

Q AND A

Jeremy Deller
Artist, 59

The British artist on his new Scarborough seafront mosaic, the fun of subversion, and the danger of creating a fixed national identity

Born in London in 1966, Jeremy Deller is one of the UK's most celebrated artists. Working with installation and film, he is best known for large-scale performative public interventions that examine era-defining moments of British history: the miners' strike in *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001); the Battle of the Somme in *We're Here Because We're Here* (2016). He won the Turner prize in 2004 and represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2013. For his latest project near the seafront at Scarborough, Deller has worked with local communities and Yorkshire-based artist Coralie Turpin to create a Roman-inspired mosaic that celebrates aquatic life forms.

How did you decide on your Scarborough project's theme and medium?

I was asked to create a public artwork in this place where everyone looks out to sea, so I didn't want to make anything that gets in the way of the view. A mosaic is two dimensional and in Scarborough you're standing on it as you look out to sea, hopefully at some of the creatures that are depicted. If you don't get to see them in the sea you can see them in this Roman-style mosaic. Scarborough has Roman history, so contextually it fits.

Some of your most acclaimed works focus on key moments in British history. Are you ever scared to tackle these major events?

Not if you have the right idea for a subject and you can communicate that and why. The "why" is really important. It's good working with big things sometimes but you



can't do it all the time, it's quite exhausting.

Collaboration is integral to the way you work. How do you see your role in that process?

Like a film director. You're the person making decisions with some level of control over the process and very skilled people are working on your behalf.

William Morris looms large in your thinking, including in your Venice exhibition, *English Magic*. Do you share his criticism of so-called high art – do you see your work as a counterpoint to the art world's commercialism?

In as much as I don't really sell much – unfortunately – it has to be. I don't think Morris criticised high art, I think he criticised people with money who thought they had taste. He wrote about his frustrations with people who had tons of money and just bought horrific furniture and art.

Isn't that what people with tons of money still do?

It hasn't ended. But Morris identified that wealth can only bring a certain amount of aesthetic pleasure and I think that sounds about right. He's still very much a person for our times

In what ways?

It's the breadth of his output. He was an artist who didn't see any difference between media, he knew how to make things and would basically have a go at anything from political pamphlets to handmade books, interiors, writing and talks.

A bit like you?

Well, much more successfully. And he made more and was a proper craftsman. I'm not a very practical person.

In *Sacrilege* (2012) you created a replica of Stonehenge as a public

bouncy castle. Did that feel like a subversive gesture?

It was pretty funny. It's not too dissimilar from what I'm doing in Scarborough, making a contemporary version of something that's ancient, which you can stand on. I don't know if *Sacrilege* felt subversive but it felt funny, because subversion is fun as well. It was really about organised sport and how pompous it is, [I wanted] to make something about national identity that literally wasn't fixed. When national identities and stories become fixed and worshipped, that's when you're living in a society that probably isn't going to treat you very well. It's a society where you can't veer off and have your own opinions about your history.

Music is often a big part of your work, from projects such as *Acid Brass* (1997) to *Steel Harmony* (2009). Why is that?

I'm a fan, and if you have the opportunity to do something, you might as well do something you like. I like being around music and musicians, and music is a part of history as well. It's as important in individuals' lives as it is in society. It's clearly something to be examined, like the transformative effects of cover versions.

Why do you love covers?

Because you see the world in a different way when you hear a song played by a different person in a different way. It gives you a new perspective on that song, on music and on the world.

I have to ask about *The Triumph of Art*, your forthcoming nationwide series of events celebrating the National Gallery's bicentenary. Is this your largest project to date?

It's the most sprawling, certainly. It's in five places around the UK [Londonderry, Dundee, Llandudno, Plymouth, London] – a lot of train journeys if nothing else. And in each city or town there will be an event or procession and some kind of celebration.

Looking back, can you tell me about a particular work that surprised you in terms of how it was received?

In 2005, Alan Kane and myself made Folk Archive, a collection of artefacts, objects and documentation from around the UK. It was received incredibly well by the public but a lot of critics were absolutely disgusted. One began with, "I can't believe I've been asked to review this. It's literally rubbish."

How did that make you feel?

Actually great. I mean, it was a personal attack on me. But it was like: we've done what we thought might happen, we've achieved something here. We've touched a real nerve in the art world.

Interview by Finn Blythe

Jeremy Deller photographed by Sophia Evans for the Observer New Review.