

Johnen Galerie

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No wishful thinking for Ryan Gander as he

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Can Ryan Gander become famous and remain mysterious?

Christian Pambrun

If your idea of a contemporary artist is one of a trendy, romantically impoverished but oh-so-cool young hipster, then meeting Ryan Gander could be a (conceptual) slap in the face. The 32-year-old artist has the sharp look of the highly focused, as if he were constantly dissecting and analysing whatever he sees. Big glasses enhance the effect. This is a man who takes what he does very seriously indeed.

As the events listed on a blackboard in his East London studio reveal, Gander is very busy these days. Later this month, Somerset House in London will include two of his works in a major exhibition *Wouldn't it be nice . . . Wishful Thinking in Art and Design*.

No wishful thinking for Gander though, it's very much all go for him. Paris, Berlin, New York . . . Gander will be showing in all of them soon. "I feel very pressured," he says. "Galleries always want new works, and the more popular you get, the more they want. So sometimes you need to say no, or to be more inventive about the way of doing shows to make sure that the quality of work doesn't suffer."

Gander has built his reputation as an influential conceptual artist mainly through his installations, but he will use almost any media, such as video or books, which has given him an edge of unpredictability. For the Somerset House show one of his works is a 3m x 2m piece of carpet that comes with a pack of double-fronted playing cards he has designed.

Gander's career path seems simple. He wanted to be a journalist but, through "chance and happenstance", he chose to study art. After 3-D design at school and interactive art at Manchester Metropolitan University, he studied fine art in the Netherlands until 2002. "I started making art with a capital 'A' quite late," he says. His parents, though not involved in the arts (his father worked in a car factory in Liverpool, his mum in a school), always let him do what he wanted.

His long years in academia have helped Gander to achieve a high level of exactitude in his work. "Rigour" is a word that is often applied to his output. "I believe in learning and practising and working," he says. "Being an artist is just being in the studio ten hours a day and then being at home and worrying. It's a lifestyle of hard work, as if you wanted to be a very good doctor: you need to practise a lot." This work has paid off: he won the Prix de Rome in 2003 and the Baloise Art Prize in 2005, among others.

Do awards matter to him? "Awards are things invented by the institution, and which become incredibly important but shouldn't be," he says firmly. "You could win the Turner Prize and make s*** work and there would still be people liking what you do."

Gander clearly doesn't believe in the romantic idea of 'the Artist'. But certain down-to-earth personal subjects he firmly declines to talk about, notably the fact that he uses a wheelchair - attempting to find out why gets me nowhere. "I don't think it's important, my work has nothing to do with it. I wear glasses as well, I live in a s*** flat in the East End with dogs that try to bite when I go out, I'm not allowed to talk about art with my girlfriend

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. . . there's a lot of facts in your life. That's quite a small one in comparison to other ones and it does influence me but I'm not going to talk about it." For those wondering, his girlfriend works in a gallery.

He expects his audience to use the same intellectual rigour that he applies himself, and in that sense tries to make his works interactive. The Somerset House *Parallel Cards* project invites the spectator to invent new game rules and to send them to Gander, who plans to compile it all into a book. "I want to give people catalysts to use their imagination rather than giving them something that is beautiful, or clever, or horrific," he says.

He knows his works can be difficult to understand and it has resulted in some negative coverage. One reviewer described him as "busy doing nothing". There will always be negative critics, he shrugs, and he doesn't care. His intense passion, mixed with an almost imperious attention to his practice, fuels him and he knows how hard it is for artists to reach such a position: "I feel like I'm luckiest person I know."