

Eastern promise: contemporary art on the Norfolk coast

The county's current open studios event is one of many reasons to tour coastal towns such as Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn, where affordable spaces and special light are attracting young artists



Henry Moore's Large Reclining Figure at Houghton Hall, Norfolk. Photograph: Pete Huggins

Kate Simon

Fri 31 May 2019 10.00 BST

I'm not sure which is more remarkable, the sculptures or the way they have been positioned. I am considering two colossal works by Henry Moore at Houghton Hall in north Norfolk. Large Reclining Figure (1984) lies before the west front, its back to the house, demanding to be appreciated against the Palladian mansion. Three Piece Sculpture: Vertebrae (1968-69) stands in front of the east facade, framed by the landscape beyond. Both have been precision placed by the curator,

Sebastiano Barassi, head of collections and exhibitions at the Henry Moore Foundation.

Six of the sculptor's gigantic abstract observations of the human figure and other natural forms are on display this summer in the vast parkland of the 18th-century home of Britain's first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Yet Houghton Hall's current owner, the Marquess of Cholmondeley, tells me the place to start a visit is with other smaller sculptures by Moore inside the hall. "They teach you how the artist thought and worked. Then you understand how the big pieces came about," he says.

Cholmondeley began assembling this gallery of world-class installations at the turn of the 21st century, when he commissioned James Turrell to create Skyspace: Seldom Seen (2004). More pieces - by Richard Long, Rachel Whiteread, Stephen Cox, Jeppe Hein, Phillip King and Anya Gallaccio - have since been added to Houghton's deer park and gardens. They are a visual treat for visitors to its summer exhibition.

A visit to this area also provides the chance to browse original works by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Lucian Freud over a drink at art collector Ivor Braka's country pub, the Gunton Arms, just along the coast at Thorpe Market. And nearby Norwich is home to the Sainsbury Centre of Visual Arts. But Norfolk, I discover, is also emerging as a home for serious home-grown contemporary art.

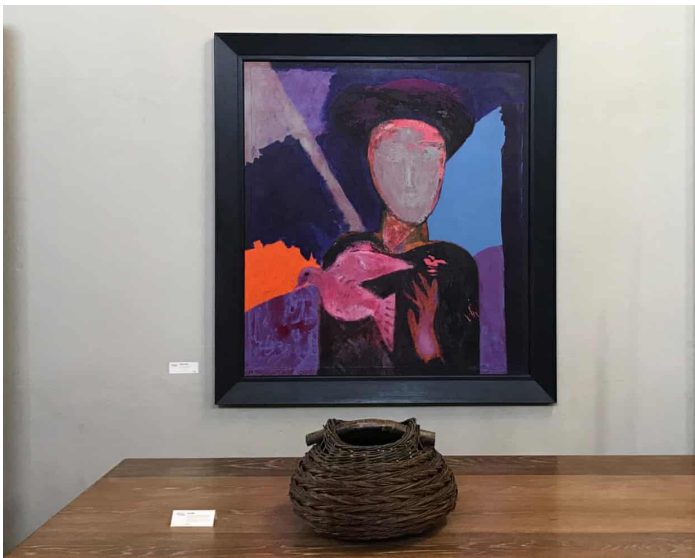


The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, by Norman Foster. Photograph: Alamy

Some of that talent is on show at a pop-up exhibition called Festival, in Houghton's Georgian stables (until 29 September). Curated by Paul Barratt and Paul Vater of Norfolk By Design, this temporary space works alongside an online showroom selling pieces by artists and makers from across East Anglia. Browsing the wooden stalls, I admire drawings, paintings, prints, sculpture, furniture and homewares by 29 exhibitors, with price tags from under a tenner to £16,000 (many are around the £30-£80 mark). "They have all responded to a brief to celebrate the optimistic spirit of the contributions of Moore and his contemporaries to the 1951 Festival of Britain," says Vater. It's a tonic for today's troubled times.

Many among the multi-generational contributors to Festival open their workspaces for

Norwich & North Norfolk Open Studios (until 9 June), including Norwich-based pop artist Colin Self, a contemporary of Peter Blake and David Hockney. My attention is drawn to a portrait of a clown hanging on the stable wall, a monotone study by Norfolk-based Brüer Tidman that I find both melancholic and menacing because of the luminous white make-up on the subject's face. Tidman, is one of three of the Yarmouth Five- the others are Katarzyna Coleman and Bridget Heriz - who are exhibiting at Festival. They, along with Emrys Parry and John Kiki, gathered in Great Yarmouth in the latter half of the 20th century, establishing an artists' colony on the industrial harbourfront.



A Brüer Tidman installation at Houghton Hall stables.
Photograph: Pete Huggins

The town once had an art school, but it has closed and been converted into flats. Yet I'm told a new generation of creatives is being lured to the seaside resort by affordable space in an interesting setting and, of course, the coastal light.

The link between art and regeneration is clear the moment I step out of Great Yarmouth station. A new five-line public art poem, Yarmouth Sublime by writer Ruthie Collins, has been carved into the pavement, leading me towards town over Vauxhall Bridge, a Victorian span that is being restored following public pressure. The poem recalls a time when Great Yarmouth had little trouble pulling in pleasure-seekers - although many still flock to the Hippodrome, Britain's only surviving dedicated circus building, a heritage celebrated at the resort's annual Out There festival of circus and street arts (14-15 September).

