

# THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

## Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020

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This week would have been the second of Bucks Art Weeks 2020, and local artists and makers would have been receiving visitors and talking with them about their painting, our painting and the objects we create. The discussions would have been about how paintings recalled places visited, connections with people and wildlife, times past and future possibilities. Art, along with music and great literature, seems to unlock thoughts hidden even from ourselves, and we can stand in front of a painting or a sculpture saying things that surprise us! Because we can't open our studios this summer, we've gone online, and I have found it fun and challenging to find one of my paintings which fits the different themes set each day under which we can post images on the BAW Facebook page. So I have been thinking about the importance to us of art, from the paintings we show to studio visitors to big, sculptural public statues and installations and everything in between.

One of the images posted onto the BAW Facebook page, for the theme, "Simple Pleasures", was a painting of a jar of Marmite. Predictably, the comments were, "Love it!" and "Hate it!"

Visitors to our studios are often willing to say a little more, and every year, after they have gone, I "interrogate" my paintings. Some answer that they say what I want them to say. Sometimes, visitors' comments let me see that something can be better expressed. I do not throw work away, but I often recycle paintings to let the good bits shine through and allow something new to work with the old.

Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* is a much loved piece of public art, because the sculptor had taken the time to find out about the demise of the steel and shipbuilding industry in the North East, and how people still feel about that. So when they look at the Angel, they feel someone understands. The statue in Amersham Memorial Gardens of the WW1 soldier standing with head bowed, as if in grief for fallen comrades, has been greatly valued locally because we can all share that grief mixed with pride. Anish Kapoor's statues literally reflect us, as we see ourselves and our surroundings in the

shiny surfaces. The piece in the photograph is in Jerusalem, and is called “Turning the World Upside Down”.



Some public statues have found a place in our hearts. Many photos are taken of visitors beside Eric Morecambe! Often, statues of public figures have been adopted as “one of us”. These days, they might be given a facemask to wear. During Rag Week one year, some Bristol students did a stunt which involved sleeping in a tent on the traffic island which is home to a statue of Queen Victoria. In the morning, those going by to work saw that footprints had appeared in the night leading from the foot of the statue to the Ladies’ Public Toilets and back!

There was another public statue in the centre of Bristol, and I confess that, even as a Bristol student, I took little notice of it. I was happy to go to concerts at the nearby Colston Hall. But I have to admit that when I heard on the news that the statue of Edward Colston, slave trader and benefactor to the City of Bristol, had been pulled down and tipped into the Dock, although I accept that some will be outraged at this destruction of public property, I cheered!

How powerful art (and statuary) is! It can express and draw the feelings of many. It seemed to me that the dunking of that statue was also a piece of art –performance art.

Some art is timeless, because it says something about us and our world that is for ever true. Some is of its time, and needs to be sensitively reviewed – because what it said only ever portrayed a narrow view. There are ideas coming to light that some representations of figures from our history might be melted down to allow new sculptures to be made, which will honour different people. It is an interesting parallel with the study of history. A statue need not stand for ever, but can be transformed into something new. Another suggestion is to bring in balance, so that a companion piece of art or a plaque which tells the other half of the story could be added. What we learnt at school as history has been demonstrated to be only partial. There is a whole other perspective which comes to light as we read the stories of those who were kidnapped from their countries of birth and cruelly transported as if they were not human beings but commodities, and hear about families who were enslaved for generations in a foreign land. As we learn to listen to those who will tell us, we begin to understand how offensive to many these monuments are. Realisation dawns that some of those feted as benefactors to their cities made the wealth which they shared from the exploitation of fellow human beings.

Art can make us aware. It can give joy, or tears. It can bring out strong emotions we did not know we had. It can inflame, and it can heal. I hope

that some good, new and old, art can be allowed to get to work on helping us live the next chapter of the history of our rich and varied land.