

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Franz West installations, Edinburgh **Franz West brought art to the masses yet made them chuckle too**

By Rachel Spence



Franz West and Heimo Zobernig's 'Bateau Imaginaire' (2004)

Franz West is often described as the arch joker in a pack of late 20th-century sculptors known for their irreverent cornucopias of materials. Yet while the coal-and-sackcloth statements of Jannis Kounellis, for example, declared that art was a serious business, West's profferings – zany, bulbous sculptures, kinky collages and funky furniture that he encouraged spectators to sit on – labelled him a cheeky Lord of Misrule. He would bring art to the masses yet make them chuckle too.

I never found him that funny. His squidgy, effervescent, papier-mâché efflorations sent shivers up my spine, as did his collages of fashion, porn and newspaper images. His invitations to perch on the sofas and chairs felt like commandments: thou shalt giggle; thou shalt chill out.

West never denied that his humour sprang from dark sources. Born in Vienna in 1947, he grew up in a city lacerated by its war record. He remembered playing in filthy, debris-littered streets where virtually all the residents had been Nazis. His own parents were communists, Jewish on his mother's side. Even without the political backstory, his memories of seeing his mother, who was a dentist, in a blood-spattered apron, and hearing the screams of her patients, are the stuff of Freudian case history.

An obsession with neurotic gore was thoroughly explored by West's predecessors, the Viennese Actionists, who masturbated and mutilated themselves throughout the 1960s. Their mission was to force their fathers to confront the violence of their past while simultaneously reclaiming art from the taint of commodification.

West snubbed the melodrama but shared the sentiment. His kinky proto-genitalia and faecal gestures – for that is the primordial stuffing within his anti-Platonic forms – might poke fun at our psychosexual neuroses yet they bring them up close and personal too. He wanted to make “art you could get in touch with”.

His predilection for furniture had another genesis too, partly inspired by a juvenile visit to Rome where he experienced the Spanish Steps as the equivalent of a village square; somewhere that allowed people to be “sitting in the art consuming life.”

That democratic spirit saw collaboration become a cornerstone of West's practice. From his earliest days, he made work in tandem with other artists, ranging from barely known Viennese graduates to such Arte Povera colossi as Michelangelo Pistoletto, the conceptualists Douglas Gordon and Sarah Lucas, to the contemporary abstractionist and sculptor Anselm Reyle and the Georgian-born painter Tamuna Sirbiladze, West's wife.

Now pieces made by West and his collaborators are on display at Inverleith House in Edinburgh. West's rapport with Inverleith goes back to 2001 when the 18th-century mansion – host to a raft of top-notch contemporary shows – dotted the botanical gardens in which it stands with West's goofy aluminium sculptures.

According to Inverleith's curator Paul Nesbitt, plans for this show, which was made in conjunction with the Franz West Foundation, were under way when West died last year. It's a shame he never lived to see it as he would surely have been enchanted by its singular blend of exuberance and equilibrium. The latter virtue is due to the setting. With its beautifully proportioned rooms and deep-set windows gazing on to the tree-dotted landscape, Inverleith is the epitome of Enlightenment architecture. Such a backdrop calms West's postwar acid with Age of Reason alkali. Suspended from a scruffy chain over the monumental staircase, the fairground-wacky, anti-chandelier “Fleur Malle” (2010), made by West in conjunction with Andreas Reiter Raabe, encapsulates the paradox between tumult and serenity which is this show's overwhelming strength.

In the first room Nesbitt has recreated Stolen Fantasy, the show West made with Anselm Reyle for the Schinkel Pavilion in Berlin in 2012. In an interview, Reyle said the work evolved out of a process of recuperating West's studio rejects and sending them back and forth between each other, with no verbal communication, until one or other artist declared it finished.

The result is a roomscape of kindergarten-style wooden tables and chairs, gaudy lamps perched on lumpy pedestals painted with gorgeous, gestural splashes. One wall is covered with a chequerboard of sugar-pink and yellow acrylic against which are displayed uber-kitsch abstract paintings and collages. It is a daft, glorious, essentially decorative fantasy which sets the mood for an exhibition which feels more like a journey through someone's home than a museum. Try to imagine an episode of Changing Rooms hijacked by Montessori kids, egged on by a Freudian shrink.

There are beds and sofas to lie on; games to play; and pictures to look at. Sarah Lucas has conjured the artist's silhouette out of cigarettes in a wall-relief entitled "Spaghetti West". Heimo Zobernig has set 10 of West's white metal-legged chairs in front of a blank white wooden box in a parody of our image-obsessed culture. With fellow Austrian Marina Faust, West concocted "Talk Without Words" (2012), a fuzzy, lime-green mohair sphere which has been suspended over a table in the hope that spectators will knock it back and forth to each other with their foreheads.

Lest we forget that this is art and not playschool, there are existential moments. "Every, little" is a 2003 installation conceived with Douglas Gordon that comprises two steel-legged sofas beneath wall text that reads, "Every time you think of me we die a little." Words by Gordon, furniture by West? Probably, but there's no way of knowing, as Nesbitt has supplied no explanatory texts in favour of a pure encounter.

Given the breadth of backstories, this is a bold move. Yet the experience of voyaging mapless through this startling dreamscape accentuates the unexpected. It was worth a trip to Edinburgh simply to stumble upon table-top sculptures – delicate, papier-mâché exclamations dolloped with lush, flamboyant strokes of paint – that were moulded by West and coloured by the Chilean abstractionist Eugenia Rochas. Made in the early 1980s, when West was still wedded to chalky whites and greys, Rochas' flair helped to kickstart West's own chromatic explorations.

Yet even when the outside influence is in evidence, it is West's imagination that dominates. In "Spiegel in Kabine mit Passstücken" (1996), for example, Michelangelo Pistoletto has supplied the mirror in which spectators are encouraged to watch themselves twirling West's Adaptives – gawky, white sculptures like gigantic cocktail sticks. Yet it is the experience of transgressing the do-not-touch injunction which applies to most artworks that lingers in the memory. Occasionally, even the most enlightened soul needs to be ordered to bring out their inner child.

'Mostly West: Franz West and Artist Collaborations', Ingverleith House, Edinburgh until September 22. www.rbge.ac.uk