I'm heading for the former home of Marks & Spencer (which has quit the high street for a retail park on the edge of town) to see the newly opened gallery Ex Marks the Spot. It's the brainchild of Original Projects, run by artists Kaavous Clayton and Julia Devonshire, founder members of Norwich's influential Outpost Gallery who have struck out to the coast. I arrive as Clayton is preparing the huge white space, denuded of food and clothes, for its second exhibition, At the End of Lines (until 13 July), which

will display paintings made this year by artists from Norwich and Great Yarmouth. Yet he's keen to emphasise that the whole of the town is viewed as a working environment in which to create and promote cultural assets, from populating the bus station with designs based on patterns found around the resort, to One-Twelfth, a series of 12 annual 1:12 scale public art commissions for the town.

The first of these has just been installed at Merrivale Model Village on the seafront, a sculpture of a giraffe in polyester resin and acrylic paint made by Ryan Gander and with text by Will Self (who will be talking about the work at the attraction on 10 July). The piece is an interpretation of an original animal created in plasticine by Gander's daughter while she was being told the story of the theft of a work by Barbara Hepworth from Dulwich Park (she imagined that the thief would have had a pet giraffe to help carry the sculpture).



Ryan Gander's Really bad thing seen from a different perspective (The pet giraffe of the thief that stole a Barbara Hepworth sculpture from Dulwich Park)

“Artists may be the foot soldiers of gentrification,” says Clayton, “but we want to ensure that everything is relevant to the place, grows out of the place, and makes it stronger.”

Further south at Raveningham, on the Suffolk-Norfolk border, I meet artist Sarah Cannell, curator of the Waveney Valley Sculpture Trail (2 August-8 September), which is far from a whimsical countryside attraction. Cannell invites about 30 artists, many from East Anglia, to choose plots and create site-specific pieces, which this year will be on the theme of the Woven Woodland.”

“We show well-made traditional sculptures, but more conceptual work, too,” she says. “It’s accessible, but I want to put in things that are more challenging.”

Among artists who have shown here is Rachael Long, whose sculpture Lifeboat Horse recently made the news for becoming a permanent fixture in the harbour at Wells-next-the-Sea, where it had been on temporary display, after the town raised £15,000 to buy it. The three-metre-high sculpture, which looks like a sketch of the creature’s sinewy body in strips of steel, capturing its power even though it is in repose, is now

destined to be hidden and revealed by the tide from spring to autumn each year.



The Lifeboat Horse sculpture by Rachael Long stands on the mud flats at Wells-next-the-Sea. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA

Like Great Yarmouth, King's Lynn, on the north-west coast, is recognising the regenerative power of art. The Georgian quarter of this historic Hanseatic League port has a more genteel feel than its kiss-me-quick counterpart to the south-east, yet plans are afoot for an art exchange between the two towns.

King's Lynn has been asserting its creative credentials. Reveal, an interactive experience with large-scale art projections, took place last winter, and this year's King's Lynn festival will feature work by the late Gustav Metzger (29 June-3 August), an early conceptual artist and former resident of the town. He developed a creative form of protest in the cold war years called auto-destructive art, using destruction as part of the process of making a work, such as the acid painting on nylon he performed at the Temple Gallery in London in 1960.

"King's Lynn is turning a corner creatively," says Veronica Sekules, owner of one of the town's most interesting creative developments, GroundWork Gallery. Here on the fragile floodplain, Sekules, formerly of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, has opened the UK's first space dedicated to making the connection between environmental awareness and contemporary art. The work shown ranges from film to paintings to Richard Long's Great Ouse Mud Drawing, which he composed by throwing mud on the gallery wall. The resulting stream of mud is a spontaneous study of this elemental material and the making process - it confronts my assumptions about art.



Simon Faithfull's film, *Going Nowhere 1.5* at King's Lynn's GroundWork Gallery, shows a man walking doggedly around an intertidal island

"I'm interested in artists who are using the environment in interesting ways," says Sekules as we study *6 Hours in and with the Pacific Ocean (Chile)* by Peter Matthews, a durational drawing on paper stapled on board that he created while bobbing about in the sea.

At first glance, it looks like a topographic map; close up the intricate sketching and note-making reveal a profoundly meditative reflection on the watery environment in which it has been made. A challenging new art scene is emerging on the Norfolk coast.

● *Accommodation was provided by Tinsmith's House (doubles from £115 B&B). For a free guide to art events in Norwich and Norfolk see artinnorwich.org.uk*

Looking for a holiday with a difference? Browse Guardian Holidays to see a range of fantastic trips

We're doing something different...

... and laying the foundations for a sustainable future. Guardian journalism has now been supported by more than one million readers across the world - meaning we've been able to keep all our reporting open to everyone, and our editorial independence is protected. But we need to keep growing the number of readers who are investing in our future - by 2022, we aim to have two million supporters around the world.

The Guardian will engage with the most critical issues of our time - from the escalating climate catastrophe to widespread inequality to the influence of big tech on our lives. At a time when factual information is a necessity, we believe that each of us, around the world, deserves access to accurate reporting with integrity at its heart.

Our editorial independence means we set our own agenda and voice our own opinions. Guardian journalism is free from commercial and political bias and not influenced by billionaire owners or shareholders. This means we can investigate with courage and report with honesty - giving a voice to those less heard, exploring where others turn away, and rigorously challenge those in power.

We need your support to keep delivering quality journalism, to maintain our openness and to protect our precious independence. Every reader contribution, big or small, is so valuable. **Support The Guardian from as little as £1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Norfolk holidays
- Cultural trips
- Day trips
- England holidays
- Short breaks
- Weekend breaks
- United Kingdom holidays
- features