

Building Blocks

Mike Murray's exhibition was on at the same time as the Artes Mundi competition at the Welsh national gallery. I didn't really want to compare and contrast them but I can't help it because it brought up an issue for me. It's about how to get things right and wrong.

Artes Mundi brimmed with art dealing with philosophy, politics, environmental concerns, social conventions and the "human condition". It sounds like a heady brew but in fact, it was quite bland. A lot of it was done in that slick, international, detached style that is very fashionable now but feels distant, self important, preachy. Most of it was academic, even one dimensional conceptually. At times, it didn't look like the real world, just the art world.

That artists may decide to give up their solipsistic egos to nobly reveal our shared humanity is a rather pompous, ego driven idea. Denying the theories of authorship and genius while enjoying all the critical credit and acclaim for the work they produce, congratulating themselves on the depth of their concerns or clever observations. Artists should be reminded that this position of artist as social commentator is self appointed; that the world they comment on may be indifferent to them and often is. The issues may be of concern to us all but not necessarily the art made about it. No matter how much artists pontificate about their take on humanity who is really listening to them when everyone else is also talking?

The best art was by exhibitors who have a connection and relationship with their immediate world that was reflected in the work and so on to the audience. It was based on experience rather than just standing back and pointing it out to us as if we are all blind. That's an old conceptual art trick, which is as boring now as it was thirty years ago. It is a device which Mike Murray avoids in his work.

What I like about Mike's work is that it has a human touch but I read it as empathy rather than pious, hand-wringing despair. He doesn't really have a style but his work has an attitude and approach.

On the top floor, life sucks. A sculpture involving a desk top moves. It heaves with great effort to produce a miniscule drawing. It's an insignificant result for all that work. We all know how that feels.

There is a picture of a miserable looking landscape. Foundations of a building lay in the foreground. The ocean in the distance. A retirement house by the sea never built? A business that was never realised? Or maybe something demolished? Dreams unfulfilled. Or maybe it looks to the future? There is literally a glimmer of light. Along comes a toy engine made from building blocks. It looks well meaning but impotent. Childish dreams, adult reality or childish reality and adult dreams. We all ignite our preferred tales when making narratives out of a picture. Take your pick.

What life can feel like is just one of the ways I interpret these works. But the work itself is enjoyable, it is lightly done. It could all be so portentous and full of hubris. It is quite serious art but it doesn't lecture and I sense an absurdity that lightens the tone.

Downstairs one is greeted by a hollow log looking like a CCTV camera. Its empty eye watches a film projected into the lower corner on the opposite wall. It looks cramped but this is part of the work, which depicts the artist walking around Cardiff, wearing said log and filming the walk. It's got a synchronised, repetitive, clunky sound track and is cropped and edited in such a way that only the free leg appears to move. It really feels painful, tortured. It is oddly hypnotic, absurd and horrible. I'm reminded of eternal punishments metered out by the Greek gods; Sisyphus endlessly pushing a boulder uphill. Tantalus and his sustenance just always out of reach. I think about the lives of people who have limited mobility. I think about the artist being filmed doing the walk. I think how bloody stupid it looks. I think of burdens, hindrance and misery. If you have ever had a broken limb set in a cast you could appreciate this piece for that reason alone.

Walking downstairs, I find a very small projection of a tree. I know it's a tree because I saw some of the preparations but it also reminds me of fairies, brain scans, synapses, stars, sci-fi films, Japanese *manga* comics, many things. It twinkles and revolves spins and waits. It has a life and behaviour of its own. It is positioned in a way that's reminiscent of insects that make their homes in ones house regardless of human concerns. I would like to see some more of these. It's charming and refreshing. Better to enjoy than deconstruct. I like this more because I know less about it. It's a simple foil to the pain upstairs.

In the ground floor is a big sculpture. It's a metal post that's been strangled by an old ivy. The tree is painted pink. The "pink tree" was a torture device from Mike's childhood used by children on children. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips once said that only children wish to become grown ups. I wonder what the torturers became when they grew up. Regardless of that and it's gruesomely funny origin I like this for formal reasons alone as much as anything else. It feels fresh. It looks like part of a painting, violently transplanted into the real world, with a sheet of paper caught in its branches, some kids building toys impaled on some twigs. It looks like the bizarre result of a hurricane. But it is also elegant because the artist manipulates what he has with aplomb. From it's inspiration to creation to the way it is hung. Its beautifully realised. Strangely familiar but without the art speak baggage one could pin on it, it looks like a different direction or maybe just a new concern. It is impressive.

Using found objects is an artistic practice that has its own history, traditions, ideas, conceits and problems. It can be hard to use because objects can come loaded with meaning, with history. Mike only uses found objects in his work when he wants too and he does not let its' traditions get in the way or as an end in itself. It's just something to use, develop or throw away. When I have listened to Mike talk about his work, I've been as interested in when he didn't know what he was doing as when he did. It is not being indecisive; it is just about taking time to make the best art than one can. The work I am looking at now is very different from what he was talking about months before.

Open minded process. This way of making art allows artists the time to make better pieces. Art is made and re-made in real time, while world events happen daily. Some of them are momentous, others insignificant. There is art made during its place in time

and another made about its place in time. That latter kind of art has missed the point. It only tells us the obvious. A lot of the Artes Mundi was like that.

The other kind, including the winner, made art about what it's like to be alive. Mike belongs to that better, healthier group of artists.

Barry Thomas

Artist/Critic