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From Pop to Poop

Lights on, lights off—Turner-winning conceptualist Martin Creed gets a major U.S. retrospective

by **Alan Gilbert**

August 14th, 2007 12:52 PM

"Everything is going to be all right," Martin Creed assures incoming visitors to the first major North American retrospective of his work. One of a number of words-in-neon artworks Creed has produced over the years, the sign is positioned at the entrance to the parking lot of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and adjoining Hessel Museum of Art. Creed's pledge mostly holds true throughout the show, though with a few intended—as well as unintended—surprises.

Inside, another neon work—the single word "Feelings"—provides the exhibition with its title. Born in England in 1968, and a graduate of London's Slade School of Fine Art, Creed achieved wider recognition (and notoriety) when he won 2001's Turner Prize for *Work No. 127: Lights going on and off*. His retrospective at Bard is split into halves. The CCS galleries contain almost two decades of Creed's work in nearly every possible medium and material: from painting, drawing, video, sound, and installation to Magic Marker, beanbag chairs, a dollop of Blu-Tack, plywood, a drum machine, etc. Much of his art is rooted in accumulations and repetitions that highlight differences among similar sets of objects, while at the same time smoothing out rough incongruities. *Work No. 406: Balls* gathers 110 balls of varying



Playtime at Bard: *Work No. 406: Balls*, 2005 (foreground) and *Work No. 800* (background).

photo: Chris Kendall

Martin Creed: "Feelings"

Center for Curatorial Studies and Hessel Museum of Art
Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson
Through September 16

Martin Creed: "Small Things"

Center for Curatorial Studies
508 West 25th Street
Through September 16

be social



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Bodies The Exhibition

size, color, weight, and texture. In the Hessel, Creed intersperses his own work with items from the permanent collection that he's selected as personally influential and engaging. Thus, Carl Andre's stolid wood sculpture *Intersects* confirms Creed's employment of Minimalist aesthetics, while John Currin's very buxom *Big Lady* allows Creed to playfully locate across the room his *Work No. 264: Two protrusions from a wall*. These bulbous shapes in turn resemble enlarged versions of his signature pair of knob-like brass and chrome objects that appear in different guises throughout the CCS galleries, including starring in their own video.

The Hessel component of the exhibition isn't meant to be secondary to the main showcase of Creed's work next-door, and may in fact be the more satisfying half. It also contains his two most famous pieces. *Work No. 628: Half the air in a given space* turns viewers into playful participants. Filling the museum's first gallery with 16-inch blue balloons, Creed forces those entering to augment their vision with a tactile mode of perception as the near-weightless crush of balloons gently washes over them in submersing waves. More prosaically, imagine a McDonald's ball pit for adults. The title for *Work No. 127: Lights going on and off* unambiguously states its function. The work exists in a number of iterations, but in this version it encompasses the entire museum, alternating every 30 seconds between illuminating and casting into semi-darkness the various galleries. Whereas *Lights going on and off* has also previously been installed in individual empty rooms, here it's much more effective at throwing viewers back on their own devices whenever the lights are cut.

The Hessel half may inadvertently confirm a sense that Creed's work is more interesting in the context of

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THE EXHIBITION

other art. As amassed on the CCS side, his work gives an impression of conceptualism lite. There's no doubt something significant about the way in which he grafts a Pop sensibility onto conceptual-art methods, but he's certainly not the first to do this. And while he wants to be perceived as a bit naughty, he's more like the Ron Howard of conceptual art, though it's doubtful that Howard will produce films resembling *Work No. 548*, a/k/a the vomit piece, or *Work No. 600*, a/k/a the shit piece. In an echo of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, the first video features a woman inducing herself to repeatedly vomit bright red liquid and chunks onto a clean white floor, while in the second a woman squats and deposits within a similar pristine space an efficiently made poop that updates soft sculptural forms stretching from Claes Oldenburg to Louise Bourgeois. Confrontational and intentionally offensive as these videos are meant to be, they're also remarkably tidy and self-contained.

For those who can't make it to Bard during the next month, two Creed artworks have been installed in Chelsea. *Work No. 755: Small Things* is composed of those two words ironically stretched into 15-foot-high neon letters that span the abutting outdoor walls. *Work No. 805* is three 40-foot-long rusting I-beams stacked horizontally, with the narrowest one on top— a piece that can't help but gesture toward Richard Serra's own retrospective a few subway stops away. Together, these sculptural installations illustrate what Creed's work does best in its subtle interaction with other artistic practices, its flexible adaptation to site and location, its direct accessibility, and its dexterity at making the obvious appear always a little less so.

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