

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

The Madcap Art of Martin Creed

'Martin Creed: The Back Door' is on view at the Park Avenue Armory through Aug. 7



A room has been filled halfway to the ceiling with 860 white balloons for 'Work No. 2497: Half the air in a given space.'

PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

June 9, 2016 6:48 p.m. ET

With an arsenal of works that range from madcap to head-scratching, Martin Creed seems to be vying for the title of village idiot of the art world.

In one piece, he tears a single sheet of paper into tiny strips and enshrines them in a display case. In another, he makes a towering sculpture out of a simple pile of plywood. In his signature work, the lights in an empty gallery flip on and off, with nothing more to see than darkness and illumination.

"I don't know if I like the art world, but I love a field where people can do stupid things—I think it's really important," the 48-year-old British artist said Tuesday at a preview of "Martin Creed: The Back Door," on view at the Park Avenue Armory through Aug. 7. Mixing arch and playful conceptual art with a strong dose of farcical humor, the exhibit is Mr. Creed's largest survey yet in the U.S.



Martin Creed's Park Avenue Armory retrospective will be on view until Aug. 7. *PHOTO: AGATON STROM FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“Everywhere you turn there’s something puzzling and eccentric,” said Rebecca Robertson, the Park Avenue Armory’s president and executive producer, who praised the artist’s ability to transform the stately venue into a sort of funhouse for the summer.

“There’s an absurdity to his work, a fundamental questioning of everything we do,” said Ms. Robertson. “He’s like this desperate man trying to create order in a disordered world, with a kind of Monty Python approach.”

The show features both old and new works, arranged in spaces all around the Armory. In the 55,000-square-foot drill hall, a lone giant video screen offers slow-motion shots of people’s mouths munching and opening to reveal the proverbial “see food.” Another room has been filled halfway to the ceiling with 860 white balloons, densely arranged in a mass to be pushed through by intrepid exhibition-goers.

The latter piece speaks to the “duality between joy and anxiety,” Tom Eccles, co-curator of the show along with Hans Ulrich Obrist, said of an experience that seems fun at the start but is disorienting as well.

The exhibit also includes musical performances by Mr. Creed and others, including a ragtag band that marches through the Armory with a megaphone leading the charge. “Thoughts Lined Up,” a new album of his due out next month, features primitive rock songs laced with cleverness and winks that evoke the artist’s upbringing in the British punk and post-punk scenes.

Mr. Creed’s infamous work “The lights going on and off,” which helped him win the prestigious Turner Prize for notable British artists in 2001, reveals his minimalist but dramatic approach. In a similar piece at the Armory, a piano opens and slams shut by

Martin Creed at the Park Avenue Armory »

'Martin Creed: The Back Door,' on view at the Park Avenue Armory through Aug. 7



1 of 13

way of a mechanical contraption hidden from view.

“There are very simple entry points so you can enter quite complex conceptual work, but through an experience of complete exuberance,” said Mr. Eccles. “It’s sophisticated but also raw and problematic. You actually ask the question: Is this art?”

Another example: an assemblage of cactus plants set on a bench. It evokes minimalist sculpture, but a casual viewer, or admirer of puns, might wonder about cactuses placed where people park their backsides.

“To me, if they make you laugh or smile, that’s a really good sign,” Mr. Creed said of such works.

At times, the work can also be rough-edged and confrontational. In the little-trafficked bowels of the Armory building, some of his more notorious video works are being screened, focused on bodily functions like vomiting and defecating.

To Mr. Creed, art is better served by playful, perplexing and sometimes messy gestures. They are “much more lifelike” than art that is too tidy and pristine, he said.

“The worst thing you can do is pretend the world is easy and you’ve got answers,” he added. “That’s what’s brilliant about the art world: It is a place where you can do stupid things and they get taken seriously, as they should.”

‘The worst thing you can do is pretend the world is easy and you’ve got answers.’

—Martin Creed

One new piece, “Shutters opening and closing,” was conceived especially for the Armory space. In the back of the drill hall, kept empty and dark except for the large video screen, a metal gate opens and shuts, revealing a view onto whatever is happening on the Lexington Avenue sidewalk.

“Wouldn’t it be great if there was a way of thinking of a gallery as a space to turn inside out, so that we look out at the world, not away from the world?” Mr. Creed asked.

Other ideas were entertained at different working stages, like orchestrating theatrical happenings on the street or hiring runners to race around the outside of the building.

“But in the end, everything seemed like it was trying too hard, and opening the back door seemed so brilliant,” Mr. Creed said. “It makes a beautiful picture of the world.”