

Introduction

I am trying to be balanced and sharp, but gentle, simple, but deep, understandable, but ambivalent. This is how I like art to be.

Kristof Kintera, 2017

This is the most comprehensive exhibition in the UK of work by internationally acclaimed Czech artist Krištof Kintera (b. 1973, Prague). Compelling through a characteristic energy and imaginative wit, it fills Ikon's premises entirely, spilling out into the public realm.

Kintera's artistic practice is essentially sculptural, often kinetic and encompassing, crafted with a dark sense of humour as it overtly addresses current affairs. Striking a balance between feigned triviality and fatality, his works comprise a lively critique of hyper-capitalist systems, especially with respect to ecological issues: "I am aware of our responsibility for drastic changes of climate, extinctions of species and all kinds of living organisms, and therefore we'll face sooner or later fatal problems. It is our shame, it is my shame." This conviction provides a key to our understanding of *Postnaturalia* (2016), Kintera's recent installation sprawling over the floor towards the end of this exhibition.

Postnaturalia is like a postapocalyptic microcosm, a model landscape made from discarded electronic components – interconnected like a nervous system - effectively reminding us that we are part of the natural world despite our technological pretensions. The built-in redundancy that it embodies has been feeding a globalised consumerism that no longer holds sway. But rather than simply condemning our unsustainable behaviour as unnatural, Kintera is more philosophical:

When working on *Postnaturalia* I was so often astonished by seeing different kinds of circuits and motherboards of different electronic devices from different periods of [our] "electronic age", which we were lifting up from huge piles of trash. When you are standing in the middle of this mountain of thrown-away erudition you can hesitate for a while and ponder whether this is nature or not, but I am sure, yes, this is the nature we have made.

A humanised voice of nature is heard coming from a sculpture of a crow, perched at the top of Ikon's main staircase. A prophetic soul, we encounter "Mr. Raven" (*I see, I see, I see*, 2009) dressed in civilised western clothes, black as befits a bird with something important to say. He moves his head and legs back and forth whilst intoning a mix of inspirational corporate slogans, such as "Let's make things better" and "Just do it", with ominous pronouncements: "I see your future ... fuuuuuture. I see problem ... I see a big problem. Jeeezus ... Jeeezus Christ ... Jeeezus Christ Superstar ... Google Goooogle Goooogle Jesus ... Google Jesus. You know fuck all about crises ... no future ... noooooo future ..." He is like the fool in an Elizabethan play, conveying wisdom through a kind of madness.

Kintera's *Nervous Trees* (2013) were made four years later and their environmental message is clear. Leafless and upside down, their branches and twigs spread out towards the floor resembling arms and legs and their roots are replaced by globes to suggest heads. Their jittery motorised movement thus signifies both a human affliction, like St Vitus' dance, and the fact that the natural world is in trouble. Another anthropomorphic work here, *My Light is Your Life – Shiva Samurai* (2009) epitomises the problem. A super-heroic figure consisting of 250 table lamps, shielded by translucent globes and neon tubes, it has a halo hovering over its notional head as if to indicate that it is on the side of the angels. This is an ironic gesture as the artist couldn't be more aware of the pollution and devastating depletion of natural resources happening as a result of our intemperate consumption of energy:

... my long-term fascination with electricity ... comes together [in *My Light is Your Life*] with a mighty strength, and we suck it out of the sockets very clearly. At the same time it is one of the pressing issues which an enormous number of people are dealing with and will in the future too. We need to do so because everything is a question of energy. What is up with it, how much of it do we consume, how do we treat it and if we will continue to have these seemingly inflexible options.

The subtitle *Shiva Samurai* is significant, not only because it references Japanese popular culture – especially comic book science fiction – but also because *My Light is Your Life* is easily read as a 21st century rejoinder to Atsuko Tanaka's famous *Electric Dress* (1956), a costume of 200 coloured lightbulbs that the artist made (and sometimes wore) in response to the rapid development of Japan after the Second World War. (Incidentally, the *Electric Dress* was exhibited at Ikon in 2011). It was as modernist as Kintera's work is intended as a post-modern observation on the way we live now.

On the floor above is the *Laboratory of Postnaturalia*, a room full of work in various states of completion – illustrated notes, collage/drawings, models, sound recordings, video – as well as books and other source material combined to evoke the atmosphere of his studio. It is a space that engages us through an impulse to demystify the artistic process, consistent with Kintera's unpretentious approach to art overall, having an intimacy that complements a distinctly outgoing tendency. The latter is evident literally in work that he locates outdoors, conveying his conviction that there should be continuity between artistic experience and everyday life:

The city changes on the surface, sociologically and architecturally. But the character of public space remains consistent. It is still the same street, in its nature, idleness and spontaneity. My activities in public space probably stem from some kind of inner anxiety, which sometimes reveals itself and other times is hidden, an anxiety resulting from the inability of art to go beyond its framework and from being enclosed in [a] self-cannibalising world of cliques and galleries. Therefore I try to get involved here and there outside the galleries.

For Ikon's off-site programme, Kintera contributes *Paradise Now*, a herd of crowd-control barriers with antlers made from tubular steel, in front of the gallery building.

Modified modules of fencing, they resemble creatures that should not be fenced in, giving pause for thought in an urban environment that is becoming increasingly regulated, according to the laws of “nature we have made”. The idea that we have been spoiling things for ourselves is a fundamental proposition in Kintera’s work and nowhere is this more explicit than in his poster campaign for dedicated sites across the City of Birmingham. Including details of his drawings, often incorporating electrical circuitry, wiring and faces fashioned out of expanding foam, it constitutes a smart eco-propaganda, with texts that are as frankly funny as they are confronting – “Am I Also Responsible?”, “The Revenge of Nature”, “The End of Fun (Coming soon)” – and so an appeal is made beyond the art world, on behalf of a world that soon might not be a natural habitat for us.

Jonathan Watkins
Director, Ikon