Jeremy Deller: English Magic

TURNER CONTEMPORARY
MARGATE, UK
OCTOBER 11, 2014–JANUARY 11, 2015

Pounding from the heart of Jeremy Deller’s installation are the unmistakable metallic vibrations of steel drums. Soundtrack to Deller’s film English Magic (2013), the beats offset footage of the crushing of a Range Rover (known as a “Chelsea Tractor” in reference to its non-agricultural use in expensive parts of London) and of the public happily cartwheeling on an inflatable Stonehenge. Set to a musical score recorded at the famous Abbey Road Studios, references to key symbols of English culture are not only visual, but auditory too: Ralph Vaughan Williams’s Symphony no. 5 in D major (1938–43), iconic 1980s acid house track Voodoo Ray (1988) by A Guy Called Gerald, and The Man Who Sold the World (1970) by that most quintessential of English eccentrics, David Bowie, hold the audience transfixed until the end.

I had thought that the enjoyment of a large inflatable toy house here—or “bouncy castle” in British vernacular—to the melodies of a steel band was a particularity of my own English childhood; but in Deller’s story of the state of the nation, it provoked a shared cultural memory that to an outsider might seem as incongruously quirky as any clichéd expression of English eccentricity could ever hope to be. From the inside, Deller’s exploration of British society has real authenticity, handled with a lightness of touch that belies his depth of understanding of the ways myths, icons, and folklore operate in the creation of its identity.

The work’s sense of humor helps, manifested in particular through Deller’s painted murals (from 2013) depicting imaginary acts of revenge upon symbols of capitalist privilege that many dream of happening in reality: the hen harrier (an endangered bird rumoured to have been shot in 2007 by a friend of Tony Blair, weapons in war zones sit alongside portraits of key figures that will be remembered in the conflicts’ histories: Tony Blair, weapons inspector David Kelly, and Rupert Murdoch, represented in naïve painterly styles, a deathly contemporary folk art.

Haunted by the ghosts of Morris and John Ruskin and Aneurin Bevan, Deller’s installation reminds us of the collective ideals of the past—ideals that seem all but lost, but are rediscovered and enacted here via the joyous, transformational powers of music as another vernacular language through which people find community. Combining the very real traces of the past to create fantasies of a magical utopian future from the dystopia of the present, English Magic casts its own spell—both light filled and, sometimes, as dark as night.

HARRIET RICHES, PhD, is a writer and lecturer at Kingston University in London, UK.