of our daily lives; they are the vehicles for our flights of fantasy. Ghosts are our memories. And dates are the architecture upon which ghosts rely to prove their existence and exert their continuing will to power.

In 2023, coronation year in the UK and so a year full of ghosts and dates, Hornby has set about populating London with a clutch of three public sculptures tightly choreographed so that each speaks to the other and which, together, present a psycho-geography of the city's architectural and sculptural history. Of the three, the first to be unveiled is titled 'Power over others is Weakness disguised as strength' and is a five-metre high Corten steel sculpture composed of 165 laser cut pieces, scripted using Python code and worried, by physical manipulation, into its final form. As with all three sculptures, its thinness, and its multiple bends manifest two separate images into being: approached from one side, a viewer sees an elegant, vertical squiggle; from the other, a sword-wielding man atop a horse ride into view. The second piece, 'Here and There', is made of cast bronze, stands three metres high, and one side presents a similar abstract form to 'Power over others is Weakness disguised as strength' whilst the other side reveals the back of a man holding a cane. 'Do it All', the last of the three to be installed, is made from sheet bronze and is the tallest at just under six metres, with a neo-gothic building and an angular silhouette of a female head comprising the two forms visible on either side of the sculpture.

All three works are immediately engaging – the fun of one form metamorphosing into another is a sure crowd pleaser – and they do not require decoding to be enjoyed. But Hornby has gifted works that are resonant with allusion to those willing to peel away the layers. As wry commentary on the nature of public sculpture, the binary of abstract sculpture and figurative monument, seen in two of the works, speaks to the two types of public art most normally occupying prime real estate in metropolises around the world: either memorials for the brave or shiny baubles for a brave new world. The artist has also raided history's closet and dressed his sculptures with an array of references. The man on the horse is Richard I (Richard the Lionheart / Richard Coeur de Lion), the Crusader king of the 12th century, and is based on a mid-19th Century sculpture made by one of Queen Victoria's favourite artists, the London-based Italian sculptor Carlo Marochetti. The image of the back of a man with a cane? That is the subject in Caspar David Friedrich's famous Romantic painting of 1818, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. The image of the building and the female portrait? London's Albert Memorial and the profile of the ancient Egyptian Queen, Nefertiti. Lastly, that squiggle is a reference to the illustrated shape that interrupts the text in Laurence Sterne's 18th century novel *Tristram Shandy* to describe the flourish of a stick wielded by one of the book's protagonists. Hand in hand with this motley crowd of fellow travellers – literary, mythical, and historical – Hornby sets off on a journey through a London of his own mental mapping, one that interweaves personal biography with public history.

It is May 1851, and London is agog with the spectacle of the Great Exhibition which has just opened in an extraordinary glass construction amid the beauty of Hyde Park. With 100,000 exhibits from around the world, this grand commemoration to consumption is as much a hymn to free trade, industrialisation, and capitalism as it is a reminder of Britain's superiority, independence, and isolation. At the entrance to the halls rides sculptor Carlo Marochetti's equestrian in clay. Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert see it as they arrive at the Exhibition and are captivated. It must have a more permanent home and they commissioned it to be made in bronze. Fast forward ten years to a cold December in London in 1861: Albert is dead, Victoria is inconsolable, and Marochetti is at the height of his fame. The bronze version of Richard Coeur de Lion has recently been installed next to the Parliament buildings and Marochetti has just been commissioned for a monument that would come to define British imperialism in India (a monument more visited by the Victorians than the Taj Mahal): the memorial to the women and children killed in Kanpur (or Cawnpore) during the First War of Indian Independence in 1857. Hornby's choice of subject in Richard the Lionheart is as telling as the choice of the sculptor on whose version he has referenced for the form of the piece. At a moment when cities around the world are reckoning with the ghosts of the past living on in the monuments of the present, the title 'Power over others is Weakness disguised as strength' speaks both to the imagery of the 'hero' as much as it does to the underlying reasons why these objects end up being commissioned in the first place.

In his London sculptures, Hornby has set up a game of call and response with the city. For example, Albert's ghost crops up again in the image of the Albert Memorial embedded within Hornby's 'Do it All'. The canopied statue was commissioned by Victoria in memory of her dead husband and, in a further echo to other works in the group, Carlo Marochetti was first considered to produce the likeness of the dead Prince Consort (before inconveniently dying himself whilst working up the proposal). The Memorial is housed at the edge of Hyde Park, a stone's throw from Hornby's sculpture 'Here and There'. The figure in 'Here and There', based on the wanderer in Friedrich's masterpiece *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, is also a reference to Hornby's own father with whom the young artist would sail wooden boats on The Round Pond in Hyde Park. The scale of the pond was, to the mind of Hornby's younger self, oceanic; similar in scale, perhaps, to the snow-capped mountain ranges looming out of the fog in Friedrich's painting. With the onset of Alzheimer's, the senior Hornby begun his own journey into the fog. Here again, Hornby weaves a complex tapestry of the private and public within his works.

Hornby is 43 in 2023; Albert was 42 when he died; Friedrich was 44 when he painted *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. The collapsing of dates across centuries presents a mirroring as Hornby reaches middle age and the midpoint in his career. For the first time he can consider his artistic output retrospectively, whilst still having plenty of time left to explore new directions in his work. He has found himself having to reckon with the ghosts of the past and has decided to embrace them as he forges his own future. In his trio of London sculptures, the multiplicity of readings available, and the nuance with which they are conveyed, are symptomatic of the artist's understanding of the plurality of audiences – each carrying with them their own ghosts – that make up any London street in 2023; cultural memory is no longer a homogenised edifice that can be encased in bronze and put on a plinth.

- Mort Chatterjee Mumbai, July '23