

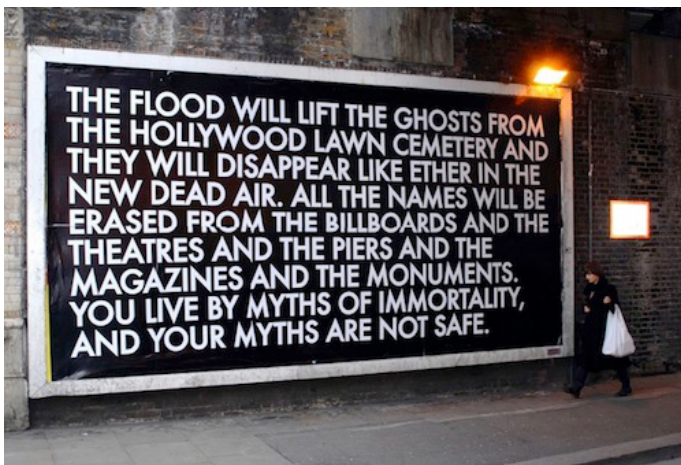


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The artist vandalising advertising with poetry

Q&A with Scottish artist Robert Montgomery whose latest exhibition opened in London today

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Artwork by Robert Montgomery

Scottish artist Robert Montgomery goes about at night illegally plastering over advertisements with posters covered in his poetry. His very pleasing verse is presented in white typography on a black background, screaming out ideas about beauty, consumerism and hypocrisy, among other things. The elegant words, and their sparse presentation, have been appearing on hoardings for the last ten years. But Montgomery, who trained at Edinburgh College of Art, and whose intellectual basis for working tumbles out in glorious verbal torrents, is not really a street artist.

Although he has been somewhat embraced by the movement. Instead, he thinks of himself as following in the wake of the Situationists, a group of European revolutionaries in the last century who constructed artistic situations (which today we might call guerrilla installations) in unexpected places, to promote their ideas.

Montgomery spoke to independent.co.uk about his first solo gallery show in London, at the KK Outlet in Hoxton:

My studio is in Hoxton, so it's quite nice to be showing locally. The show is essentially three billboards on Old Street and a sign made with solar panel LED light on the front of the gallery, which is called Recycled Sunlight Pieces and uses very, very low consumption LED lighting.

Have you had permission for the three billboard pieces on Old Street?

Yeah, we have in this case. I sometimes work without permission, but I didn't want to get the gallery in trouble [laughs].

How does it work when you're doing the pieces without permission?

We are literally dashing around at night. Often, there are only two of us. People respond to it really well. Lots of people pass by. Ordinary people just really like to see billboards covered up with

poetry. They find it really refreshing I think. So, we've never really got into any trouble.

Have the police ever come up and asked you what you're up to?

Actually, no. They have driven past quite slowly but they've never actually come up to me.

Is that because you act like you're supposed to be there?

Not really. We don't dress up in workmen-like clothes. There was a funny episode the year before last when we did a few coverings of Cameron's campaign posters –quite amusing because it was a bit of a stupid campaign- and we did one close to the Mayor's Office. It was quite high up and took a long time and I really thought we were going to get in trouble. But, you know, every single person who walked past was appreciative and we got away with it.

What do people do to show their appreciation?

Anything from smiles to hugs. I've been hugged in the street several times [Laughs]. It's really nice. I meet a huge cross section of people. It's nice to sell my work in galleries, obviously, it's nice to be at the Venice Biennale, but this way my work reaches ordinary people which is a more fundamental thing to me. Normal people in the street are much more intelligent than society gives them credit for – and they are not at all conceptual art-phobic.

You're obviously working in a way resonant of street artists, but you don't seem to have a street art perspective. You've got training behind you which street artists, graffitists in particular, tend not to have. Has the street art scene embraced you?

Yeah, I'm working from a more academic background on the streets, but I do feel an emotional connection with street art. In fact I'm doing a collaboration with an East London graffitist from Bow, called Krae. He's a classic graffiti writer, grew up on a housing estate, is very much from the street streets. This piece that I showed in Venice called All Palaces Are Temporary Palaces really resonated with him, so he asked me if he could use it for a T-shirt.

I did at a certain point do some work that was like writing. It wasn't graffiti art in its strictest sense, but it was writing the words with spray paint. I decided that it was easy to ghettoise that. So I decided to work in a way that was visually very simple – all with black backgrounds on the billboards, all with white text- so that it won't be categorised as graffiti art and written off before people have read it. At the same time, it's a very unspectacular style, so it's evident that it's not advertising too.

Tabloids use white on black typography to make things stand out on their front pages – is that what you were going for?

[Laughs] I want the words to appear almost like statements from the collective unconscious, in a sense. They are quite subtle ideas, and poetic ones; sometimes political points mixed with poetic allusions. The words can be complex, so I want them to look as straightforward as possible. If I was to tell you what I thought of the tabloid press it would probably be unprintable.

Well, let's move on. Do use particular poems or extracts of text for particular places?

Sometimes. One of the ones I've just done in Old Street (pictured) faces towards Shoreditch House which is where, until recently, Occupy was installed. I was actually planning to do a collaborative

piece with them, but they got turfed out on 25 January so that didn't happen. But one of those texts is very much a testimony to the positive things I think Occupy are doing. It starts, "There are wooden houses on land in far-away places that don't cost much money, and strings of lights that make paths to them gently, and do not turn off the stars. And 100 black flags of anarchists held up at night 100 miles apart."

It's the idea that rows of tents in front of St Pauls are guarding our future – or trying to. I find that whole thing very moving. I found Giles Fraser resigning from the Church of England in support of the Occupy movement, incredibly moving. The church taking sympathy with what they're doing is really significant. It shows that the concerns of middle England are not too far away from the concerns of Occupy. I worked a lot with the Stop The War coalition over the years and I did several pieces with them and some of the marches. It was lots of middle class, middle-aged people from the home counties marching.

You're coming at art from a fairly politicised context. How does that fit in with your Situationist influences? There is a big parallel between the general strike in Paris 1968 (when the movement was at its height) and what's going on in the UK now.

The Situationists certainly have been almost a point of obsession for me since I was at art school. I think Guy Debord's idea of society as a spectacle – he comes from a post-Marxists perspective, but he analyses the coalition of capitalism and the media and predicts, what he calls, a "Spectacular" life where humans will feel disconnected from the things we make. A society where we live divorced from real life, surrounded by images designed to sell us things and give us paranoia. I think we are now living in the Spectacular age. The Situationists' contribution to the May 1968 uprising was to write poems on walls of the campus of the Sorbonne. They saw poetry as an agent for political change, which I find fascinating.

You sell smaller works via galleries, of course, but have you ever sold one of your billboards?

No, I've never sold a billboard. They just cost me money. [Laughs] But I do think they're the most important thing in terms of what I do. All I want to do in life is to be able to pay the rent and make the billboards. That's my complete and utter ambition.