



AUTUMN PREVIEW

PJ Harvey, Grayson Perry, Leonardo da Vinci and 'Tintin' – we bring you the best of the season

Mathew Sawyer: White Donkey for Sale



Rokeby Galleries East

The personal. It's a territory artists are generally encouraged to avoid and yet the tone of Mathew Sawyer's sculptures, photo-works and paintings is one of a day spent in the life of another person's head, as he grapples with the point of existence and documents it as art. While there is always the suspicion of a ruse to Sawyer's interventions, he uses the umbrella title 'documentary' to describe the different series here, a word that could apply as much to the idea of observing life as it does to the formal frameworks of other makers. Each piece is designed with an iconic mode of presentation in mind, recalling such antecedents as John Baldessari, Chris Burden and Sophie Calle.



The gallery appears the site of a mini art-historical rebellion, littered with a cast of porcelain period figures whose decorative wellbeing has been compromised by fleshy clay adornments (pictured). The tragicomic worlds of Fischli and Weiss, David Shrigley, and Ansel Krut are all present, but in a mercurial sense.

Examples of Sawyer taking this road-less-logical include a celebration of his birthday that involved posting a pingpong ball, covered in key words of particular significance, through a random letterbox, or else making a lunchtime pal of a blackbird, as well as returning a hoodie to Gap with added woolly mammoth hair hand-stitched inside. Yet, however elegant or clever these works might appear, the real gem here is Sawyer's rich interior world, which, at its best, simply, brilliantly, does not fit.

Rebecca Geldard

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Skye Sherwin

Artist of the week 154: Mathew Sawyer

theguardian

If he's not slipping scraps of song lyrics into commuters' pockets, he's secretly sewing woolly mammoth hair into Gap hoodies. Have you had a brush yet with Mathew Sawyer?



Watch out, Sawyer's about ... Mathew Sawyer's Ping-Pong Ball, 2011 (detail), which he put through someone's letterbox. Photograph: Mathew Sawyer/Rokeby gallery

Once, when he was living in a block of flats, [Mathew Sawyer](#) took his neighbour's shoes. The guy left them outside his door every night, and the young artist was able to paint a swallow on each battered sole and replace them before his neighbour had time to notice. Were those birds discovered before they rubbed off on asphalt? Who knows. Sawyer has been developing novel ways to secretly brush up against the lives of others for years; what the unwitting participants might make of it isn't the point.

In Sawyer's work, making connections with people (or animals and things) is but a sweet, absurd dream always slipping away. One of his earliest works, *It'll All Come Out in the Wash*, involved sliding scraps of song lyrics by [Television](#), [David Bowie](#) and other bands and musicians he admired into the pockets of strangers on the tube. On another occasion, he wrote down five words summarising a year of his life on a ping-pong ball and put it through the letterbox of a random terraced house.

Sawyer calls these gestures Documentary Works, presenting them as a photograph or two, accompanied by some awkward poetry to explain each project. "I go to sign on at the job centre/ No one there but me is aware/ All my pockets are full of sugar," reads one concise three-liner. They also beg the question of documentary truth. Did he really leave his taps on at home and go on a trip to Trafalgar Square? While Sawyer insists he carries everything through, a photo of a fountain doesn't tell us much.

Perhaps veracity is beside the point. As a Venn diagram in his current London solo debut explains, there's the world we want and the world we live in, but there is no real world. By this, Sawyer is implying, of course, that we're solipsistic folk, stuck in the world in our head. He tests the boundaries, exploring what is arguably the crux of all art: the yearning to communicate and make sense of life, and the challenges of doing so.

He also creates surreal rainbow-hued drawings and paintings of animals and smiley faces. Then there's his [sculpture](#), sending up [our fear of otherness](#) with kitschy mock 18th-century figurines wrapped in bearhugs by a turd-like, brown Neanderthal clay man, pathetically cumbersome and out of place. Though Sawyer's work can be subtle, the themes he skewers are big, timeless and very human.

Why we like him: For Gap, where Sawyer sewed some woolly mammoth hair into a Gap hoodie and returned it to the store, a brilliantly daft riposte to consumer culture's anonymity and brevity.

Spooked: Sawyer also makes music – as [Mathew Sawyer and the Ghosts](#). It's unlikely you'll see him play live though: he has a fear of public performances.

Where can I see him? At [Rokeby gallery](#), London until 22 October.