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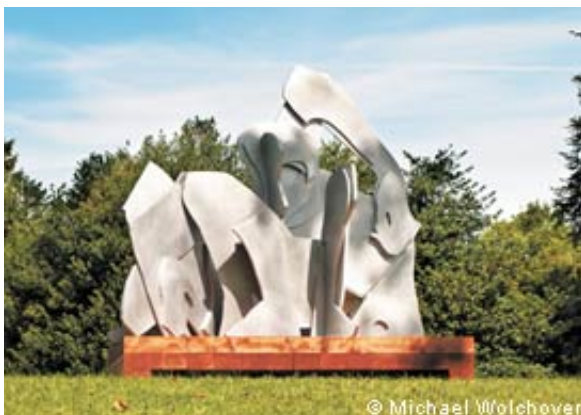
Edinburgh untamed

By Jackie Wullschlager

Jackie Wullschlager finds a daring diversity and dynamism at this year's art festival



'Reclining Figure for DV' (2008) by Thomas Houseago



It has neither the panache nor the money of Venice or Basel, Miami or Frieze – which is precisely why the Edinburgh Art Festival, which opened on Thursday, is serious, provocative viewing. The roster of artists at most biennales and fairs today is identikit, conventional and tame. Edinburgh's this summer is unexpected and diverse – from the Modern Art Gallery's shimmering small show of new abstract photographs of lightning by Hiroshi

'Reclining Figure for DV' (2008) by Thomas Houseago Sugimoto to an over-extended survey of Scottish watercolourist Elizabeth Blackadder at the National Gallery on the Mound. The international/local, trendy/traditional balancing act distinguishes Edinburgh; crucially, its original programme challenges on intellectual, contemporary terms the conceptual stranglehold that so often dulls smarter venues.

The most compelling exhibition, *Thomas Houseago: The Beat of the Show*, is a pertinent illustration. Houseago makes monumental figurative sculptures, rough, cartoonish yet fragile, with giant mask-like faces, marked by a fine draughtsmanship pronounced because part of each figure – an arm, a head – is left unnervingly flat, in two-dimensions rather than three. Houseago is currently showing at François Pinault's collection in Venice and Charles Saatchi's in London, so he is as sought after as they come. Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden, however, is the first to display his work outdoors, and it is a revelation. Put Houseago in the natural world, and you see immediately his realist impulse: his fanciful creations, testing representational possibilities, here breathe energy and life.

A one-eyed head growing out of a tall bottle has a lustrous green-gold sheen echoed, in sunlight, by the sticky sap of the pines surrounding it. Peering from a copse, a large copper-bronze owl is turning slowly green. In planes of aluminium, a post-cubist "Rattlesnake Figure" strides through a clump of ivy. A chunky, carved "Lumpy Figure", built up from branches and poles, is constructed like a tree. The outsized "Golden Spoon" placed in a bower invites you to sit in it, while the crescent "Moon Mask", flat as paper, with an encrusted white patina suggesting chewing gum, glimmers at dusk.

Leeds-born but working since 2005 in Los Angeles, 39-year-old Houseago mentions sources from Brancusi to *Space Invaders*, commenting that now "the 20th century comes to us without linear index ... Picasso, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Hanna-Barbera, *Star Wars* and modernism all kind of co-exist". His is a signal talent: a visionary who creates his own convincing milieu, a vibrant maker at a time when art is overwhelmingly conceptual and virtual. "I am fascinated", he says, "by the actions that an artist takes to make something ... As a sculptor I am trying to put thought and energy into an inert material and give it truth and form, and I believe there is nothing more profound than achieving that."

Thirty years ago another British sculptor, Tony Cragg, emerged from a conceptual environment to make physically and politically charged work rooted in the material world. "Britain Seen From the North" (1981) – made in a year dominated by miners' strikes and the Toxteth riots against Margaret Thatcher's government – is a map composed of scavenged plastic objects, presented on its side, with Wales on the bottom, seen from the perspective of a life-size plastic mosaic outsider-figure looking on from Scotland.

Soon afterwards, Cragg won the Turner Prize and represented Britain in Venice (1988). He had settled in Germany in 1977 and has rarely been seen in Britain since. The Scottish Modern Art Gallery's new retrospective is his first UK show in two decades, and begins spectacularly in the grounds, where the bright yellow-painted bronze "Declination" (2004), a huge bottle form metamorphosed in combination with other vessels into an abstract push-and-pull dynamic, echoes the twisting energy-plus-elegance of Charles Jencks's permanent landscape spiral. Cragg's piece weighs two tonnes, but, balancing on points, looks weightless; a solid mass, it is also open, inviting the eye into strange crevices and interiors – enticing, elusive.



