

In a strange, sculptural way...

Martin Boyce's fondness for the surreal

A Scottish sculptor inspired by early 20th century modernism, Martin Boyce makes sculptures, photographs, and installations that examine the intersections between art, architecture, design, and nature, creating works that fall betwixt or overlap the various categories. Collapsing distinctions between past, present, and future, each of Boyce's works seems to exist in an autonomous world, detached from any fixed time or place. His current exhibition in Zürich succinctly captures the essence of his oeuvre. DAMN° talks to the artist about his work today as well as about what has gone before.

ANNA SANSOM

Martin Boyce has a poetic way of articulating his ideas about his work. Take the title of his current show at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zürich: *Inside rooms drift in and out of sleep / While on the roof / An alphabet of aeries / Search for a language*. Sometimes Boyce borrows phrases from literature or from lyrics (for instance, Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* and the album *Power, Corruption & Lies*, by New Order) that resonate with the kind of landscape atmosphere he seeks to achieve. This time, though, the Scottish artist wrote the title himself. Asking what it refers to begets a descriptive response about the sculptural exhibition.

In the first room of the gallery, a fairly sparse interior is evoked through scaled-down fireplaces, cast-bronze socket outlets and light switches, hanging lamps from his *Dead Star* series, and geometric, column-like lamps. It's a muted palette of terracotta tones and greys, the only 'moments of colour' coming from the lamps. The scale shifts in the second room, which is more nocturnal. Punctuated by ten softly lit chimneypieces in four different shapes arranged in clusters with TV aeries, Boyce likens it

to spindly branches looming above. "It's a mixture between being inside a piece of architecture with pillars or in a forest of trees or walking among chimneys on a rooftop with overlapping aeries silhouetted against the sky", says he, adding that the alphabet idea comes from how aeries are transmitters of information and language.

This exploration into spaces and landscapes is characteristic of Boyce's practice. The raised fireplace sculptures follow the presentation of another such piece at Johnen Galerie in Berlin last year, and have a stepped design inspired by a motif used by Italian architect Carlo Scarpa. Boyce discovered examples of Scarpa's architecture, such as the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, when walking round Venice in 2009, the year he represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale. Another reference point is the miniature fireplace that Carlo Mollino designed for his apartment in Turin. In the mind's eye, Boyce's fireplaces occupy a larger space beyond the objects themselves. "The one at Johnen had a rectangular hole, which could be a door, and a small circle of perforated steel, painted yellow and suspended from a





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Against the Night, 2013 (1)
Perforated steel, steel chain, plywood, wood stain, wood oil, galvanized steel, wired electrical lights; table: 320 x 170 x 170 cm; 3 six sided lanterns, each 29 x 22 x 22 cm; 2 four sided lanterns, each 38 x 14 x 14 cm
Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow; photo: Jean Vong

Eclipse, 2013 (2)
Jesmonite, wood, steel, enamel paint, acrylic paint; 219 x 155 x 6 cm
Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow; photo: Jean Vong

A River in the Trees, 2009 (3)
Cement fondue, plywood, paraffin coated crepe paper, powder coated aluminium, steel chain, electrical components; dimensions variable
Installation view 'No Reflections: Scotland and Venice', Palazzo Pisani, Venice Biennale, 2009
Courtesy of the Artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; photo: Gilmar Ribeiro

Installation view, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, 2015 (4)
Photo: Gina Folly



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wire, that becomes a sun or a moon”, he says. “As soon as you have these two elements, you’re drawn into a surreal situation, as the work becomes a little landscape.”

Events in his personal life have seeped in too. Boyce was renovating his house in Glasgow and became “consumed with every detail”, like the light switches, tiles, and fireplaces. “When I look at how the work has developed, it feels like all those obsessions have filtered in, but in a strange, sculptural way”, he reflects. As for the chimneys, Boyce’s memories flitted back to a visit to the undulating rooftop of Casa Milà / La Pedrera, designed by Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona. Boyce reinterpreted the Spanish architect’s organic forms into geometric ones.

Discussing how these various ideas intersect, he says, “All this stuff is swimming in my head, but there’s no linear or rational connection. It’s just a combination of things that I’ve experienced or come across in books. It’s almost about catching a glimpse of something and allowing it to resonate in your imagination.”

What has been most influential in the development of Boyce’s artistic language is a cubist concrete tree by French sculptors Jean and Joël Martel made for a garden designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens in 1925.

