
David Cotterrell: ArtReview : David Cotterrell

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Sacha Craddock on the temporal and outgoing nature of this Beck's finalist's work

The kind of oversimplification that insists the audience in the outside world is different to that inside the gallery does not allow for the fact that it can be both. Artists too can be interested in both at the same time, in placing work in different as well as the same places. It can be difficult, when starting out, to combine public art with private ambition. Artists quickly become typecast. Actively engaged with the desire to speak to as many people as possible, David Cotterrell has made a wide range of work. He studied first at Winchester School of Art, where among the projects he organized were public visits to the decommissioned Civil Defence Emergency Control Centre, and then went to Chelsea in 1997 to do an MA.

The same year, David collaborated with Javier Flores to cover the fronts of two empty terraced houses in Vauxhall with newspaper. This very straightforward work was of the moment, fixed in place and time, part of a community festival and therefore not initially part of a conventional art context. Cotterrell talks of the difficulty he has had in representing his work. Does it lie, to a certain degree in its documentation, in the photographs of the houses that were shown as part of New Contemporaries exhibition in 1997, or does it require the physical gesture to be made over and over again? One problem with making work at this scale and in this manner is that it tends to be seen as a series of projects, an unglamorous cocktail of preconceived local authority and public need and is constantly projected forward into the future.

The Saltley Geyser, in which 500 litres of water shot straight out of the ground for 26seconds at 4 p.m. every day, took place with local planning permission. But it was hard. The geyser, commissioned as a precursor to a major regeneration scheme, may seem like the opposite extreme to Mark Wallinger's Fountain of 1992 - in which a plastic hose was pushed through a hole in the gallery window trickling water pathetically onto the pavement below - and yet there are similarities between the works. With no surrounding evidence of anything, no explanation, the geyser is elevated, literally, way beyond the momentary public landmark to carry all the artistic awkwardness of sudden death and ultimate disappointment.

Car Culture, a DVD video installation, shows a series of cars tailgating. One by one they close up and threaten the driver who has the audacity to hog the fast lane of the motorway. This piece, shot by a windscreen-mounted rear-facing camera over 2,000 miles of motorway, acknowledges the participants by publishing each number-plate in the credits.

David Cotterrell will probably show the virtuoso performance piece Borrowed Time at the ICA. Starting with nothing in a room but the distant sound of a train, tension and expectation builds to a whoosh of illusion as a steam train is projected onto a mixture of liquid CO₂ and smoke fluid to actually come across the room towards you. The steam comes close but then fades black onto darkness to disappear with the vapour. Edwardian imagery, perhaps, reminiscent of that fairground spectacle in which life is seemingly conjured out of nothing. The material that drives and builds the image is also holding the illusion.

Cotterrell's work has a simple sense of moment and subject; whether inside or outside the gallery space, it can be understood, not totally absorbed, but is strangely lacking in physical presence. The film ends, the geyser stops and the building is eventually brought down.

Show: Beck's Futures

