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## How John Gerrard is sculpting the future

The apocalyptic visionary makes his mark with 3D art depicting a bleak virtual world in which only time is real

More than 40m people a year pass in and out of the great glass maw of Norman Foster's Tube station at Canary Wharf, in east London. Ant-like, they arrive to populate the gilded palaces of the broken banking system and, ant-like, they depart. Do they ever consider what brings them here?

The answer is three things — oil, nitrogen and corn. Oil made 20th-century man wealthy; nitrogen, fixed by oil, fertilised his crops; and corn fed both him and the pigs and cattle he consumed. Suddenly, 20th-century man noticed, everything — food, transport — was cheap, and he wanted more and more. To satisfy his demands, in the early years of that wealthy but benighted century, farmers used oil power to plough up 100m acres of land around the Texas Panhandle. It was meant to be the bread basket of the Great Plains, but it turned into the Dust Bowl. Ploughing had destroyed the stability of the surface. The land dried; winds came and whipped up dust storms so dense, dark and vast that the farmers thought the end of the world had come. In 1935, an unknown man took a picture of a dust storm in Texas. A great rolling wall is about to enshroud the houses. Many years later, an Irish artist, John Gerrard, found the photograph at the University of Texas at Austin. He turned it over to find these words written on the back: "Dust storm at Stratford, Texas, April 14th 1935, 5.45pm, lasting 45 minutes. Darkest dark I ever experienced." "I was drawn to that dust storm," Gerrard says. "It was biblical, apocalyptic."

A straight line runs from that moment to Canary Wharf Tube station. It is there Gerrard is to install his Oil Stick Work (Angelo Martinez/Richfield, Kansas), commissioned by Transport for London's wondrous Art on the Underground. This and all his current work is inspired by his visits to the eerie, deserted landscapes of what was the Dust Bowl.

On a giant screen, 11 metres x 8 metres, the ant-bankers will see a barn and three cylindrical silos in an empty landscape. The image moves in 3D, so we seem to be walking slowly round the scene. A tiny figure on a ladder is slowly painting the buildings black with an oil stick, solid oil paint. This computer-generated man has a name, Angelo Martinez, and it will take him 30 years to cover every surface. In the year of the installation at Canary Wharf, he will just about finish the wall he is working on.

"The 30-year trajectory is not an accident," Gerrard explains. "The general understanding is that the replacement of petroleum as our main energy source will happen in that period."

Everything happens in real time. Once the Canary Wharf year is over, the work still exists as a computer program. It will also be projected at other sites and in the homes of people who have bought a smaller version. The sun rises and sets. Angelo arrives at dawn and leaves at dusk. But only time is real; everything else is virtual. Both Angelo and the buildings are made and operated by a highly tuned version of a computer gaming program. "The virtual," Gerrard muses, "is a metaphor in and of itself." He particularly likes the fact that Angelo — modelled on a real man with that name — is doing real manual labour beneath the bankers' glass palaces, with their virtualised money. "He is a virtual worker doing this real activity, as opposed to all those real workers doing virtual activities."

I meet Gerrard at his London gallery, Thomas Dane. Two of his works from last year are on display — Sow Farm (near Libbey, Oklahoma) and Lufkin (near Hugo, Colorado). In the first, we seem to walk slowly around huge sheds. Inside are 10,000 pigs, and outside is a lake of their waste. The whole thing is computer-controlled —

"There's a devotional quality to these pumps. They draw a substance up from the earth, then bow down to give thanks."

Gerrard starts the process of making these works by going to the real places and walking round them, taking several thousand pictures with his Leica M8. It is a strange experience. "I've seen hundreds of these facilities, and I have only seen one person in weeks on this site. They are desolate places, hundreds of miles from any town. They are on the corners of big, irrigated fields. A huge metal arm sweeps around, irrigating the fields. That makes a big circle, leaving out the corners, and that's where they put these facilities."

Once, a man, a Mexican, tried to stop him photographing. He was shocked and afraid, hands trembling as he confronted this strange, tall, thin, 35-year-old Irishman, with his dark red hair and beard, in the middle of nowhere. Then he lost his nerve and drove off, leaving Gerrard standing there.

