

Culture 24 : 'Gavin Turk on pharaohs, pyramids and magic carpet rides ahead of Museums at Night 2013', by Mark Sheerin, May 10th, 2013

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By Mark Sheerin | 10 May 2013

Ahead of his Museums at Night appearance at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Gavin Turk talks to Culture24's Mark Sheerin about the power of pyramids, flying carpets and the occasional imaginary pharaoh...



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Sculptor Gavin Turk is perhaps best known for work about Gavin Turk. He has dressed as Sid Vicious and posed for a waxwork, or dressed as a vagrant. He has posed for photos as Andy Warhol or Che. And his degree show consisted simply of a blue plaque confirming his historic residence at the RCA.

But his booking at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery for Museums at Night was always going to be a bit different. There might not even be a self-referential artwork in sight as Turk fills the exhibition space with monitor screens, 'flying' carpets and skeletal pyramids, which he promises have occult powers.

The sculptor plans to install pyramids big enough for visitors to sit or stand in, and talks of "maybe getting some crystals as well". Monitor screens all around the space will relay found footage to do with the structures' fabled power. Turk hopes to raise awareness of their potential.

Now he lists the benefits of pyramid power like a true, if wry, believer: "It can preserve stuff. It can make you sleep at night. It can help you think more clearly. It can make plants grow quicker. It can generate battery electricity."

The Persian rugs also have potential. "I'm feeling the carpets," quips the artist. "I mean feeling the sensation of flying, not just sitting here rubbing them."

The 100-year-old museum is new territory for the former YBA. Its wealth of Egyptian artefacts seem to have little to do with the pop culture within which Turk operates. "I was a little bit struggling," he admitted to me over phone.

Pharaoh: King of Egypt is the British Museum touring show currently showing at the museum - complimented by their permanent collection of exhibits from that ancient world.

"I started wondering where it fitted, 'where was 'I' in this thing?' and also 'who are these pharaohs, what are these pharaohs?', because in a way they're not really a ME theme," he explains. "I haven't really done or touched anything to do with them."



Gavin Turk, Ink Rut Vag. 2010
© The artist

Then his sculptor's eye for form fell on one of the most fundamental structures of all time. "I thought 'Oh, we can work with pyramids.'" So his discovery of pyramid power could make for one of the eeriest events Museums at Night has ever seen.

But none of what he says is without a sense of humour. Turk is ever ready with a quiet chuckle. It's not quite clear how much credence he gives to the wisdom of the ancients.

"Obviously some of the earliest pharaohs were - what was it 3535 BC? - so they're 6,000 years old," he says with yet another laugh. "Which is pretty cool."

Talk gets round to the present day situation in Egypt, which is, according to Turk, "very odd". "Egypt has in its history been so super advanced and then it kind of fell back into a curious setback."

Most strange of all was the attitude of Egyptians to the arrival of archaeologists in the 1800s. "They were kind of mesmerised," says the artist, "and almost happy that various parties were coming and taking things away."

But the history of overseas plunder is, of course, tied up with the history of museums. "The whole thing about museums is very interesting as well. With the idea that the museum was invented to bring back things from all around the world, like trophies," says Turk.

Nevertheless, the artist is cheerful at the prospect of late opening museums throughout the UK come mid May. "Yeah, it's great," he says. "I mean, if you're there during a nine to five day it feels like work. Whereas if you're there after work, it feels like 'after work'. It feels like holiday."

His sense of fun extends to giving kids access to art. With partner Deborah Curtis, he runs children's charity House of Fairy Tales. I mention sleepovers taking place in other museums and he enthuses about them:

"We just love that idea, you know where everything comes alive when the lights go off everything in the museum will come alive."

His dual role may complicate his artistic practice, but he is happy to work outside his comfort zone. "I can kind of make mistakes, so this idea I couldn't normally do, with this kind of crazy power of the pyramid," he says with another chuckle. "It allows me to have a bit of fun really."

It might even appeal to a certain incognito street artist from the Bristol area. A homecoming show by Banksy was his biggest to date here in 2009. "He's going to show up, yeah, let's get him to show up. We'll do little cut outs of Turkses, big Turkses and Rameses."

To the best of my knowledge the Pharaoh Turkses has just been invented by Gavin. Perhaps the pyramids have been about this mercurial artist all along.