



## Liverpool unleashed

*An exhilarating outpouring of artistic licence hits the streets for the city's biennial. By Richard Cork*

**T**he founding of the Liverpool Biennial a decade ago by James Moores, a relation of the great art patron of the region, John Moores, was an inspirational breakthrough. At long last, Britain cast off its national habit of refusing to stage a spectacular, regular survey of new international art. Before then, the whole notion of holding a UK biennial was regarded as a hopeless fantasy. Such events were only held abroad, preferably in sublime locations like Venice.

Unlike an exhibition confined to a single museum, the Liverpool Biennial allowed exhibitors to invade all its urban spaces. There was nowhere to hide. The curators of the 2008 biennial, led by the artistic director Lewis Biggs, are celebrating Liverpool's European Capital of Culture year with an equally irrepressible explosion of activities.

The most inescapable installation can be found at Exchange Flags, behind the town hall. Here, crowds of passers-by stare agog at a giant spider. Unlike Louise Bourgeois, who planted her formidable spider firmly on the ground at London's Tate Modern, the Chinese artist at Liverpool has suspended his insect from an enormous web stretched right across a city square. Ai Weiwei, who helped to create the bird's-nest design for the Olympic stadium in Beijing, is clearly adept at producing linear marvels. The web, made from a kilometre of steel cabling and LED lighting, is especially mesmerising at night. Vulnerable rather than sinister, it makes the glittering crystal-studded spider at the web's centre look fragile.

Ai Weiwei offers an alternative to the gung-ho heroics of the Victorian monument below, where Nelson towers above the words "England expects every man to do his duty". Mercifully, artists working in public settings have travelled a long way from such predictable patriotic propaganda. And they are no longer confined to grand municipal settings. Even a location as noisy as a traffic-ridden road junction can now be transformed, and Diller Scofidio+Renfro have created a grassy hillock where 17 hornbeam trees are planted in a grid pattern. But anyone walking into this delightful wooded grove soon discovers that three of the trees lean at tippy angles and perform a slow, circular dance. Turntables are embedded in the earth, and I found myself moving round gently with the trees. As I did so, anything seemed possible.

This year's biennial theme is "Made Up", an assertion of artistic licence that seems to have emancipated everyone involved. Over at St Luke's Church, still lacking the roof it lost when a German bomb descended in

1941, Yoko Ono has invited anyone to donate a stepladder. Several examples, ranging from pristine to battered, are already clustered in the grassy nave, and after climbing one of the "Liverpool Skylanders" I experienced the tragic loss of the church's vaulting even more intensely, as well as the palpable presence of an unusually blue sky – an exhilarating sensation.

Climbing also plays a central role in Atelier Bow-Wow's installation nearby. This inventive Japanese duo have built a welcoming amphitheatre on a derelict site in Renshaw Street. After clambering up the wide rows of wooden seats, you reach the summit and relax while local dancers, musicians and poets perform there regardless of the buses and cars choking the road behind them.

To find three of the most resonant biennial works, though, we must leave the open air and penetrate the vastness of Pilkingtons, a disused glass warehouse on Sparling Street. Nobody should miss this experience. Leandro Erlich confronts us first, spinning a carousel complete with brash fairground music. Yet no horses can be detected here. Instead, Erlich has built a one-bedroom apartment where objects in every room – the umbrella stand, pedal-bin, coffee pot and even the toilet seat – rise up and down. Mirth gives way to a sense of unease as Erlich's crazy merry-go-round recalls Mark Gertler's remorseless painting of an insanely whirling carousel in the first world war.

Relief of a kind can be found in the second space at Pilkingtons, where Tomas Saraceno has installed a cluster of biospheres called "Air-Port-City". As the title suggests, he has created these ethereal and ballooning structures to propose a new way of living in the sky. Yoko Ono might well understand why Saraceno has constructed these habitable cells floating like clouds and continually changing their shapes. But she might not identify with the foreboding implicit in the biospheres. They are, after all, the product of a time when anxiety about sustainable life on our planet accelerates every year.

