Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Presents “Directions: Jeremy Deller”

*Video “English Magic” Appeared in British Pavilion at 2013 Venice Biennale*

“Directions: Jeremy Deller,” on view Feb. 7 through August at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, features “English Magic” (2012), a 14-minute single-channel video that shares its title with the artist’s solo exhibition commissioned for the British Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. According to Deller, this idiosyncratic collective portrait of Britishness, which stretches from the ancient to the contemporary, can also be described as an “esoteric, mystical pop video.”


For “English Magic” Deller turned to the Melodians Steel Orchestra, a multiethnic, multigang group of steel-pan players. They appear in Studio 2 at Abbey Road in London, loading in and setting up their equipment to record three compositions selected by Deller: the haunting third movement of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Symphony No. 5 in D major (1943), A Guy Called Gerald’s trippy acid-house hit “Voodoo Ray” (1988) and David Bowie’s cryptic rock classic “The Man Who Sold the World” (1970).

The film steps out of the studio to the shimmering pianissimo of Vaughan Williams’ “Romanza,” as beautifully shot slow-motion footage of birds of prey, landing and on the wing, fills the screen. When the movement fades, the camera cuts abruptly to a scrapyard crane, putting down...
stabilizers and hoisting a Range Rover aloft with its giant claw. A pair of the luxury SUVs are consigned to the car crusher then discarded. One of them is twirled playfully in midair before being flung to the ground. The score to this segment is the Melodians’ jubilant rendition of “Voodoo Ray,” which also accompanies footage of kids and grown-ups frolicking on Deller’s inflatable sculpture “Sacrilege” (2012), a full-scale re-creation of Stonehenge as a moon bounce. The spires of the Millennium Dome can be glimpsed in the background as the fake megaliths inflate.

The scene returns to Studio 2 for the familiar opening riff of “The Man Who Sold the World,” before going back outdoors for the Lord Mayor’s Parade, a semi-surreal annual procession that celebrates the power and the charitable initiatives of financial institutions in the City of London. “It’s quite an opaque part of UK life,” Deller explained, “largely unaccountable and secretive and so open to corruption.” The film closes with a return to the Melodians’ performance and the majestic birds of prey.

The artist leaves the interpretation of the artwork an open question: “It’s really just music I like with imagery that interests me.”

“Directions: Jeremy Deller” is organized by curator Kelly Gordon.

Related Programs

The Hirshhorn offers a range of interactive educational experiences designed to engage people of all interest levels in contemporary art; consult hirshhorn.si.edu for a complete schedule. On Thursday, March 20, at 7 p.m. in the Hirshhorn’s Ring Auditorium, Deller will speak about his work as part of the ongoing Meet the Artist series. Also available on the website is the museum’s archive of podcasts, which makes gallery walk-throughs and interviews with artists accessible internationally.

About the Hirshhorn

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Smithsonian’s museum of international modern and contemporary art, has nearly 12,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, mixed-media installations, works on paper and new media works in its collection. The Hirshhorn presents diverse exhibitions and offers an array of public programs that explore modern and contemporary art. Located at Independence Avenue and Seventh Street S.W., the museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). Admission to the galleries and special programs is free. For more information about exhibitions and events, visit hirshhorn.si.edu. Follow the Hirshhorn on Facebook at facebook.com/hirshhorn, on Twitter at twitter.com/hirshhorn and on Tumblr at hirshhorn.tumblr.com. Or sign up for the museum’s eBlasts at hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/social-
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