'Red Figure' (2009) by Tony Cragg

Cragg remains a maker; developing from his early stacked pieces, he pulls, bends, stretches forms out of their axis, mutating vertical shapes, above all, the vessel, which he sees as “a strong metaphor for the body and organisms of the natural world”. Recent titles – “Mental Landscape”, “Lost in Thought”, “Ever After”, “It Is, It Isn't” – suggest a growing interest in interiority and metaphysics. Impressively, this show displays the figurative drawings and watercolours that are Cragg's starting point: often a tangled mass of heads, faces, sometimes in opposition – “Points of View” – or a series of chromosomes are the basis for smooth, dramatically simplified works in bronze or wood: the abstractions of biology and chemistry made tactile.

Cragg began as a transformer of junk at a time of global depression, so it is intriguing to contrast his trajectory with a 1980s series by the most famous and seminal American scavenger-artist, Robert Rauschenberg. *Botanical Vaudeville* is the first UK exhibition of Rauschenberg's “Gluts”: works constructed from discarded metal parts – traffic signs, exhaust pipes, radiator drills, metal awnings – collected in Texas at the time of the oil recession. The exhibition title comes from a silvery painting of ghostly trees on mirrored aluminium. Everywhere, Rauschenberg's formal exploration of the reflective, textural, sculptural and chromatic properties of metal and glass is enhanced by the flood of natural light which is a feature of Inverleith House in Edinburgh's

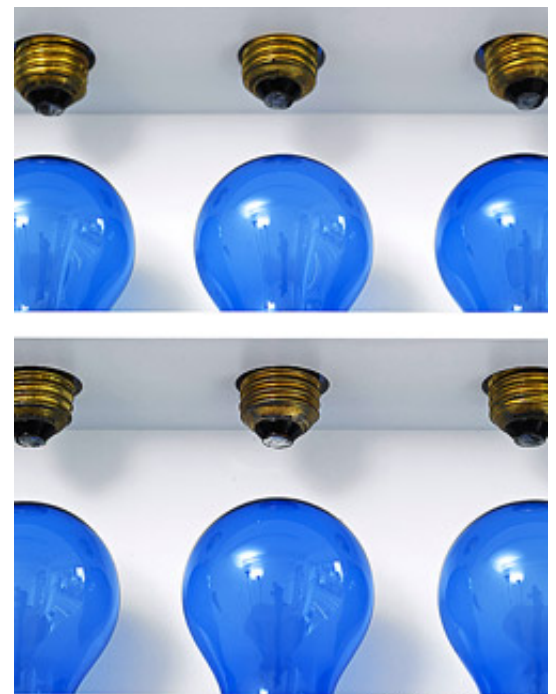


'Pegasi/ROCI USA' (1990) by Robert Rauschenberg

Royal Botanic Garden.

In “Urban Katydid (Glut)” scores of buckled street signs (Tropicana Parkway, Miramar Street) dance across a long flat mirror, their names promising paradise but their distorted warped forms suggesting collapse. Reflected through them too, to queasy contradictory effect, is the neoclassical ornamentation of Inverleith’s gracious interiors. “Curly Que Summer Glut” is a twisting wall-based aluminium sculpture, a poor man’s slice of baroque; “Ginger (Kabal American Zephyr)” is a comically assembled construction where a worn-out kettle seems about to take flight, while “Pegasits/ROCI USA” is a philosophical combine – a soaring, two-dimensional horse is delicately painted on a broad stainless steel ground, to which is attached a life-size gilt silver leaf chair, at once thuddingly material, absurd, poetic.

“I think painting is more like the real world when it is made out of the real world,” Rauschenberg stated. His generous, protean, careless-yet-formal spirit is wonderfully reprised in Edinburgh’s finest commercial show, Ingleby’s *Mystics or Rationalists?* where works by nine conceptual artists tread a line between logic and lyricism. Susan Collis’s apparent paint splatters turn out to be mother-of-pearl patterns. Katie Paterson’s “Light Bulbs to Simulate Moonlight” creates a romantic spectral glow while measuring the hours of moonlight experienced in an average human life. Best of all, Cornelia Parker’s “The Collected Death of Images” embodies in a few “pages” of beaten silver, fashioned out of leftover particles from photographic chemical processes, the theme of transcendence, making and materiality which courses throughout this excellent festival.



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‘Lightbulbs to Simulate Moonlight’ (2008) by Katie Paterson

Edinburgh Art Festival, to September 4; Thomas Houseago, Royal Botanic Garden, to June 21 2012; Tony Cragg, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, to November 6; Robert Rauschenberg, Inverleith House, to October 2; Mystics or Rationalists?, Ingleby Gallery, to October 29; Hiroshi Sugimoto, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, to September 25

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