

Words: Natalie Beech

RYAN GANDER: NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM



The subject of looking couldn't be more relevant. Today we are looked at more than ever, privacy is at its lowest and visibility is at its highest.

CCTV cameras line the streets and our internet activity is monitored; and by looking at our digital lives, you could easily conclude that we actively pursue being looked at. Selfies are so popular they are now in the dictionary; our location can be pinpointed and listed on our Facebook profile; our ever-changing moods documented in a series of tweets.

In art, this is hardly a novel idea, particularly in regards to examining our increasingly digital lives. Yet, less considered is the topic of how objects feel about all this looking. In the context of the art world, how do works of art feel about being held up for examination? And how would we feel if they were looking back?

This February internationally renowned artist Ryan Gander will bring *Night in the Museum: Ryan Gander curates the Arts Council Collection* to Attenborough Arts Centre between 25th February and 21st May; presenting over 30 works by artists including Roger Hiorns, Henry Moore, Lynn Chadwick, Richard Deacon and Wolfgang Tillmans. Gander made the selection from the Arts Council Collection of nearly 8,000 works of British art in a range of media, the majority of which were acquired from young and emerging UK-based artists over the past 70 years.

Aside from the opportunity to see some of the world's artistic masterpieces, Gander has reframed how we view them. Recently awarded an OBE, the artist is known for his playfulness and diversity of style, and his approach to curating is no different.

"Looking at art' is definitely an important part of the exhibition," Visual Arts Officer at Attenborough Arts Centre, Sam West, explains. "In particular the looking back and forward within the history of art, and the way museum collections collapse these types of divisions."

He presents the sculptures in NITM so that they gaze at pieces featuring the colour blue – an important colour in Gander's own work - representing for him the abstract ideas often found in modern and contemporary art.

"The overall concept 'Night in the Museum' is very imaginative. I think the creativity with which the artworks have been paired together is the most exciting aspect of it for me personally," West says.

This act of pairing is in a sense a new artwork in itself. Here you can find Henry Moore's sculpture *Head of a King* (1952-53) taking in



Patrick Caulfield's *Dining Recess* (1972), or more contemporary artist Kerry Stewart's *Untitled* (Lucy) (1996) observing Garth Evans' *Blue No. 30* (1964). Gander brings the artwork to life, enabling them to be as much of a participant in looking as we are.

"There is something about switching the roles of the spectator and the spectacle that is fascinating," Gander explains. "When I look at sculptures of the human figure I am frequently left thinking of all the things that they've seen: the visitors to the museum, school children and art students attempting to earnestly recreate them in pastels and charcoal, the other artworks that surround them, artists and technicians installing, their maker perhaps, discreetly calling in on them with proud eyes. This is the world of the silent onlooker."

The intimate curation involved in pairing artworks in this way permits us to draw new connections between artists and styles, allowing us to view the pieces as individual entities, separate from their makers. Gander's genius comes by presenting us with a new way to see the artists we thought we knew so well.

The exhibition will also include one of Gander's own works, *'As old as time itself, slept alone'*, one of eight new works commissioned by Arts Council Collection, in 2016, to celebrate its 70th Anniversary. Modelled on Edgar Degas' ballerina sculptures, Gander places his sculpture in front of a large blue cube – something he considers to be a caricature-like representation of modern art.

"Gander's practice priorities inventiveness, curiosity, playfulness and humour, West says. "I think this rubs off on visitors, in that sense his work is very infectious."

As a city, Leicester does have a strong artistic foundation; DMU has highly regarded Fine Arts degree courses; Phoenix, Two Queens Gallery and the Summer Arts Trail have done exceptional work in bringing both local and international artists to the city, but Leicester is yet to achieve much of a national reputation for its visual arts. But having such a major exhibition at AAC shows the centre's ambition to progress visual arts in the city and the Midlands as a whole, proving they have big plans for its new, £1.5 million gallery.

"We were approached by Arts Council Collection senior curator Natalie Rudd prior to the new galleries, which opened in November 2016," West recalls. "We were very excited by the concept and quality of the work; the opportunity

to bring this exhibition to Leicester was one we couldn't turn down."

Gander is also a wheelchair user, but rarely focuses on his disability in his work. The Art *Nobody Knows* (2011) was the only piece in which he brutally examines it, portraying a model of himself lying on the ground next to a wheelchair – as if he has just fallen out of it.

Gander will no doubt act as an inspiration for other disabled artists – but his efforts to make art accessible go beyond this role. By turning our traditional gallery experience on its head, encouraging us to bring a sense of humour to our interpretation of art, all the while enthusing his own art with a comedic sensibility, Gander makes his work and ethos accessible to all. In this respect,

AAC – which prides itself on accessibility - is a perfect venue to showcase his ideas.

Jill Constantine, Head of the Arts Council Collection, says: "He has deployed that same imaginative approach to curate this show which is not only visually stunning and will be enjoyed by the many visitors who will see it in different venues across the country, but will also introduce us to new ways of looking at contemporary art."

Attenborough Arts Centre will be hosting a programme of events surrounding this exhibition, including drop-in family workshops, guided tours and a panel discussion with artists and curators, as well as a responsive performance to the exhibition by local dance artist Lewys Holt.

"Gander has already messed with traditional gallery visitor pathways and viewpoints by putting statues already where they might have stood. As a performer I'm looking at what a mobile human figure can lend to this spatial dynamic," Holt says. "Getting in the way of people, maintaining certain distances and gazes with audiences and artworks alike. I'm also getting a fancy costume made by Jade Webb, an MA fashion student at De Montfort University."

Running until the spring, it is encouraging to see that AAC haven't eschewed the involvement of the local arts scene in light of such an esteemed artist's arrival. The benefit of a touring exhibition is in bringing art to different communities, but with AAC's involvement we also see the community brought to the art. In much the same way as Gander has paired artworks, this exhibition will pair art worlds, offering us an experience that is entirely new and authentic to its environment.