Since seeing it in a black-and-white photograph ten years ago, Boyce has used it to develop ‘a palette of shapes’ that are central to his work. This was evident in his installation *Do Words Have Voices*, which won him the Turner Prize in 2011 and formed part of his exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, Switzerland this summer. The shapes of the mobile placed above a Jean Prouvé-inspired table derived from the Martel tree, as did the pattern of ventilation grilles in the walls, the white fins on the ceiling, and the leaves scattered across the floor.

Boyce even created typography by tracing the lines of his repeat pattern of the Martel tree. To his surprise, the exercise resulted in a representation of every letter. “There were a couple of amazing weeks in the studio in 2005-2006 that were a bit like an Ouija board kind of thing, where, by way of this tree from 1925, language, phrases, and words were being whispered through the pattern”, he reminisces. “The poetic possibilities within that were quite incredible. I hadn’t developed the pattern with any hope or notion that there would be a language lurking in there.” The aerals at the Eva Presenhuber show also came about by tracing lines and shapes to form a repeat pattern, while the lamps echo the Martel tree’s diagonal leaf-form and are structured slightly like Louis Poulsen’s lamps. “It has almost

We are Resistant, We Dry Out in the Sun, 2004
Concrete, steel, steel tubing, copper tubing, powder coatings, fluorescent tubes, electrical fittings, hardware, fabric
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the Artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich
Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich



reached the point where I think less and less about the Martel tree and use these shapes as I'd use any shape", he considers. "I'm very interested in repetition and series in my work, which becomes interconnected with these objects and forms, being filtered through this one system. If I want to make a chandelier or a table, these shapes fight their way into that structure."

Boyce's interest in landscape and design dates back to his student days. From the Glasgow School of Art, he received a BA in environmental art as well as an MFA, and he also studied at the California Institute for the Arts, where a friend of his had an old Eames table. Years later, Boyce refashioned the ESU shelving system by Charles and Ray Eames into a De Stijl-like colour scheme. He also remade Arne Jacobsen's Series 7 chairs, cutting them into parts and arranging them like suspended mobiles, an allusion to Alexander Calder.

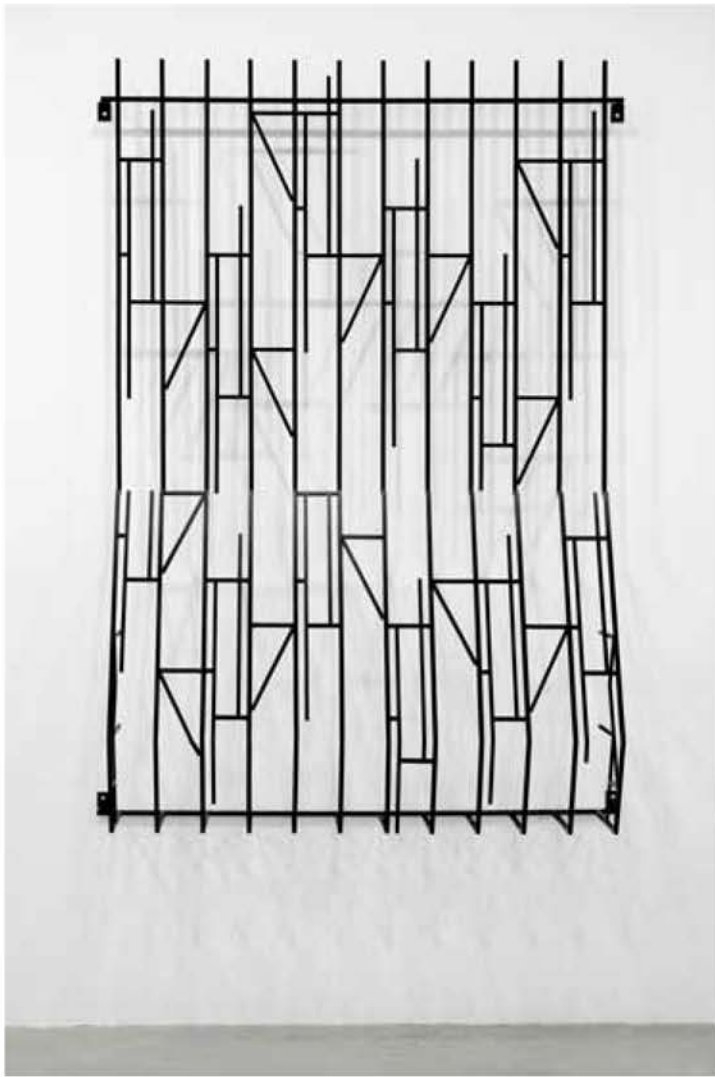
More broadly, much of Boyce's work has been about urban landscapes, deserted places, or car parks. Part of his No Reflections installation at the Venice Biennale comprised of a pathway of concrete stepping stones, a black geometric chandelier, and an abundance of brown leaves. It captured the feeling of an autumnal stroll after a windy downpour of rain. His piece, We Dry Out in the Sun (2004),

restaged in the Unlimited exhibition at Art Basel in June, evoked a terrace of sun beds – blue linear sculptures with branched-out neon lights and trashcans. Night, terrace, lantern chains, forgotten seas, sky (2011), at The Modern Institute in Glasgow, saw lines of brightly coloured lanterns illuminating a table and a partition.

