
David Cotterrell: Amelia's Magazine : David Cotterrell

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As I walk down the unusually quiet thoroughfare of Brick Lane I idly follow the moves of a sandy-haired man in front of me. Strolling alongside his bike he has the easy air of a travelling man and I find myself wondering if he is David Cotterrell. A few minutes later I can't help but smile; sometimes your initial instincts really are correct.

We step inside the coffee shop and settle into the comfy sofas, surrounded by pockets of murmured conversations. Despite David's laid back demeanour, it soon emerges that he is busily engaged on several projects. After all, he is an installation artist whose work encompasses video, audio, interactive media, artificial intelligence, device control and hybrid technology "Because I'm interested in so many different issues I can go off on tangents, but the same narratives reemerge all the time."

We at Amelia's Magazine discovered David's work earlier this year at the Tatton Park Biennial, held in Cheshire. Here he erected a series of pieces inspired by the Red Book for Tatton Park, a book about creating grand gardens written by the famous eighteenth century landscape gardener Humphry Repton, in which he advised landowners to "test people's spatial perspectives of the grounds" through judicious management of nature and artifice. Whilst cribbing up for his commission David was mightily impressed by the story of the family behind Tatton Park, and especially with the insatiable collecting of the family's last heir, a man named Maurice Egerton. Despite the absence of a successor, he was devoted to the upkeep of his family gardens and continued to travel the world, making additions to the ancestral collection. But of course his continued dedication failed to cheat death, and the estate is now in the hands of a trust.

So bemused was David by the presumptuous notions laid out in Humphry's handbook that he set about offering a modern day interpretation of his ideals, manipulating reality through careful design. To do this he created a number of perspex artworks featuring idealised views, and these modern day frescos were hung throughout the gardens for unsuspecting visitors to chance upon, in the hope of prompting them to question the authenticity and meaning behind a typically picturesque scene.

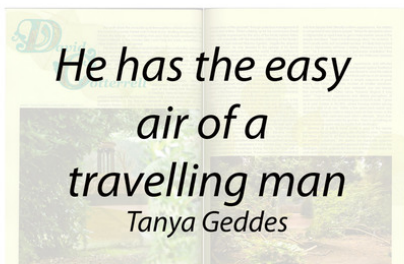
David is also inspired by larger themes such as war: to this end he was invited to Afghanistan late last year, spending one month with medics and later on, one month with the civilians of Kabul. "The Wellcome Trust scouted me to contribute to a major exhibition based on their work of the past few hundred years. They gave me training in first aid so I could hang around doctors who work in the field and see how they cope with their work, but fortunately I didn't have to use it," he explains. "At first they were nervous [of my presence] but eventually I became invisible. When I returned later, I found myself - through force of habit - carrying combat application tourniquets, first-aid field dressings and mine clearance equipment in my camera bag." He forged many unexpected friendships during the trip, not least with a character known only as Major. "It was a revelation to me [to find out] that despite their (literally) uniform appearance, the military is comprised of very diverse people." When he decided to return to Afghanistan in April it was to get a more realistic sense of the people and place. "I kept a hundred page diary," he exclaims "I don't usually write, but I scrawled nonstop. It is likely that my brief visits to Afghanistan will have a lasting influence on my future work." He is currently producing a "panoramic installation" that will feature video and photography for the Wellcome Galleries exhibition later this year.

David is "intrigued by stories, experiences and attitudes that are hidden" especially when

juxtaposed against traditional renditions of history. "At school I was forced to read the radical historian Christopher Hill, and he introduced me to an amazing idea," he says. "History is never a simple sequence of great events, but rather an infinite number of smaller narratives. From these, depending on your viewpoint, you can always find something that makes sense, however illogical it may seem." Fragmented experiences and altered perceptions of environment remain the central intrigues in David's work. "I grew up in east London in the 80's, where housing estates sprung up in the blink of an eye." Within a few years each owner was desperately trying to make a unique mark on their home; in the process they often replicated each other's attempts. "More than one house was surrounded by gnomes. There is something so heroic about people's wish to modify their landscape"

Bearing all of this in mind, David is wary of the narrow perspective the art gallery-going elite affords his work. "I believe that there is more to art than merely producing luxury goods for wealthy customers." His worries are especially poignant given that a desire to unearth bypassed stories is one of his key ideologies. Luckily projects like the one at Tatton Park make his work available to a far wider viewing public.

Tanya Geddes



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