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Nathan Coley
Appearances



Nathan Coley

Appearances



The artist, Nathan Coley.

The Artist

Scottish artist Nathan Coley has enjoyed critical and popular success with his investigations into the social aspects of our built environment. His deliberately allegorical small scale and life-size models, public sculptures and slide lectures have focused on the ways in which belief systems and society's values are reflected and reinforced in its edifices, public spaces and built environments.

Coley is known for his works relating to religious architecture and places of congregation. For the new Jupiter Sculpture Park, Edinburgh, he created a graveyard which was both memorial and folly. His illuminated 'fairground' billboards have emblazoned enigmatic messages such as the infamous *There Will Be No Miracles Here*: a reference to religion in the context of Monarchy and Enlightenment. His mammoth project, *The Lamp of Sacrifice*, saw the artist undertaking a labour of months to re-create, in cardboard, all the places of worship in Birmingham and Edinburgh.

Coley lives and works in Glasgow. He was a shortlisted artist in Britain's 1997 Turner Prize, and has exhibited widely in Europe and the UK: Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh (2010), Kunsthallen, Norway (2009), Edinburgh International Festival (2009), Folkestone Triennial, Kent (2008), Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2008), De La Warr Pavilion, East Sussex (2008), MCA, Belgrade, Serbia (2007), Tate Liverpool (2006) and British Art Show 06, Baltic, UK and SCAPE, Christchurch, New Zealand (2002).

The Exhibition

For this major new exhibition Coley will transform ACCA's large exhibition hall into a civic plaza, defined by a series of cast concrete platforms. Inspired by the designs of Oscar Niemeyer for Brazil's iconic modernist capital, Brasilia, these enigmatic structures will become plinths for a contemplation of the social congregating spaces of cities and people. A highlight of the exhibition will be a new 'lecture' work, *Another Lecture*, in which Coley has collaborated with actor Cate Blanchett. Posing as the architect, Blanchett narrates a funny and ironic slide show of 'provisional' architectural projects that include images of non-architecture, urban fracture and decay found in Coley's native Glasgow and field trips through Melbourne.

His Practice

Coley is an ideas-driven artist who conducts extensive research before creating his works, including visiting sites, archival research, interviews and photographic documentation. He investigates how public buildings, monuments and public spaces come to represent values, beliefs and ideals of the society that builds and uses them.

Using a diverse range of media, including public and gallery based sculptures, installations and video, Coley explores the symbolism in architecture and the urban environment.

The materials he chooses to use in his work have significant connotations, associations and suggestions, however Coley prefers to provoke dialogue rather than to make statements in his work. He does not reveal his opinions in the themes he explores.

"The generation of discussion is the centre of the work rather than the object." Nathan Coley



Camouflage Church, 2006.

ARCHITECTURE

Coley's preoccupation with architecture and urban environments centers on the significance they are given by their social history. He investigates the meanings given to public buildings by the communities who live and invest in them.

Civic buildings are often a physical expression of ideas and ideologies. How humans behave in and around these spaces is often dictated by social, political and religious doctrine. By drawing our attention to the symbolism in architecture, Coley encourages the viewer to reflect on the values that underscored the construction of civic buildings and to consider their transformation over time.

In 'Lamp of Sacrifice' (2004), Coley built 289 cardboard scale replicas of every place of worship in Edinburgh, Scotland, as listed in the Yellow Pages. These included churches, synagogues, mosques and Salvation Army Halls. Displayed en masse, 'Lamp of Sacrifice' is a complex reading of a people, place and history, defined through its sites of religious meeting.

"The Lamp of Sacrifice was not about the architecture in terms of the way it looks. It's about what it means. I'm interested in why was this made, who made it and what does it signify? Religious architecture is fascinating because the conditions in which we are looking at a 19th century Protestant church now are not the conditions in which it was built. Ideas of the church have changed and society and architecture have changed. For everyone who reads The Lamp of Sacrifice as a celebration of these pieces of architecture, there's another person who understands it as a critique: they are meaningless and collectively have no power." Nathan Coley

In 'Palace' (2008) Coley used a Western film set street façade, complete with saloon and bar front, to explore our relationships to political borders and limitations, religious frontiers and ideals. The ten by six meter façade was painted entirely with black emulsion to look like a burnt out street façade from a Western film set. Signage over the shop fronts was replaced with the text – WEALTH, BELIEF, LAND, MIND, LIFE – the five rights that every human is granted under Islam.

