

Rory's McCormack's Flint Grotto on Brighton beach.

This stretch of the beach is, in theory, designated for local people to keep small boats and the appropriate gear to go with it... that used to mean that everyone treated three-quarters of a mile of the beach essentially as maritime allotments... you kept a small boat down here... you came down, you caught your fish or just had a bit of fun or whatever... and nobody really gave it a second thought because it's what the beach was for, keeping small boats on, and using the sea... but one way and another that's all gone by the by... and I'm that last one left here that still carries on fishing. There's a couple of boats further up but they're not used any more... and that particular little stretch is all being taken over and they're building swimming pools on it... so there is nothing now. It started going downhill twenty, twenty-five years ago. The actual equipment to run a boat off the beach has got to be quite substantial... it's got to be well anchored... so everything was large concrete blocks set up with a lot of time and effort put into it all and used for decades... and as soon as this bit of the beach got hit by vandalism too bad, and people started peeling off, they immediately brought diggers down here and dug up all the concrete infrastructure of what's needed to run boats... there was nothing wrong with it... I mean at one time there was a small mountain of hand- and motorised-winchers on the beach... just dug up and dumped.

Was it Brighton council that did that?

Oh yeah... absolutely. The space that's here is fenced off... quite illegally, it shouldn't be fenced off... because I stuck it out through the vandalism... this enclosure used to have thousands of pounds worth of fishing nets on it... because you have to have such an amount of gear to fish for a living... and I thought I'll put a bit of garden in... and that worked quite well... I mean as this beach was totally cleared of everything bar myself... it does look like a total desert... it's almost the definition of a desert... nothing grows, it's all the same, it's completely infertile... I mean it's one of the most boring stretches of beach you'll ever find... I wonder what you can make out of that.

Is there a story to it, the figures you're making and their relationships?

Well, I'm quite interested in the classical world... and if you go back a step before that... to the mid bronze-age... there's quite a lot of stuff that no-one quite understands available... lots of little figurines of this, that and the other and they intrigue me... so most of the larger figures are simply outsized blow-ups of existing small, six-inch figurines... there's bits from everywhere. That is a Cycladic figure... so that's from the Aegean... and there's a fella playing a harp at the back... which was quite fun to do... to see if that was going to hold together... so there's two Cycladic musicians... and then a couple of other bits and pieces... and I kept on making those because I got into the swing of it... and they're simple figures... while you're trying to figure out what is going to work and what isn't going to work... and how far you can physically stretch what you're trying to do before it just disintegrates or looks stupid... they're strong, imposing little figures in their own right as figurines. Nearly all of these at the time... at the moment of conception... were experiments... What will this look like if I put in a couple of un-knapped flints?... What will it look like if I make it flat instead of curved? That head behind you is brick... accidentally it ended up looking like Donald Trump. I made these as a pair... I tried to make them the same size to see how different they looked being made out of different materials... so, as I say, the whole thing is an experiment.

Do you have a background in building dry-stone walls?

Yes.

So where was that? Was that here?

I did a government training course donkey's-years ago on Dartmoor and round Plymouth way... so I got the feel of it then, and I lived in Canada for a while... and no one was doing it there so instead of working for builders I did it myself. With that little bit of experience of dry stone walling I came back to Brighton and thought it's a non-starter here... because when people tried to work from nature here all they did was pick up beach pebbles and cement them together and then plaster over it to disguise how rough it looked... but then when you look at what people could do... when you see entire churches made of square knapped flint... and then you see other buildings that have fallen into disrepair and they're still so well made... something like the Priory at Lewes... you'll have the barebones of arches left but because it's put together well... you've got un-knapped and knapped flint holding up... still keeping the integrity of an arch in place. Instead of waiting for time to give you that there's no reason why you shouldn't make that... and because flint is such an unsuitable stone for that sort of thing... no one really tried it before. So I thought I shall build them as the better buildings around here are built. The larger pieces are more striking for me, purely because of the physical side of it... but I did put a kerb on it... the largest is just shy of ten foot... but I would like to put one up 15 or 20 foot... and there's nothing to stop you whatsoever... it ain't going to fall over. I would like to see just how imposing it would look.

So how did it start with the council contacting you and complaining?

To be honest this is something other people have got hold of much more than I have. There was one occasion where one of the beach inspectors who I knew fairly friendly... said, 'I'm sorry, this has all got to come down', but that was 2 years after I started and by that time I'd spent 2 years in the middle of the beach on top of a ladder...sometimes 12, 15 foot off the ground, with the beach inspectors and whatever coming past me with no-one saying a dicky-bird... and then when I finished all the larger figures then they come along and say, 'Ah, you shouldn't have done that' ... so then I dug my heels in and carried on. That was more than 3 years ago and I haven't heard anything since.

