

## Words Don't Fail Michael Dean

remembering good art from lockdown three: a review of Michael Dean's 2016 turner prize installation, five years on.

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He treads the sloppy borderline of artist/writer and, in his own words, puts a 'dirty flesh on typographical bones'. Each twisted steel rod, cable tie and concrete stump tells a tale not only of how we talk (or fail to), but also of Newcastle, of being working class and of DIY. Boot footprints in plaster, padlocks and rolling metal forms create an industrial landscape wherever Dean chooses to inhabit. This choice of material is deliberate, it says: ordinary, ugly, boring. Jeff Koons' sculptures say "you could never" but Michael Dean's say "B&Q, aisle 3". And there's something humbling about that. I think (I know) the arts has massive class problem (only 16% of the creative industry is working class), so when I walked on Dean's pennies in 2016 (£20,436 dumped on the floor of Tate Britain for the Turner Prize; the amount of money the government states is the minimum that two adults and two children need to survive for a year in the UK) it felt like watching my team win the world Cup. Because he captures something so inexplicably working class. A feeling I've never felt in a white cube before. A feeling of home. Part of me wants to kneel at the feet of each object, because they feel like poems. And the other part of me wants to knock them all over and roll them around because walking a Michael Dean show is like going on a tour of someone's fucking garage. And weirdly, that's exactly how I want to feel in a gallery. Each arc is so close to legible, you're almost tempted to rearrange the broken letters into something that makes sense. But you can't. It's like messing with a fridge magnet alphabet in a foreign language. And that's the beauty of it, that's Dean's whole career, is pointing to our tied tongues and saying "oh, you can't voice that feeling either". Steinbeck wrote "the art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for wordlessness" and I don't know if Dean has read that, but it feels like his religion. He catches a stutter and kneads it into concrete. Traps a scribble in plaster. And moulds a spelling error into something that can break bone.

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The irony of reviewing Michael Dean is that I've always felt I can't put into words why I like him. And Dean's medium is: things you can't put into words. Titles like 'hah ahahahahaha ah ahahah', "yes no" and "fucksake fucksake" chronicle intrusive thoughts that I usually reserve for my therapist's office. Two words play tug of war in any Michael Dean sculpture. At one end, is 'cope'. At the other: 'struggle'. Dean stands in the middle and hangs a sign that says 'exhibition open'.

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references:

1. Heather Carey, Rebecca Florisson, Dave O'Brien and Neil Lee, (August 2020). Getting in and getting on: Class, participation and job quality in the UK's Creative Industries. Available at <https://www.pec.ac.uk/assets/publications/PEC-report-class-in-the-creative-industries-FINAL.pdf>

2. John Steinbeck (1990). Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters, p.8.