

David Cotterrell: Culture : Smoke and Mirrors

Culture

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The practice of giving weapons of war uses for peace has a powerful artistic heritage. Two artists are entering into this ideal by transforming a US military reconnaissance balloon into the source of an surprising multimedia performance piece.

Sunderland's cultural master planner Dan Dubowitz, who is overseeing a three-year programme of temporal artworks, is collaborating with David Cotterrell on Searchlight.

This is the first of a series of projects within Hobo, produced on behalf of Sunderland and Sunderland Council.

On March 7, 8 and 9, a helium-filled balloon will float 200ft above Sunderland. Suspended from it will be a giant searchlight, projecting shadow-like images onto the ground.

This follows a test-run at the end of February when the balloon was seen above Galley's Gill, an area on the bank of the River Wear which cuts between two dramatic cliff gorges.

It is the same type of unmanned aerodynamic balloon system which is used by the US military in war zones, reportedly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Helium balloons have been brought to the frontline of modern warfare for cost-effective surveillance.

David, senior lecturer in fine art at Sheffield Hallam University, says: The reason they are so useful is because in winds up to 100mph they remain stable in the atmosphere. They actually get more stable the harder the wind blows. These balloons are used by the military to look over the horizon.

We are giving them an unusual application: encouraging people to rethink under-used areas of Sunderland. The balloons will migrate around the Wear through the lifespan of this project.

In preparation, Dan and David filmed drama groups, school children and adults who were dressed in black, moving around the derelict Groves Cranes factory. In a new take on the 19th Century magicians' use of smoke and mirrors, the artists used specially created technology to film the figures with a computer controlled mirror.

David says: The movement of the mirror is recorded as well as the footage, so when we play it back you see the imagery and the location where the imagery came from. Optically, the projected image looks the same as a shadow. It is quite eerie as it looks like there is a moving presence on the ground, but there is no-one there.

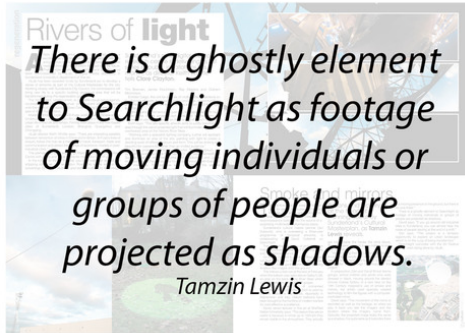
There is a ghostly element to Searchlight as footage of moving individuals or groups of people are projected as shadows.

David says: If you go around old industrial sites in Sunderland, you can almost hear the noise of people leaving at the end of a shift.

Dan says: This project is a fantastic opportunity to explore an urban landscape which is on the cusp of being transformed.

Searchlight coincides with the AV Festival and the work being done by s/Lab.

Tamzin Lewis



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