

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Franz West review – his sculptures look like they've wandered in, up to no good

Showing the Austrian maverick at the temple to Britain's greatest female sculptor reveals what a complex and joyous artist he was

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Franz West's intriguing pink Sputnik-shaped Epiphany an Stühlen, 2011. Photograph: The Hepworth Wakefield

If you stand among Barbara Hepworth's carved and rounded plaster and wood shapes at the Hepworth in Wakefield for long enough, you feel that time will wear a hole right through you. Hepworth's art seemed to aim for a kind of timelessness. But time is all I feel among these soothing shadows and hushed planes. I feel eroded in their presence.

Among these prototypes for her bronzes sit three rough, crumbly hollow lumps. The invigilators might want to keep an eye on them. They look like they've wandered in, up to no good, slack-mouthed and conspiring. Franz West's uncouth papier-mâché forms are a great counterpoint to the reserve and sanded-down refinement of Hepworth.

Part of an excellent survey of the late Austrian artist's work that has travelled to Wakefield from Frankfurt and Vienna, West's 1988 ensemble *Das Geraune* (Murmuring) is the only work at the Hepworth placed in direct relationship to the British modernist. Where Hepworth's art encourages a sort of mute contemplation, West's is all about how objects speak and have their way with us. His sculpture, objects and collaborations with other artists feel part of the world rather than apart from it. "It doesn't matter what the art looks like but how it's used," West said.

Much of the show is devoted not just to West's own works but also to the arrangements he made both of them and the paintings, drawings and sculptures he swapped with other artists. These are interesting, but in my view more so as insight into friendship patterns and artistic fellow feeling than as full-blown collaborations.

Since his death in 2012 at the age of 66, there has been a flurry of exhibitions devoted to West, sometimes juxtaposing him with entirely different artists. One recent show in London put him together with Hans Arp. The exhibition highlighted not only what an inventive sculptor West could be, but also how crazy Arp was.

After further shows of West in Edinburgh and at Gagosian, you might wonder why we need another. West was involved in the development of this exhibition at the time of his death, and though not as large as those in earlier venues, it is the last show we shall see of his in which the artist had a hand.

For all West's playfulness, as a man as well as an artist, and the lewdness of many of his sculptures – some of which are like giant sausages, penises or brightly coloured turds – he was a serious, largely self-taught reader and thinker, especially of philosophical and psychoanalytic literature. He understood the power of the abject, the seriousness of the absurd. He was Viennese, after all. A lot of this gets unpacked in the catalogue. This exhibition shows not only West's range, but exactly how good and how deceptive his art could be.

One large gallery is filled with a group of his divans. Manufactured from steel rods, minimally upholstered and covered in commercially available batik cloth, these welcoming three-seaters are an invitation to sit and be quiet, or at least they would if not for the TV monitors hung in the room, from which the unmistakable voice of Slavoj Žižek explains some of Jacques Lacan's ideas about art. You can choose to listen or to fall asleep, read a catalogue, chat. It's the old life and art conundrum, something West chose to dramatise time and time again.

In another room, two chairs sit in front of a huge, daft, pink sculpture that hangs suspended from the ceiling like an asteroid, a giant virus or a Sputnik, with long arms poking into space. Are we meant to talk to it, simply be in its presence, or wait for instructions?

Other sculptures, West's Adaptives, were meant to be handled, worn and played with. One is like a mad golf club, with a huge distended plaster blob on the end of a wonky shaft. It is extremely pleasant just to swing it about, poking at the air, or resting the weight of it over your shoulder. Nearby are a number of photographs of people playing, posing and dancing with these ludicrous forms, set beside some archive photographs of Barbara Hepworth posing decorously with her own works. In one, she rests her shoulder and arm in the embrace of one of her plaster maquettes. In another nearby, a man stands with one of West's big rough white plaster disc balancing on his hips, like he is wearing a gigantic tutu.

Never solemn or pompous, West is serious without taking himself seriously. It's as if he has nothing to prove either to himself or to us. This makes him an enormously likable artist. There is something joyous and slapstick and vulnerable about both him and his art. This is sculpture as silent, physical comedy.

But there is more subtlety to West than this. One room is filled with seven sculptures called Parrhesia. The word, derived from ancient Greek, means to speak freely or boldly. The sculptures resemble heads, held up on rods, balanced on insubstantial, make-do wooden plinths. The rough, mis-shapen lumps have all sorts of interesting and happenstance contours. West was terrific at the lump. Moving around them, their bulges and curves and silhouetted profiles are alive and always unexpected. You keep seeing an ear, a cheek, a nose, a chin, a brow. As soon as you grasp a physiognomy, it has gone. At one moment a head might look feminine, the next ogre-like and masculine. Then it's an ice-cream cone, a knobbly rock, or

something sheered off in some iconoclastic act of vandalism. There are drools of paint, flecks and touches of colour.

I'm reminded of Daumier's caricatures, of the Elgin Marbles and of carnival heads, of Jean Fautrier and many other artists. The heads – if indeed they are heads – seem to be talking to one another. They appear to be enjoying themselves, speaking their minds, arguing, speaking to us, turning towards us and turning away. Parrhesia is worth the trip to Wakefield alone, and reminds us that West's art was all about the conversations.