Martin Creed's stairway to heaven

Martin Creed has paved an Edinburgh thoroughfare with richly coloured marble, bringing a splash of Italy to the city. It's the highlight of this year's art festival

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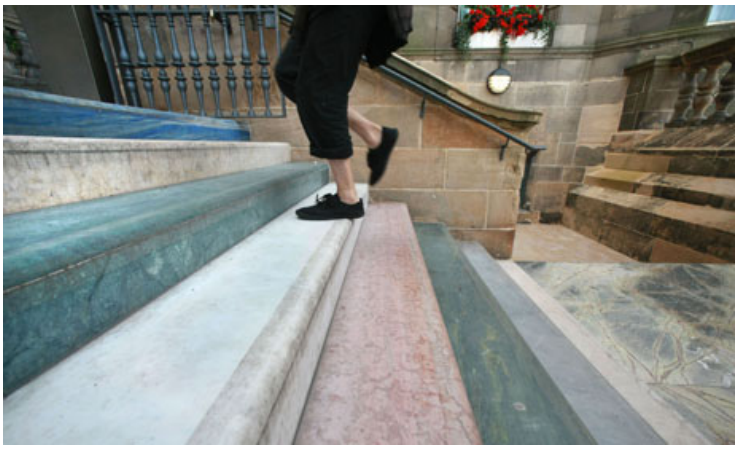

Not so pedestrian ... Martin Creed's Work No 1059, the Scotsman Steps. Photograph: Tom Finnie for the Guardian

The best art at this year's Edinburgh festival is not in a gallery. It is under your feet. You walk up and down it and you may, if you like, look at it as a work of art; but no one is forcing you to experience it that way.

In fact, it is a bit embarrassing to stand on the Scotsman Steps, an enclosed public staircase that leads from a spot near Waverley Station up to the heights of Edinburgh's Old Town, examining the aesthetic beauty of the 104 stairs while people rush from A to B. They wonder why you are loitering in the middle of a pedestrian thoroughfare. Martin Creed has created a work of art so perfectly integrated into the world that you feel a bit of a fool for making a fuss over it.

Creed was commissioned by the Fruitmarket Gallery to transform these formerly dingy stairs into a work of pedestrian art. Titled Work No 1059, it was meant to open in time for 2010's festival, but wasn't completed until June this year. No wonder it was tricky to

bring together, for it makes use of a spectacular and luxurious variety of coloured marble slabs. Every step is made of a different kind. We think marble means white shiny stone, but there are blue marbles, orange, green, red marbles – and they are all here, meticulously shaped and precisely installed, to create a staircase fit for kings.

This is a visionary and utopian work of art. An exhibition at the Fruitmarket last year, filling the gap created by the public work's delay, irritatingly made Creed look like an artist obsessed with numbers and clever-clever plays on pattern. In reality, he is a social artist; the true magic of his work lies in the way it interacts with people and places. Here, he has given a gift of imagination to the city. Why should public spaces be shoddy, uncared for, mean? The Scotsman Steps in their new marble incarnation accuse every compromised civic scheme. Here is a set of steps lots of people use every day, going to work, or coming back from the pub. Why not make that climb a moment of beauty?

Creed, who lives on Alicudi, an island north of Sicily, has brought a bit of Italian visual glory into the heart of Edinburgh. Italian cities have been decorated with rich marble for centuries, and have always treated public spaces as special, dramatic stages for life. You could almost say this is a Catholic work of art infiltrated into a Calvinist city: the coloured richness of stone is the sort of extravagance you expect to find in the Vatican, but now lies in a place associated with the Reformation. Then again, the Scotsman Steps possess a no-nonsense, practical, modest quality, thanks to Creed's streak of sober restraint – the streak that makes him a minimalist. From the top of the steps, you get a wonderful panoramic view over the city. All human life is there, down in the station and crowding the streets, and up here with you. This is a model of what public art ought to be: not a pompous statue but a contribution to living in the world.

