THE TIMES

Kevin Harman skips all the way to the art show

Mike Wade

April 28 2018, 12:01am,
The Times



Kevin Harman's artistic endeavours have left him in trouble with the law
STUART ARMITT

Share Save

A load of old rubbish or a work of art? Kevin Harman, a young Scottish artist with a growing reputation, is asking that question next week at one of the largest art fairs in the world.

Working with maniacal energy over 48 hours, he has just completed Skip 16, converting the detritus in a dumpster by a pavement in the Bronx into an ordered and curiously beautiful piece.



Harman created Skip 16 using items he found in a dumpster in New York's Bronx
CHRISTOPHER COOK

Unlike some of its 15 predecessors, not everything he found has made it into the sculpture, which has been transferred to the Frieze New York art show in Randall's Island Park, where work by artists represented by more than 190 galleries is being exhibited.

"There was marble, card, bricks, all kinds of building material, but loads of food too," Harman said. "I was going through the black bags, getting rid of all this vile stuff. This skip wasn't just going to stay by the stair and I didn't want to stink out the [art] fair out."

Brought up in Wester Hailes, a housing scheme in southwest Edinburgh, Harman, 35, spent a year in Majorca in an Abba tribute band before he embarked on his artistic career. He was , he said, a "great shader" as a child, and loved colouring books; later at Wester Hailes Education Centre he won prizes for drawing and painting. In his second year at Edinburgh College of Art, his work began to take a new direction, driven by a sense of challenge mingled with poverty. Reclaimed materials are free. The results are arresting. And for his pains, Harman has been arrested more than most artists.

He first came to attention of the Edinburgh constabulary when he collected 220 doormats from tenements in the Bruntsfield neighbourhood, combining them in a sculptural work entitled *Love Thy Neighbour* for his degree show. One woman contacted the police because her doormat had sentimental value and Harman returned it. Some of the other feedback was "borderline aggression" as people turned up to retrieve their property, but "most people went away delighted, they came down to the show and were happy to have been part of it".

Officers were alerted to his master's composition, *Brick*. This time, after months spent marshalling a legal team along with a glazier and a journalist, he smashed a window at the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh, replacing it immediately. The police were called and he spent half a day at St Leonard's police station, where he was asked: "Did you have permission to commit this art?" He was fined £200 for breach of the peace.



His finished work
CHRISTOPHER COOK

Brick was, he insists, a serious piece, a critique of the people who control art. He added: "It could be seen as an act of violence, like you were a chippy artist. It was way more than that. Today it's cited in lectures. Immediately after it happened, things got exceptionally tough, especially when I started taking it all into the art school as my master's piece: the smashed window, the evidence, the video footage, the lawyers' documents, the police statements.

"I had a letter from the college saying: 'Due to our relationship with the local galleries, we really can't show this as your degree show.' I showed my lawyers that, they read it and said: 'Nah, you're fine.' I hung the letter as well, at the end of the show."

There is an element of performance in his work. It's like that with the skips too. Passers-by start talking with him and tell him their stories and about the things that have been thrown away. He met a man called Lionel while making Skip 16. "He was blown away," Harman said. "He was saying, 'I don't understand, what are you doing?' He walked away, had a couple of beers, came back. He still couldn't get his head round it. He said, 'I'm from Jamaica and I've been in the Bronx all these years. But I have never seen anything like this.' "

Work by Kevin Harman can be seen at TWENTY at the Ingleby Gallery, the Glasite Meeting House, 33 Barony St, Edinburgh, from May 12. The Frieze New York art fair opens on May 4