

Art & Photography / Culture Talks

The Poet Inspired by Modernism and Kazimir Malevich

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As two new London exhibitions open, Robert Montgomery talks to AnOther about the democratising power of public art

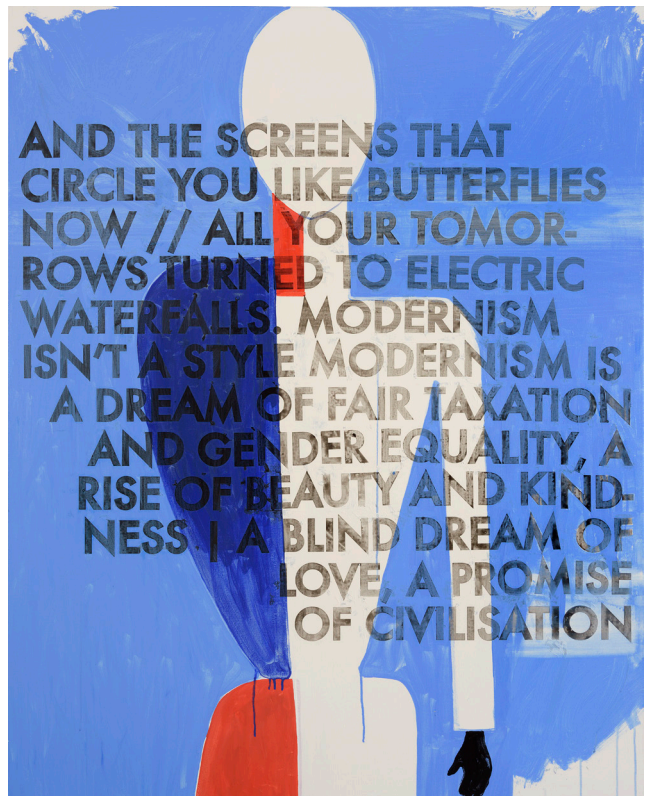
Robert Montgomery's work straddles light, immense physicality, conceptual art, and poetry; spelling out our collective societal thoughts and deepest personal musings in bold, all-caps Futura. His vast text-based pieces grace billboards and bodies alike: at least 20 people have his words tattooed on them – mostly, he says, having seen his pieces circulate online. Such is the power of his art to transcend physical borders and to profoundly touch people – something that will surely only increase from this month, when not one but two exhibitions open in London at Parasol Unit, near Old Street in the east; and Cob Gallery, in Camden. We spoke to Montgomery about the impact of billboards, the democratising power of public art, and a new move away from irony and towards spirituality in the art world.

On working on billboards...

"It seemed really exciting because the kind of language you get with billboards normally is so sinister; it's selling you things based on generating insecurities in your psyche. I felt as though the meaning of that language is significant, and it shows we're in this really materialistic culture who are much more body than spirit. I wanted to try and use that place to talk about more spiritual things, so it came from a kind of desire to erase what billboards say. When I was a kid I was really sensitive to signs; I always felt a bit like the billboards were shouting at me."

On the democratising stance of making public artworks...

"I wanted to make experiments to see if people could understand art who hadn't studied Art History, and they can plainly, if it's 80 words on a billboard. The ordinary person on the street is more intelligent than the Daily Mail gives them credit for. The first ones looked so unlike billboards



Artwork by Robert Montgomery

people stopped and read them: I'm interested in that grey space where if it's not an art audience and they don't know my work, they don't even know it's art. I'm really interested in that direct communication with strangers who are reading the text, and they can't categorise it. I think for a certain group of people if you say it's contemporary art they sort of slightly switch off, so it's great if you can reach those people without them knowing it's art. Sometimes I write them like a madman and sometimes I write it so it sounds like a sort of inspirational idealistic manifesto and I sometimes write them so that they sound quite angry; so I'm conscious of the difference in the tone of voice. In the street they're always anonymous."



Artwork by Robert Montgomery

On the importance of artists engaging with politics...

"We're sitting right on the precipice of an ecological crisis, and in countries where anti-intellectual movements have taken hold and are pulling the discourse further and further to the right, the last thing that's gonna save the planet is pulling the discourse more and more towards individualism. I think not just artists but politicians, journalists, people in industry and people in business have to wake up to the now or else we truly are fucked, and we're the generation that kills the planet or doesn't save it.

"There's a kind of new moral focus on everyone and I think contemporary art is going through a paradigm shift where artists are looking less to making art about art in that post-Duchampian vein and looking maybe to someone like Joseph Beuys instead of Marcel Duchamp as a model for what being an artist is. As well as being an artist Beuys was a founding member of the German Green Party, and was engaged in politics in society in a real way that wasn't distant. He was also looking for a genuine spirituality that was not ironic, and looking for art to sort of give us a spiritual transcendent experience, and in contemporary art for the last 50 years we've been very embarrassed about that sort of thing. Beuys was looking at art to fill that void a little bit and I think we're seeing a slight climate shift towards that in art practice."

Robert Montgomery, Hammersmith Poem and Love Letters to Kasimir Malevich runs until November 25, 2017 at Cob Gallery.