The work's radicalism would surely have delighted **Robert Rauschenberg**, the great American artist who died in 2008. His paint-spattered assemblages of everyday objects and found images – a photograph of his son next to a stuffed American eagle, his own bed smeared with fleshly colours – transformed art in the 1950s. Rauschenberg once said that neither art nor life can be made: "I try to act in the gap between the two." Creed's steps occupy the mysterious, enchanting space in which Rauschenberg strove to act; the borderland between art and life.

Rauschenberg himself is remembered this year in a show at Inverleith House in the Royal Botanic Garden. In the 50s he was a revolutionary; for perhaps a decade after that he made deeply moving and evocative works. But you won't find any of those masterpieces at Inverleith House. Instead, this exhibition drags out of gallery storerooms and flabby collections his late works, from the 1980s onwards. Nothing can redeem these sad sacks of exhausted ideas. Rauschenberg in his later years descended into self-pastiche. His gold and blue silkscreen pictures, reused Florida street signs and junk that seems carefully selected for him by assistants, have the manner of his early work but little of its intensity or passion. It is a bitter encounter, because I believe Rauschenberg still has a lot to teach and show, but he is ill-served by this misconceived wallow in his years of decline.

In the gardens, people stumble over clumps of hardened goo and marvel at what looks like a storm-ravaged fallen tree trunk, but turns out to be pair of giant legs and a headless torso. Its surface is engraved like rough bark, as if a tree god were slumbering on the lawn. This is a bronze sculpture by the young British artist Thomas Houseago

whose works, scattered under the trees, provide a better reason to trek to the Botanic Garden. Rauschenberg's art seems a dead thing in Edinburgh, but his words live on, as young artists reveal new ways for art to be part of life. Creed does that, Houseago does it, too – as does American painter **Ingrid Calame**, whose ethereal wall drawing in the Fruitmarket gallery is based on tracings she made of Los Angeles graffiti. Words float out of the gracious veil of pallid, delicate colour she has transferred to a gallery surface: outside brought inside, street art memorialised, an abstract painting as a documentary photograph.

Faces in a restless universe

I find these artists more memorable than the British sculptor **Tony Cragg**, who has a survey of two decades of ambitious work at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. It feels sacrilegious to say this. Cragg makes extraordinarily energetic, spiralling, skewed forms, like melted chessmen. At first sight, his tottering towers of spun discs, or unbalanced stacks of plates, seem totally abstract; but in this exhibition, his drawings reveal their figurative origins and send you back to look again and notice the distorted faces, like people trapped in the warped material, that spookily populate his restless universe.

Cragg has formal originality, explosive creativity, and depth. His art is surely a reflection of modern science, an evocation of the warped fabric of space and time. His spectral faces, fused with the shuddering cosmos, suggest the human predicament in these stormy times. I suppose.

Yet the conventional presentation of his art as just that – Art, on plinths and with drawings to back up its seriousness – traps Cragg in a universe slightly askew to the one that interests me. This is art that sits on its pedestal and waits for life to come and admire it. Rauschenberg was right to say that what matters in art is a relationship with life; it is the way art inhabits the world that makes it powerful or weak, unforgettable or irrelevant. This is a good ethos for art at the Edinburgh festival, which is all about the moment of connection between artist and audience. And it forces me to say that, for all its strengths, Cragg's art just does not have what Creed's has: it does not speak in the world in the same unforced, open way. It is just some stuff in a gallery. Outside the museum, Creed's neon text glows with reassurance: Everything Is Going to Be Alright. Art is going to fuse with life. Both will be better for it.

• Robert Rauschenberg: Botanical Vaudeville is at Inverleith House until 2 October. Thomas Houseago: The Beat of the Show is there until 21 June. Ingrid Calame is at the Fruitmaket Gallery, Thursday until 9 October. Tony Cragg is at National Galleries of Scotland until 6 November. Full details: 0131-226 6558, edinburghartfestival.com