Westerns were predominantly made in the 1950's, during a time of unease and mistrust in the USA and assessed issues of morality, religion and family. The films were set 70 years earlier depicting historical events, myths and legends of American History. Mans basic rights were fought out in on screen battles of good and evil, morality and immorality, right and wrong.

"We all have perceived ideas of what we are entitled to in our everyday lives that are built up by our society, our religion, political climate, our family and our friends. This is architecture that is built to be deliberately false, while focusing on two sets of ideas from very different corners of the globe." Nathan Coley

Reflecting the collective melancholy and loss felt by a community in 'I Don't Have Another Land' (2002), Coley created a matt-black model/sculpture of a building destroyed by the IRA. The modernist Marks & Spencer building in Manchester was one of the city's architectural landmarks, until the IRA bombed it in 1996. It was only then that the community realised how important the structure had been to them.

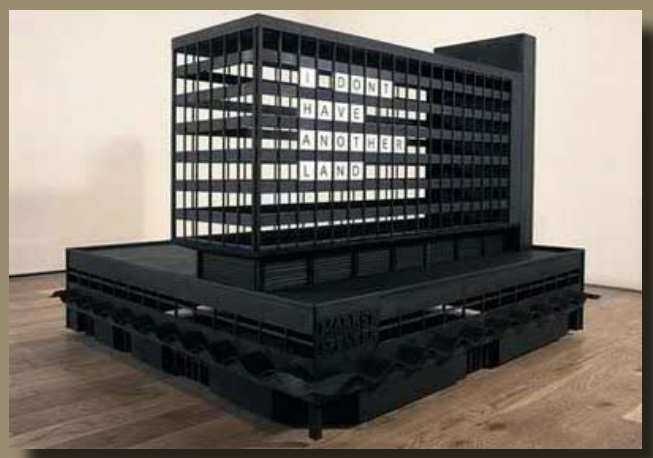
Investigating trauma, Coley has placed the words "I Don't Have Another Land" on the window façade, quoted from an Israeli folk song and often graffitied on walls in the Israeli-occupied areas in the Middle East. Coley explores the human need to identify with a place, and how vulnerable and fragile the physical structures that form these places can be.



The Lamp of Sacrifice (286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh 2004)



Palace, 2008.



I Don't Have Another Land, 2002.

TEXT

Coley is also well known for his large-scale message sculptures, and often uses illuminated text in his work to play with ideas around power, authority and authorship. The texts he uses are appropriated from history, literature and popular music, then illuminated and placed in different locations. There is an ironic sense of proclamation in the chosen texts, however the original context and understanding of these phrases are gone, so they resist declarations of truth and provoke questions.

For Coley, truth and belief are considered unstable and relative. The statements he uses can have different meanings depending on tone, case, font or social, historical and physical context. Coley chooses to use globes rather than neon to illuminate the text, due to neons association with advertising. Light globes have a theatrical and nostalgic appearance, and are reminiscent of fairgrounds, fun and play. The playful material undermines the authoritarian tone of the statement, which is written in capital letters and placed on large scaffolding, creating an imposing sign.

Erected in the ACCA forecourt in 2010, 'Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens' (2008) is both comforting and disconcerting. The text was taken from a 1980s pop song

"Its strength is in its ambiguity. Is heaven a place where nothing ever happens? For some it's a comforting message that this promise of an afterlife is without incident. Others may wonder if heaven is the place they were told it would be." Nathan Coley

Made of 480 light globes mounted in letters on an imposing aluminum frame, the message sculpture was first made for the Folkestone Triennial, a big exhibition in a small English seaside town with a large retiree population. Interpretations of the work focused on heaven as something fast approaching the aged community, and Coley was interested to see how the different context invites new readings, from Folkestone to Melbourne.



Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens ACCA forecourt December 2010

"It's hard to know who the space belongs to. Federation Square, say, is owned and controlled by the city. Your back garden is clearly yours, just as the tree-lined space by a church is arguably God's land. But [ACCA's forecourt] is a no man's land. It just sits by a busy freeway and tramline. It's as if you'll see it when you're going somewhere else. It'll be read in transit." Nathan Coley



There will be no miracles here Mount Stuart parkland, Isle of Bute, Scotland



Tate Liverpool

'There will be no miracles here' (2006) is text taken from an historical anecdote from a French village in the seventeenth century. A site with regular occurrences of miracles, a large notice was put up saying 'There will be no miracles here, by order of the King.' This chosen text simultaneously forbids and admits the possibility of divine intervention, demanding obedience and asserting God's power to be subordinate to that of the speaker.

Again Coley provokes questions around the age-old power struggle between state and church, politics and religion, between the rational and spiritual, the visible and invisible. Originally installed in the Mount Stuart estate parkland on the Isle of Bute, it was surrounded by rich Scottish history. A year later it was re-staged in the Tate Liverpool, part of a presentation of Coley's work for the Turner Prize. Re-situating the work in an interior gallery space changed both its character and possible interpretations.

FAITH

"I'm not someone who makes work about religion, I make work about how our values illustrate themselves in public or private space. The work deals with how architecture can symbolize the community's beliefs. I've long been interested in how we occupy space." Nathan Coley



Camouflage Bayrakli Mosque, 2005

Coley is interested in faith, and the way that religious buildings still hold great importance for our cultural identity, despite the decline of their spiritual significance.

"I don't have formal faith in any of the religions of the world, but I'm fascinated by the fact they exist. Religion is the issue of our time. Nothing defines space more than a disagreement about where my space ends and your space starts. That space might be moral, physical or religious. It's what terrorism is about and, in Scotland; you don't have to go very far to find arguments about communal playgrounds within the same [Christian] religion. My work is not a homage, a celebration or a condemnation, it's a spotlight bringing it in for discussion." Nathan Coley

Coley's 'Camouflage Mosque' (2007) belongs to a series including a camouflaged church and synagogue. A model of the Bajrakli mosque in Belgrade, Serbia, it was built around 1575. The mosque was turned into a Catholic church during the Austrian rule 1717-1739, reverting back into a mosque when the Turks returned. Today it is the only remaining Muslim place of worship in Belgrade.

Made from simple painted hardboard, Coley has removed any defining symbols and characteristics. It represents a generic building for faith. The stripe pattern is appropriated from 'Razzle Dazzle' camouflage, which was applied to naval ships during both the World Wars. While the horizontal patterning does not blend the ship into its surroundings, it disguises the vessel's size, type, speed and heading.

By camouflaging places of worship, Coley poses questions around the increasing loss of authority that religious institutions have in our society. Using wartime camouflage brings up ideas around conflicts of different religious beliefs.

In his video work '14 churches of Münster' (2000) Coley references orders issued to allied bomber pilots in the Second World War to target the churches of Münster, Germany. Investigating the concept of sanctuary, his work questions whether any spaces still exist that are beyond the reach of law, or whether the conceived notion of safety within a house of God exists if they are war targets.

During the World Wars, churches were public buildings targeted by air force bombers. Katrina Brown says that "these churches can be read not only as the constructed manifestations of human faith, buildings to which the notion of sacrifice pertains as much, if not more, than that of architecture but as the physical and spiritual heart of the city and powerful vulnerable targets. "

From the middle ages, until the advent of skyscrapers, churches were the most elaborately decorated and often tallest buildings. Their height reminded people to cast their eyes upward to the heavens where God is enthroned, and the grand architecture symbolized the wealth and power of the Christian church. Today, as in the event of the 11/9/2001 bombing of the Twin Towers, it is skyscrapers that are targeted in attempt to break a community's morale.