The photographs are taken to Vienna, where a man works for months to turn them into a virtual model. The computer then overlays the model with the photographs and the whole thing is run through a "gaming engine", the software usually used for computer games, to produce the 3D rendering and the movement. Gerrard is the only artist in the world to work like this.

He was born in 1974, in Dublin, and brought up in Tipperary. He had six siblings. He describes his upbringing as "post-Catholic, but largely Christian". His father tried teaching and farming, and ended up teaching, oddly enough, in the oil industry. His parents were active environmentalists and campaigners for the legalisation of divorce in Ireland.

He studied sculpture at Ruskin School of Fine Art, Oxford. In 1997, he came across a 3D scan there. "It was a sculptural photograph, untethered from the 2D surface. It was a sea change in the way you could think about photography."

Gerrard blagged his way into the company that did it, which, curiously, was scanning 2,500 women a year so that Marks & Spencer could get their bra sizes right. They let him have a go, and he became convinced this was the sculpture of the future. He took a higher degree in Chicago and even spent a year doing computer science. His studio is now in Dublin, but the hard production is done in Vienna, just because that's where he found the computer craftsman who could do it. Once he found his medium, he was quickly picked up by a gallery and, almost at once, had huge successes at the Basel and Miami art fairs. "For the first time, I jumped ship from institutional funding into this direct form of support from society. In Miami, we sold six works in 10 minutes. It was shocking." Now, in editions of six, his domestic-scale pieces — 3D videos in a frame, mounted on a table that houses a specially built computer — sell for about £46,000.

It was last year's Venice Biennale, however, that fully launched him on the international art scene. Reviewing his Animated Scene show, Blake Gopnik, in The Washington Post, made a crucial point about this work: "Most artists who try on the new immersive technologies end up making art that, like it or not, is mostly about the new immersive technologies. Whereas in Gerrard's latest pieces, we see someone who gets his high tech to work as just another medium for saying what he has to say, and showing what he has to show."

In other words, Gerrard has content. In fact, the striking thing about our conversation is that he talks perhaps 40% of the time about the technique and his life, and 60% about oil, nitrogen and corn. On nitrogen he is an anorak, summarising at length a history of nitrogen written by an Irish academic for his Venice catalogue. Such devotion to subject matter is, in the world of computer art, refreshing. And his content is big.

"Cheap oil equals wealth in a real sense. Much of the 20th century was built on converting oil into wealth — it's fundamental. Then you've had these incredible free markets, which have kind of dismantled legislation to allow speculation to run riot. You've had the dramatic climax of that recently. It has become extreme, the level of money — which you can think of as virtual capital, anyway — and the speculative, some would say parasitic, level to which investment banking has escalated."

He draws back when I suggest his images are portraits of human folly. He prefers to see them simply as meditations on the reality of our world. And they work. Start watching and it becomes hard to stop. The one criticism I have is that they are too virtual; they need to feel more photographic to intensify the experience. But that's just me.

Back in Vienna, Gerrard has been making contact with the non-virtual through food. Four times a year, in a building divided into three parts — workshop, display space, kitchen — he holds dinner parties. The food is sourced and made by a group called AO&, one of whose stunts was to send a truck to ski resorts to sell food to the wealthy. "Feed the Rich" was the slogan.

The cutlery was made by Gerrard. He asked a man in Cuba — he is mad about Cuba, although not its politics — to slaughter a goat. They ate it, and Gerrard went to sit by the sea, cleaning the bones. These were sent to France, where they were remade in pewter and silver plate, with spoon, fork and knife bits added. Nothing had to be added to the shoulder blades: they went straight to salad tossers. You can buy a pair for about £200. Like the virtual-real, real-virtual nexus at Canary Wharf, it is another circle. "You hold the basic structure that supports these animals, and you eat these animals."

Loquacious, self-conscious, precise — even immaculate — in appearance and occasionally anoraky in manner, Gerrard is both very Irish and very international — like Ireland, in fact. He is also very Irish in that he has cast himself as a truth-teller, just what is needed to confront the ant-bankers with Oil Stick Angelo, the artist's surrogate, who spends a working life making a mark on the most unforgiving landscape imaginable, the landscape of mere efficiency.

Oil Stick Work launches at Canary Wharf Tube station, E14, in April 2010. The piece was commissioned by Art on the Underground: [www.tfl.gov.uk/art](http://www.tfl.gov.uk/art)