If there were a situation in the future where there was a problem what would you like to happen to your statues? I think they make sense here on the beach where I can see the fishing nets, the boat, all these other things... and it seems to be one big idea... this is the work of a fisherman artist.

Well yeah... the whole thing is Brighton beach, Brighton sea front... it could be absolutely anywhere... it's just a matter of living in a place... looking around you... seeing what it has to offer... seeing what you can give and using what is beneath your feet. I live 200 yards back that way and the sea is 60 yards that way... to me it's insane not to have a boat of some description... catch fish, eat fish... because you're there... if you lived out in the middle of the countryside amongst other things you'd probably learn how to take a couple of rabbits here and there... and if you lived in an area that's all millstone and grit and if you have any little odd-jobs to do you'd make it out of that... you wouldn't send to Italy for sheets of marble... that's nonsense to me... you use what's there... you don't become perverse and try to build a plastic dome in the middle of the Sahara desert... I mean if you want to build something there, figure out a way to use the sand or whatever. There's no evangelism in it... it's just a matter of fact that where I live there is loads and loads of flint and there's a tidy bit of fish and it's all available on the doorstep... so why try to do something else?

What I'm getting at is that I think it makes perfect sense here on the beach but if the council contacted you and said, 'We'll save this for you and we'll put it in Brighton Museum', how would you feel about that?

Yeah... it is highly problematic... as soon as you start thinking about the future it all goes up in smoke. I live 200 yards back that way and I own my own home but I own it leasehold and half of my street has just been sold and they're going to develop it. So I don't even know if I've got a home to live in this time next year... and that's happened in the last three months... and that is sort of writ-large what is happening on the beach all the time. You just haven't got any idea. You really have got to get used to living in a form of anarchy... anarchy imposed from above... where essentially you have to try to fit in with what happens around you, which is absolutely artificial and you have no control over. That sounds a bit bleak... sounds like Ballard... a bit like he used to write a long time ago... but that is what is happening right now. I have no idea where I live in a year, or what happens here in 3 months. Essentially this is owned by the public... and it is, if they choose, for the public to keep. So this is gratis. As soon as I've built anything here I don't own it any more. I haven't got the final say in it... and it's out there for the public to enjoy... whether I like the public or not it's quite immaterial...

Interview 2

I think it's becoming a bit of a monoculture... I mean I only know about the fishing side of it and that's nearly all gone now... where we are standing, 25 years ago, we would have been in a forest of small fishing boats, all run by local folks... who just accepted it as a day to day thing, that's what you did... you didn't watch Jamie Oliver telling you how wonderful mackerel were... you went out and caught more than you could possibly use, 50 yards off the shore with a seine net. And it's not gone because of a lack of fish, because the bulk of people that used to fish here were amateurs... so they weren't worried about making a couple of grand a week to pay off the mortgage on a boat... they were filling the fridge up and keeping the neighbours happy... and they're gone.

And how has the situation been with the council?

If they had a big enough project to build on this bit of beach... this place wouldn't even feature in any considerations, but as it stands everything they put on this beach is on a temporary basis... because it is a public beach... so they have events down here... very substantial things that will go on for a few weeks and take a week to put up... but it all comes down again. Everything changes so fast now that you have to adapt and take it in your stride... and really it's got to be a hell of a change these days before you throw your hands up in despair and say I can't cope with it... I mean I certainly wouldn't want to open up any campaign, 'Save the Brighton eccentric fisherman's odds and sods', because there's no need for it. I've actually finished anything I'll ever do down here and what there is here hasn't been touched for the best part of a year and it just sits there. There's large events go on on the beach and they pretty much go round me.

Part 2

I've been trained as a dry stone waller... I know how to do that... and I have tried to do the same thing with round pebbles... I've never seen a dry stone flint wall but actually, when it comes to it, there's no reason why you shouldn't at all... obviously you wouldn't use round beach pebbles... but if you select what you're using it works.

