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Sentiment and experiment



By Peter Aspden

CORE, a contemporary art installation, connects the flights of creative thinking with its discernible results

It is difficult to receive a mobile phone signal in the Shropshire village of Coalbrookdale, which I can't help but interpret metaphorically. The post-industrial world is not a sentimental place, and it tends to pay scant respect to the era that it has supplanted. What better way to cock a snook at the ways of the past than to isolate one of the wellsprings of Britain's industrial heritage?

Coalbrookdale, nestled in a lush and lyrical green valley, is both a humble and a humbling place. Here is where the industrial revolution can be said to have started, when a local Quaker businessman, Abraham Darby, was first able to smelt iron successfully using coke, instead of costly charcoal, as a fuel. The results of his experiments were far-reaching and fast-moving, and are movingly told in the series of 10 museums that constitute the Ironbridge Gorge world heritage site.

The museums already attract more than half a million visitors a year, but they yearn to lure different audiences to their spaces: hence the opening last weekend of CORE, a contemporary art installation by the Austrian artist Kurt Hentschläger.

You can tell when you are in a place that is unused to the giddy ways of contemporary art: instead of Tate-style didactics on the wall, a middle-aged lady in an impromptu ante-chamber warns you that you may feel initially disorientated by the experience. "A word that visitors use is 'hypnotic'," she says helpfully, and she is not wrong.

Inside a huge, darkened space that used to act as the foundry's engine shop, five giant screens, each about 5m wide, depict a series of interlinked projections of human bodies floating in a weightless environment. They come together, they fall apart. Their movements appear totally random, yet they form beautiful patterns. It is like a demented aquarium, or an extremely edgy piece of choreography.

The work could have been purpose-built to confound expectations. Here, in the rock-solid heartland of the industrial age, we are celebrating fluidity, ghostliness, ephemerality. Nothing could be more jarring. And yet, as so many cultural institutions are finding, ever-more sophisticated audiences almost expect this sense of friction in their visits. Cultural disorientation has become part of the package, as inevitable as jam jars and tote bags in the museum shop.

The exhibition is a striking outpost of the Cultural Olympiad's London 2012 festival, which I think is apposite. If that event is to celebrate all that is great about British culture, it does well to dwell on that unusual combination of heritage celebration and love of experiment that marks the country's sensibility. Britain loves its past, but also wants to nudge itself into the future more readily than most.

CORE also connects the flights of creative thinking with its discernible results. In our preoccupation with dark satanic mills, we forget the conceptual genius behind the birth of industry. Abraham Darby was a man, as we would say today, who thought outside the box. Just occasionally, that can lead to extraordinary rewards. Ask those slack-jeaned innovators in the Coalbrookdale of 21st-century California, Silicon Valley.

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Hentschläger, who works in Chicago, says that CORE is a work that treats human beings in a primal way. I say the movements of the bodies reminded me of tadpoles, in their frenzied and directionless swimming. He says he is dismayed by the way our perceptions of what constitute acceptable social distances have increased over time. "We are becoming more and more solitary," he says, "but we also crave the company of others around us." The weightlessness and random movements of the bodies are a sharp reminder that we are not always in charge of our corporeal selves. "Our obsession with technology is a longing for total control," he observes.

Hentschläger admits he felt a little intimidated by the Olympic-related part of his commission. "I wanted to do something that was fitting for the occasion, without being over-literal. In the end I just found something inside myself that I wanted to do anyway." He had considered a project on bodybuilding, but he agrees with me there were drug-related issues related to that particular theme that might have embarrassed Olympic chiefs.

The artist has indeed interpreted his brief liberally. The free-floating human figures portrayed in CORE form an ironic counterpoint to the finely honed athletes who will travel to London this summer. They are anti-Olympians, lacking in control, aggression, desire. "But they do just

keep going,” says Hentschläger, not without mischief. “It is all about endurance, in its own way.”

It strikes me that this is an original and inspired Olympic cultural commission, sufficiently tangentially related to its theme as to stand alone as a piece of art. Hentschläger gives the impression of having had enough already with the Games. “Today one of the questions [at the press conference] blew my mind,” he says. “I was asked if the five screens were related to the five rings of the Olympic movement!” He bangs a fist on the table.

“That is something I never thought about!” he swears.

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