"Many of the shows have taken the form of a fragmented landscape", says Boyce, referring to how disparate elements combine to form a setting. "Through the use of details and elements, there are ways to describe an almost archetypal place." This spatial sensibility saw Boyce commissioned to design a set for Run For It, a ballet choreographed by Martin Lawrance for the Scottish Ballet. His model for an imaginary stage-set had inspired his proposal for the Turner Prize, which in turn led to the Scottish Ballet commission. Boyce also designed the scenography for a Sonia Rykiel catwalk show a few years ago, based on his installation Our Love is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours (2002). The runway was transformed into a cobbled lane flanked by chain-link fences and linear trees illuminated by fluorescent tubes, with trash cans dotted around.

This autumn, the RISD Museum at the Rhode Island School of Design (US) is staging a survey ex-

Mobile (For 1056 Endless Heights), 2002
Powder coated steel, chain, wire,
altered Jacobsen Series 7 chairs
Dimensions variable
Installation view, Museum für
Gegenwartskunst, Basel, 2015
Image courtesy of the Artist,
Johnen Galerie, Berlin and The
Modern Institute/Toby Webster
Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Gina Folly



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Untitled, 2010 (1)
Painted steel
205 x 144.8 x 45.7 cm
Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and The
Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Jean Vong

Absent Eyes, 2012 (2)
Painted steel, painted and rusted steel, brass
146 x 49 x 40 cm
In Praise of Shadows exhibition at Johnen Galerie, Berlin, 2012

Lighting sculptures (3)
Runway: Sonia Rykiel A/W 2011 Ready-to-Wear fashion show,
Paris
Photo: Martin Boyce, courtesy of the artist

Perforated and Porous (signal) 2010 (4)
Painted steel, fabric
64.8 x 81.3 x 52 cm
Courtesy of the Artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and The
Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Jean Vong



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Set design, 2012 (1)
Scottish Ballet: Martin Lawrance's ballet production *Run For It*, as part of the Cultural Olympiad
Photo: Martin Boyce, courtesy of the artist

When Now Is Night, 2002 (2)
Fluorescent light fittings, plywood, powder-coated and lacquered MDF, altered Series 7 Jacobsen chair parts, silkscreened wallpaper
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Photographic services

Dead Star (Red), 2014 (3)
Painted steel, cast and painted bronze
61 x 37 x 43 cm
Courtesy of the Artist, Johnen Galerie, Berlin and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Jens Ziehe



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hibition of Boyce's work. Entitled *When Now is Night*, it's named after a work from 2002 composed of a suspended web of fluorescent lights and grid-patterned wallpaper. "That's when I became interested in bringing soft furniture and interiors into a very film noir atmosphere and seeing if you could bring the function of film noir into architecture, design, and sculpture", explains Boyce. The piece is at the core of the show, along with examples of his different types of mask sculptures. "The exhibition is populated by all these strange phantom/figurative presences", he adds. Early photographs, *Interiors* (1992), and part of the Scottish Pavilion installation are also included. According to curator Dominic Molon, "It characterises the modern city as a place charged alternately by wonder and anxiety." Indeed, a feeling of abandonment or the desolation of beauty often permeates Boyce's installations. "I'm drawn to this balance between at what point something is lost and that sense of coming across something and seeing it for the first time after it has been lost", says the artist.

A continuum of Boyce's exhibition making, apparent both at the RISD Museum and at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, is about conveying a suspension of time. "I've always been interested in the idea that the gallery space feels outside the linearity of time in the real world", he says. "There's something very still and frozen about the sculptural pieces that I make, and I quite like the idea that you're stepping into a frozen moment." <

Inside rooms drift in and out of sleep / While on the roof / An alphabet of aeriels / Search for a language, at Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich, until 24 October 2015. presenhuber.com

When Now is Night, at the RISD Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, USA from 02 October 2015 until 31 January 2016. rismuseum.org

Martin Boyce (monograph), published by JRP Ringier. jrp-ringier.com