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An emotional roller-coaster



A Historical Masturbators

*His sexually-charged works elicit polarised reactions, leading some to question whether **Eddie Peake**'s intention is purely to shock. **Naima Morelli** interviews the London artist about his current exhibition, *A Historical Masturbators*.*

After half-an-hour squeezed between outstandingly stylish people, I bodysurfed my way out of the Lorcan O'Neill gallery in Rome, Italy.

Outside the gallery's courtyard, leaning on a car like total brats in leather jackets, I stumbled upon two friends. On a normal day one would be a painter, the other a gallery director, but tonight they were just grumpy art viewers.

"This show is so crap," blurted the painter "It doesn't have anything to do with Rome." "Commercial rubbish that's good for art fairs, that's what it is," groaned the gallerist.

These kinds of reactions are pretty common when it comes to Eddie Peake's work. Successful and controversial, the British artist has been described as the most exciting artist of his generation, as well as a mere Young British Artists fanboy. The title of his show at Lorcan O'Neill, *A Historical Masturbators*, doesn't try to conceal its explicit content.



Indeed, Peake's art might span different media, but sexuality is the leitmotiv. From the ceramic statues engaged in autarchic pleasures, to faun-shaped neon lights and edgy performances, these are not the kind of shows you want to bring your little daughter to see.

"I don't care about the sexual allusions really. We have seen these kinds of attention-grabbers plenty of times," said my friend painter. "What really annoys me is that this Peake guy used €200 canvasses just to spray them with stupid words. What a waste."

"The only thing I liked was the acrylic bear with the scarf," said the gallerist.

"Me too," agreed the painter. "I really liked the bear. But that was pretty much it."

Perplexed but curious, I reckoned that the only way to find out what the artist was up to was to speak to him directly. Peake has been renting his studio in the Pigneto area of Rome for six months while working on his show. He isn't new to the city. In 2008 he undertook a residency at the British School in Rome. Being represented by Lorcan O'Neill, the ties streng-then; now he even speaks some Italian.

When I asked him about his permanency in Rome, he said he had found the city slow and very much about its past, to the extent of wanting to deny the future.

"So that's why my show at Lorcan is called *A Historical Masturbators*. History, for me, has always been a sort of burden and, in Rome, it is very much so. There is a mentality and ethos here that corresponds to a constant masturbating of history."

Your paintings are colourful and attractive, at first. It takes a while to visualise the words that are written on the canvasses, which are

Artists who say that they block out the audience are lying

usually sexually-charged or rude. Why this dichotomy?

I'm just trying to have some form of conflict at play. I love drama and that's what I'm trying to do with the work. I feel it's still possible to actually affect the viewer emotionally, psychologically and intellectually with a drama. I want to take the viewer on a roller coaster.

Some people loved the show, others were like: "Yet another guy who is doing sex..."

Yes, that's true, the responses are often quite polarising in relation to my work. I think the work is quite often misconstrued as being provocative or shocking, which I don't want. I would ask those people: do you feel provoked, or shocked?

I would be surprised if the answer were to be yes. In which case, it would lead me to ask: if you are not shocked or provoked why did you come to the conclusion that this is what I'm trying to do? It is very obvious to me that I'm using a language that is visually and emotionally, I hope, arresting. But it is true, I want to be extreme.

Ideally, how would you like the viewers to experience your exhibitions?

I'd like the viewer to find the show invigorating at times and painful at others. And I feel it's quite difficult to make an exhibition a non-cerebral viewing experience at all. Just the action of going into a gallery is so non-passive. You need to be active mentally.

So you mean that the viewers walk in with their minds already made up?

Exactly. Even if they do not know your work at all, just the act of walking into a gallery becomes this experience where any viewer, sophisticated or not, switches on this button of 'now I'm being a critical viewer'.

I do want that to happen, but I do not want to prevent a real feeling from emerging, either. And I think the conditions that we have come to see as normal in viewing art make it very difficult to experience art in a genuinely emotional way. The environment is hostile and the discussion and the critical discourse built throughout the years are an obstacle.

Do you like to observe the reactions of the public and collect opinions?

Yes, I love to see how the viewers are engaging with the work. For a show at White Cube in London in 2013 one of the works was a constantly present performance. The performance involved me and a group of artistes devising a performance.

White Cube in London is the kind of gallery which non-art people also go to. There were hundreds of people coming there all the time.

So I was there on display naked, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally. You see the people coming and you can tell on their face before they even walk in the door they've already made up their mind. They come in and they've got a scowl on their face. They want to dislike it, they want to be annoyed.

When making the work, are you thinking about the audience's response to it?

I feel ambivalent about this. Artists who say that they totally block that out are telling a lie. Sometimes I feel that I really need approval. At others I feel completely defiant, I don't care what everyone thinks. I suppose in the end I think it's important to do what you really want to do. I try not to let the audience dictate the direction of the work, it's not about second-guessing their taste.

One work everybody loved in this exhibition was the bear with the scarf. The whole exhibition was heavily sexually-charged and then there was this bear wearing a wool scarf, which was really... nice.

In general I quite like it when things feel quite incongruous. For me, having a bear in the gallery is just the most fabulously amazing idea I can possible imagine, precisely because it's not where you'd expect to find a bear.

A Historical Masturbators runs at Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome, until April 4.

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