CURATORIAL APPROACHES

GALLERY 1 'PUBLIC SPACE'

Coley has been commissioned to make a major new project for ACCA. In the largest gallery he will create a continuation of the street or public plaza.

There is a series of cast concrete platforms inspired by the designs of Oscar Niemeyer for Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil. Coley visited the city in 2003 and was interested in the way the concrete platforms sit strangely amidst the modernist architecture. With nothing atop the platforms, they raise questions about whether they are unfinished, or sculptures themselves. The audience is able to sit and walk on top of them, creating an interesting way to position the viewer in the plaza.

The gallery also contains a tree sculpture with colour fairground lights, remixing his illuminated signs with a particular structure he saw at Luna Park. The tree marks the space as being outdoors but in a particularly abstracted, magical way.



A picture Coley took in Brasilia, 2003

GALLERY 2 'GALLERY'

One of the platforms extends from gallery 1 into gallery 2 through the doorway. A model of Melbourne's Scots' Church will be exhibited on the platform here along with a series of text based light box works.



The Scots' Church, Melbourne.

GALLERY 3 'HOME'

The shape of gallery 3 is redefined and altered by the 'Razzle Dazzle' style bold horizontal stripe pattern directly across the walls. Coley uses the pattern to create an optical effect, making the reading of the room more difficult, pulling and stretching the walls into a new shape.

GALLERY 4 'SCHOOL'

Coley subverts an architects' typical methodology of holding 'slide talks,' in which images of buildings and projects their office has undertaken are discussed. Gallery 4 is set up as if for a lecture, with seating for the audience with a 20 minute video projection. Coley creates a funny and ironic version of these architectural lectures, casting actress Cate Blanchett as the architect, narrating the slide show. However instead of seeing buildings, the images are of non-architecture, urban brokenness and rubbish that Coley photographed around Melbourne and Scotland. Blanchett discusses the images as if they were serious and outstanding building designs.

ART**Unit 2 Outcome 1 Formal and Cultural Framework**

Coley examines how the ideas, traditions, values or beliefs of historical and contemporary society are manifested in public architecture. Investigate how his work reflects and communicates the values of our societies; apply the Formal Framework and the Cultural Framework, discussing Coley's work in regard to cultural structures around politics and religion.

Consider:

How do the social, political, cultural or religious contexts of the artwork contribute to its meaning?

How have historical or contemporary events shaped the intention of the artist or our understanding of the artworks meaning?

How does the physical placement (such as differing locations) of the artworks affect their interpretation?

What physical aspects or presentation of the artworks contain symbolic meaning and use of metaphor? How do the chosen materials shape the interpretation?

STUDIO ART**Unit 1 Outcome 3 - Interpretation of art ideas and use of materials and techniques****Architecture in Art**

Compile a resource folder of artists from Australia and Europe who portray architecture in their artworks: Jeffery Smart, Howard Arkley and **Callum Morton from Australia***; **Nathan Coley from Scotland**; Camille Pissarro from France and William Turner from England.

Compile a worksheet of questions and heading which can be applied to each artist in order to provide a focus for discussion and comparison.

For example:

- What type of architecture is depicted?
- What inspired the artists to depict architecture in their paintings or artworks?
- Identify any historical or contemporary influences on the artists that may have contributed to their work.
- What influence may the time, place and cultural background have on the style of the artwork?
- What materials and techniques have been used?
- Have the materials and methods of creating the artwork influenced the style of the painting or artwork?
- What is the artwork's purpose or meaning?
- Look for reviews or critiques of the artist's work in order to understand how others view the work. What is your response to the artworks?
- Are there any aspects of the artists and artworks you have studied that could be adapted to suit your own artwork?
- Do any of the techniques used by the artists inspire you to investigate and appropriate their applications in your own explorations?
- Compare the artists different approaches to the same subject matter, and the effects of the use of different materials and techniques to create artworks. Review the different timeframes and cultural contexts of the artist and examine the influence on the development of a particular style.