In the final Pilkingtons installation, Yayoi Kusama makes us feel this dilemma more keenly still. Entering her deceptively modest-sized white chamber, I found myself in a mirrored space with water on the floor. Small LED lights suspended from the ceiling and reflected an infinite number of times seemed to float in their millions all around and, at first, the sensation seemed intoxicating. Gradually, though, a profound sense of isolation set in.

Nor is Kusama alone in her determination to convey acute disquiet. The further I went

in my exploration of the biennial, the more unnerving it became. On Renshaw Street, Manfredi Beninati invites us to pause in front of a grubby, poster-choked wall and peer through a dark gap. I had to press my nose right up against the glass before making out the living room within. Although empty, signs of its occupants could be seen everywhere. Breakfast remains lay abandoned on a table, while children's drawings were strewn across the carpet. All this normality, however, was contradicted by a bizarre view of a tropical sunset flaring through a distant window. And suddenly, I glimpsed my own reflection in a mirror, staring into the room like a seedy voyeur bent on disrupting family life.

This emphasis on the macabre can also be found in the John Moores Painting Prize show at the Walker Art Gallery. Grant Foster's "Hero Worship" focuses on a phantom-like figure with grim, manic eyes. Human hair is emmeshed with the thick, repellent paint, and the artist admits that an element of self-portraiture lurks within the victim/villain he has depicted with such vehemence. As for Peter McDonald, winner of the Moores first prize, he turns the artist Lucio Fontana into a Hitchcock-like slasher, headless yet ferocious while attacking his canvas with a sharp-pointed weapon.

Nightmares continue at FACT, where U-Ram Choe has suspended an enormous gleaming creature with metal ribs or wings slowly curving in and out. Although entitled "Hidden Shadow of Moon", this phantasm was triggered by a marine creature glimpsed

**Uninhibited** Clockwise from above left: 'Web of Light' by Ai Weiwei (2008); 'Air-Port-City' by Tomas Saraceno (2008); 'Fontana' by Peter McDonald (2006)

by the artist beneath the waters in Albert Dock. And, sure enough, down at Tate Liverpool we encounter an outright trauma. David Altmejd transforms an entire gallery into a festering jungle, where giants' corpses sprawl in several, repellent decay. Like a ghoul, Altmejd appears to reveal in all the putrefaction and ripped-out intestines. But upstairs at Tate, Omer Fast's impressive and convincing two-channel video shows a crew at work on a film about a suicide bomber in Jerusalem. Although Fast warns us by calling his piece "Take a Deep Breath", nothing can prepare us for the grisly sight of the bomber's own mangled corpse.

This unrelenting emphasis on savage destruction is, no doubt, an authentic reflection of the tenor of our times. One intriguing large Tate room is filled with drawings by friends and relatives of Roman Ondak, who invited them to produce "visions of the future megalopolis". The outcome consists, time and again, of sinister urban clutter, devoid of people, with science-fiction creatures roaming through the void.

The young artists on view at Bloomberg New Contemporaries are no more optimistic. Displayed in an excellent space on Greenland Street, the show includes pieces as startling as Steve Bishop's criss-crossed fluorescent tubes impaling the body of a real taxidermied fox. More hapless animals appear in Jane Maughan's monumental photo-works of naked owners posing with their pets in garden settings. One grinning, red-faced, middle-aged man, with a ring piercing his penis, bears a disconcerting resemblance to the distressed ferrets hanging from his hands.

I also recoiled from the puppets in Paul Bratt's video, opening their coats to reveal nothing except glistening internal organs exposed inside. They try and comfort each other on a narrow bed, but another artist called littlewhitehead [sic] insists on confronting us with a heap of life-size, all-too-real bodies dumped in a corner. Smearred with muck and blood, as well as humiliated by black plastic bin-bags pulled over their heads, they look like victims of some random, inexplicable atrocity. It is an unrelentingly gruesome sculpture, yet I would defend the maker's right to meditate on even the most grotesque images of destruction.

As well as enabling some artists to make our imaginations soar with exhilaration, this ambitious and uninhibited biennial is justified in reminding us that we live in a world haunted above all by fear.

Liverpool Biennial, until November 30, tel: +44 (0)151-709 7444; [www.biennial.com](http://www.biennial.com),