This is a bi-product of me being in this position and running a little fishing boat... I agree it did take over things for a few years... but I'd rather keep it as a bi-product. It's what people do... someone will build a totem pole in their back yard when they're putting their garden together... they might knock it down in 2 years but it's that. It's a reflection of the people that made it and where they made it... on this spot you have got flints to play with... on this spot you are on public land... so you can't really take too many liberties... in a different place I wouldn't have built these, I'd have built a house... and that house you could have made as fanciful as you wanted, so you would have got something else altogether... and if you lived in a different country where land is cheap and you don't have to worry about leaseholds... you would be as fanciful as you like... well people are all over the globe, in that situation... you haven't got to go back very far before it was a very, very common thing for people to decorate the inside of their house with murals... and I don't think they expected to be Raphael or anyone else... they just cheered the place up... and quite likely the next year they whitewash it over and put something else up... but it was obvious, it was such a common thing that it didn't warrant comment... so it gets lost in that way as well... not only are they not put up to last forever... it's so straightforward, it's such a commonplace... that nobody tells you about it either.

Interview 3

Outsider artist isn't a bad term, it's just not the best one... there should be something that fits the bill a bit better... a restless person, with itchy fingers who couldn't help but keep going. When it starts I think it's a spontaneous thing... there is a spark and someone puts 2 stones together or 2 whatever together and they get carried away... and they really do not ever think in terms of art... it's something much more simple and satisfying... it is 'putting things together'... but another time you will be doing something similar and you have created something that will move you emotionally... and you can see that has more to offer... and you're very pleased with yourself... and you do the next one... but the whole concept of putting it up for criticism, i.e. how it's going to be received at the end... there is no 'this will be in an art gallery', 'how will this compare to another artist?', 'what will this be worth?', 'will this stand up well against my other body of work?'... There's none of that, you just do it... and if you make a dogs-dinner of it you take a hammer to it. You don't overthink it... 'What's this all about?' 'Well look, it's right in front of you, bang your head on it... do whatever you want... that's it'. There's no ulterior motive... money's not in it... it's not cost anything and it's never intended to have a financial value at the end...

But it could do.

Yeah, but that would be incidental... and that would be someone coming in and using it in their world... it is of its place and of its time and it was there!

I think the idea that a postman or a builder or a fisherman has made it makes it more accessible to many people than the idea that an artist has made it.

It'll probably be more heartfelt. There isn't a person on the planet that hasn't made stuff... so when an 'everyone' sees what another 'everyone' has done... and it sort of works, there is a camaraderie there... 'Oh I done that n'all... mine didn't come out too good', 'Mine did, do you want to see it?'

The things I've done I'm well aware that I could have done some of them differently and better and more effectively... and the ones that I like I know have a certain quality and worth... and I

don't care what anyone says about those, they satisfied me. Now if someone wants to look at it and say they like it, great... if they want to look at it and think 'that's not too hot', I don't care... they're welcome to think that... it doesn't matter... it's not a matter of water off a ducks back, it's a done deal.

Which ones are the ones that work best for you?

The two apes I did, the gorilla and the orang-utan... I didn't really have anything much to work from and they built themselves and came out well... they worked... there's the Venus of Willendorf with the little dog at the back, that no one ever seems to notice... and right at the back, quite an early Neolithic figure of a woman crouched down in a vaguely sexually suggestive position... but it's not an erotic position... there's a couple of the others I haven't made accurate enough... and there's a couple I've done properly but they don't move me at all. Sometimes you actually get quite an insight into the person that built the original... you feel like you have a few atoms of them in you... and you really appreciate it and other times it's just a huge garden gnome.

When I came here last year I asked about your plans for the space and you talked about building a very big piece to see how imposing you could make it... last week you said you've probably done as much as you want to do with the site... what's changed in that six month period?

What I've done seems to have been slowly accepted... to be honest I don't want to push my luck with using up bits of public space and potentially annoying someone... it's the age of the mobile phone... there will be complaints. When it was three-quarters finished, I didn't have the opportunity, but you could see it would be a good idea to extend it and put a huge figure down the end... so it would be something akin to an Egyptian temple... which has a walkway of several sphinxes or whatever it might be... and then the main meal at the end of it, the imposing Zeus or whatever... but I found a different way to finish it... I ran out of space and I was still on a roll if you like, in that I had a technique of sorts at my fingertips and I was used to doing it... so I wanted to carry on doing it and that's why I made a lot of those tiny figures... and to my mind I finished it by putting these tiny figures more mischievous and random... sort of frolicking over the tops of the other ones... I felt that sort of completed it in a way... plus it was definitely starting to get a bit cluttered and you couldn't keep going forever. Right now, what I've done on the beach is finished... it wouldn't bear any additions really... at the moment I'm quite pleased with it because the plants there have grown incredibly and it's beginning to get a little overgrown with shrubbery... you would have to be a bit judicious about it but I would like the whole thing to be grown over.