***ACCA's Callum Morton Education kit is available in the online education resources.**

PHILOSOPHY**Unit 2 Outcome 2 Other great questions in Philosophy**

Visit the Nathan Coley exhibition as a starting point for a discussion into Political philosophy. Use Coley's work to formulate philosophical questions arising from issues around authority and power within Political and Religious ideologies. Consider:

- What is the basis and purpose of the state and what are the just limits of its authority, at a local, national and global level?
- What are an individual's rights and responsibilities?
- What sort of values underscored the building of particular types of civic architecture? How are we directed to behave within these spaces?
- To what extent should individuals be obedient or obliged to the state?
- What is the importance in social/political philosophical debate of terms such as state, society, power, authority, coercion, obligation, consent, autonomy, freedom, rights, law, punishment, welfare, the common good?

As a class analyse problems, evaluate viewpoints and arguments arising from the exhibition, and offer justified critical responses to, and viewpoints and arguments associated with Coley's work.

Level 5 – Tronic Slide Talk

The Arts (Art)- Creating and Making

Generate and develop ideas that explore particular concepts, techniques and issues when making art works. Develop ideas that explore issues, for example:

- use symbols and imagery associated with selected themes to convey statements and messages; for example, poverty, migration, environmental issues.

Communication

Develop a range of strategies for listening attentively and extracting meaning from communications ... Students respond to a wide variety of aural, written and visual media ... Students share the meaning they have constructed with others and discuss any differences ... Students regularly present information, ideas and opinions ...

- explore media texts for meaning, context, aesthetic form and identify intended audiences
- are required to present information, opinions and ideas in class and in group discussions. They present their media work to specific and appropriate audiences

The Arts (Media)- Creating and Making

Experiment with, select and use appropriate skills, techniques, processes, media, materials, equipment and technologies across a range of arts forms and styles.

- explore the possibilities and limitations of media equipment, such as analogue cameras, digital cameras, digital video cameras, sound and lighting equipment
- experiment with different techniques, processes and technologies, such as in animation (frosted cell, cutout, figure, puppet, wire armature, drawn, computer)

Suggested Activity

In pairs research different types of animals. Write short descriptions about each one in the style of a wildlife documentary narrator, such as David Attenborough.

Use a digital video camera to film various ways humans interact and move through spaces, such as school corridors, train stations, shopping centres etc.

Create a short film of the footage captured and record the wildlife documentary narrative to play alongside the imagery. As a class, discuss the ways in which our perceptions of the imagery change with the voice over. Compare the activity to Nathan Coley's lecture work, highlighting the similarities and differences.

Level 6 · Re-interpreting Buildings

The Arts (Art)- Creating and Making

Communicate their interpretations by effectively combining and manipulating selected arts elements, principles and/or conventions to create the desired aesthetic qualities manipulate arts elements expressively, for example:

- appropriate the work of known artists and infuse the work with their own preferred imagery, style and symbols
- appropriate known artists' conceptual applications and processes, and develop personal interpretations in artworks
- make a visual statement to convey responses to local, national or global issues
- use popular art forms to create imaginative artworks that may communicate different responses.

The Humanities – History (standards, Historical knowledge and understanding)

Analyse events, which contributed to Australia's social, political and cultural development.

For example; create an artwork with a subject focus of a particular historical setting. Come to understand the context of the theme through researching relevant information, supporting the effective communication of the artwork.

Suggested Activity

Research a part of Australian history, focusing on the public buildings used around that time and making notes about various social, political, religious and cultural events that have happened there.

Research another historical period or event from a different part of the world, investigating the sorts of imagery and symbols attached to it.

Make a mind map of different materials that could be used to construct or cover the buildings, and the possible meanings and symbols that could be conveyed through those materials.

Create small-scale constructs of the chosen Australian building, taking away particular signage and symbols and replacing it with symbols from a different historical movement.

How does this change the reading of the work? How does this relate to the building sculptures that Nathan Coley creates?