Would you?

Yeah, not totally obscured, but grown through. It did that of itself... even after the first couple of pieces I did, people would be saying 'Oh, how long has that been there?' 'That looks old' and all the rest of it... I thought, 'Might as well go the whole hog'. The notion of something that's got a great deal of age... it's reassuring. It anchors you a bit. You like to feel part of it. In a way it's almost a primal religious thing... you feel the need to belong and to share with your surroundings... you might be inspired to start worshipping a tree or something... but you do react to your surroundings... you wouldn't think you're revering your surroundings but you're respecting them... you want to join them in some way... and joining them will often mean making images of them or having some ceremony integral to a place.

Is that why you use the materials that are there?

Well I can't see why you would possibly do anything else... why would you bring stuff in? If you spend enough time in a place and you don't mutilate it too much... sooner or later it sort of tells you which direction it wants to go... you come to an agreement with it.

Some of the sites that you've mentioned as a comparison... the kind of things that people do spontaneously to brighten up their environment and make it more cheerful... I think their nature is that they're temporary... they tend to come and go relatively quickly, I think... how would you feel if your space didn't exist in ten years time... if your space was cleared?

You'd be a fool to think that was an impossibility... it would get a bit grim, 'grumpy old man' but I don't think we have a great deal of certainty in our lives any more... and I think you're a fool to expect it... do not regard yourself as sacrosanct... so I think it will be ephemeral because some bright spark at the council will have a plan for the beach... the events they put on are obviously successful or they wouldn't keep doing them... sooner or later they're going to say, 'This is what this beach is for', and it's no good pretending it's a public space any more... we want to put permanent hard standings down because it makes no sense to keep on spending two weeks erecting and taking down an event when the event lasts less than a day... I can imagine that will happen eventually and then I would think it's unlikely that my little patch would be worth tuppence in the grand scheme of things. Having made it, that's two thirds of the satisfaction I would expect to get out of it.

That beach has always been local people doing their own thing and for most people doing their own thing was running a small fishing boat. If you go down that beach now... if you dig down the pebbles a foot you'll find all manner of grease and rubbish that's seeped down there over the years from boats and winches... it was part of the human community in this area... it was part of living in Brighton... it is not such a physical way of life any more... people now, instead of keeping their boats and whatnot there... come down to the beach in cars... vans... unload whatever kit they might be using... go to sea... go back to their van when they're finished and go... they are not linked with it any more. Brighton, for all its veneer of entertainment, it was fishing and farming folk, and it's relatively recently that that's not been noticeable.

When I started keeping boats on that beach it was 100% Brighton people... it was Brighton working class people with a long tradition... and basically that generation of people is now stone dead... when I got to know them they were all in early retirement... there was a generation that came after them... which would be my age... but very few of them were willing to stick it out on the beach and whatever, through the vandalism... but they were aware of the same traditions... and just the very fact of doing it, especially with the heavier old-fashioned boats... anyone that does that has got to be committed to a lot of... you can't play at it... it's not a game... you have got to know how to get the boat down to the water... you've got to know how to get it into the water without turning it over... you've got to know how to do it with half a ton of fishing stuff in the boat... and then you've got to get that back up... so just that will make a community out of people... because you're all having to do exactly the same thing... those people do not live here much any more... it is more and more noticeable how impersonal the place is getting.

It sounds like in part that what you've made is a memorial to what Brighton was... that lost past.

Yeah, that's it! And if you like, it's not that I'm uncomfortable with it... but I'm not entitled to put that memorial up... the most serious fishing I've done was out of the marina... and these

other people would spend their lives on the beach... I know one fishing family who can point out their names in the Doomsday Book, and my family's London... I came to Brighton when I was 6 or 7... I mean I've had boats on the beach since I was 16... but even if you've been here that long you're still an outsider... because you're talking about people who would still have discussions about arguments their great-grandparents had over so-and-so fishing rights.

I think that's a very interesting way to look at it... that what you've made on the beach is...and I don't want to overstate it...is a link with Brighton's past.

It's connected to Brighton's past because I still keep fishing... once I stop fishing it's not connected to Brighton's past... it becomes a peculiar little artwork.

So what should happen to it?

I think it would just about merit being saved, incorporated into something else. Considering what other things are kept... it would get my vote, if I was nothing to do with it.

So it's more than just losing some statues made by an eccentric fisherman... it's something else... it's something a bit bigger than that?

Yeah, it is the presence of the Brighton folk on the beach... we are still here.