



Martin Creed,
photographed
by Hugo
Glendinning
in 2016.

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER

A nervous Martin Creed
comes to New York

The British artist likes to ask life's Big Questions: How does one live better? What is art? How do we understand other people? Then he inches his way toward the answers through artworks that double as psychological inquiries. For his largest U.S. survey to date, "The Back Door," June 8 through August 7, Creed is transforming the period rooms of the Park Avenue Armory into a bar and vegan cafe, and hiring a musical troupe to perform in the space. For the centerpiece of the show, Creed will debut a new film that tackles a subject that has preoccupied him and many patients on the couch before: Mother. *Modern Painters* executive editor Rachel Corbett spoke with the artist about mouths and boredom.



LEFT:
*Work No. 569,
 Piano, 2006.*
 Kinetic piano,
 5 x 2 x 6½ ft.



ABOVE:
*Work No. 1701,
 2013.*
 Digital film,
 4 min. 15 sec.



ABOVE:
*Work No. 200, Half
 the air in a given
 space, 1998.*
 White balloons.



LEFT:
*Work No. 1572,
 Scarlett, 2013.*
 Acrylic on canvas,
 18 x 14½ in.

RIGHT:
*Work No. 1094,
 2011.* C-print,
 64 x 117½ in.



RIGHT, ON WALL:
*Work No. 800,
 2007.* Emulsion on
 wall, dimensions
 variable.

LEFT:
Work No. 88, 1995.
 A sheet of A4
 paper crumpled
 into a ball,
 2 in. diameter.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FIVE IMAGES: MARTIN CREED; MARTIN CREED AND HAUSER & WIRTH; MARTIN CREED. OPENING SPREAD: HUGO GLENDINNING

You said you were afraid of your retrospective at London's Hayward Gallery in 2014, because you might not like your work in hindsight. Has that fear returned on the eve of your New York retrospective?

I'm definitely fearing it again. I always get scared having shows, and the bigger the show, the bigger the fear. In the Hayward show, there were a few things that had been basically dragged out of my cupboard and my bedroom from when I was a student and were exhibited for the first time. So it was a particularly strange experience to see things in the world that I used to have in my bedroom. But I wanted to exhibit those things because I don't really trust myself, you know? What you think you're doing is not necessarily what you're doing, and that's true about life. You cannot see these things the way other people see them. I am a person and I may have my little ideas about this and that, but in the end I'm like a plant or an animal trying to make my way in this world. So when I have an exhibition, I try to present things that are more or less a study of my own situation and what I've been doing—not to trust myself, to try to be analytical about it. To answer your question, yes, basically I'm scared.

How will this show be different?

Well, it's going to have all the film works I ever tried to make.

Tried to make?

When I say tried, I actually just mean I *made* them. But I feel like the trying is the thing. It's true to say that I tried to make them, but what I don't necessarily think is true is that I made them, because it's basically provisional. It sounds like an achievement to say "he made something." But to say "he tried to make it" sounds more true to me because I don't really know what I'm trying to do with my work other than make my life better in general. To feel better. But, for sure, I do think that has something to do with trying. Trying to live, or something like that.

Tell me about the new film you made for this show at the Armory.

The film is of people opening their mouths. It's got my mother in it. Yeah, my mum's in the film, and she's got a mouth as well. I think it has something to do with my mother, this film, but there are all different people in it too, like the model Lily Cole.

What is the connection between mouths and your mother?

I don't really know the answer to that. But I had the idea to make a film of people opening their mouths and in their mouths they have food, like a kid might do to gross people out.

I had the idea to make a film of that because I like doing that very much.

I do it at home with my family, and they don't like it, and I thought, "I really should make a film of that." For some reason, I thought of asking my mother. Actually, it's all women in this film; I don't know why, but I thought it should be. But that worries me as well because I just don't know what I'm doing.

I think it's got something to do with the inside and the outside. I've been working on this film since I got asked to do the Park Avenue Armory show, and one of the main thoughts I had when I went to visit the site was just to try to make the exhibition sort of face outward to the world, rather than inward. Art galleries are often very protected spaces and people create a kind of internal world in them. I wanted to try to do something that looks outward because I worry about a lot of what is called art—and the things I try to do, I wouldn't necessarily call art; it's basically a little wank, in my opinion—and people who get called artists are people who have such an extraordinarily high opinion of their shit. And I worry about that because I think, "Oh my god, I must be equally deluded about myself." I don't want to create a little wank. So I'm trying to do this thing with the back door of the Armory looking out to the street and making that a central part of the exhibition.

Then the mouth comes up. If you look into someone's mouth—I just like doing that. I thought it was a childish thing, infantile, and that's what made me think of my mother. If someone opens the mouth, you see inside, and with the food in the mouth it's a visual representation of the horrible insides. It's the horrible feelings you have to fucking live with and carry around with you. I made this film of people being sick a few years ago, and to me that was a film about bad feelings, not particularly to do with vomiting. And this new film, I think it has to do with the inside and the outside.

Why do you think your more subdued works, like *The lights going on and off*, from 2000, which incited one viewer to throw eggs at the walls, seem to generate more outrage than the explicitly provocative ones, like *Sick Film*, or your self-explanatory two-word song "Fuck Off"?

I don't know. It's a different type of upsetness, I think. If someone gets upset at vomiting, it might be a more animal reaction. Plenty of people found it difficult to watch. It made them feel sick. I found it difficult to watch when I made it, especially the sound. I couldn't edit it at first because it was too disturbing, but then I got used to it. With *The lights going on and off*, that's probably a bit more along the lines—I'm imagining, generalizing—of someone seeing it and feeling like they've been taken for a ride. I probably like being naughty, like when you're a kid and someone's there and then the lights



Installation views of *Work No. 227, The lights going on and off*, 2000, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007.

OPPOSITE: *Work No. 610, Sick Film*, 2006, 33 mm film, 21 min.

start going on and off. But also, it's a fucking boring world, so wanting to make work like a child feels like a very good idea to me. Like a child before he's been dumbed down by adults. In my experience, it's children who like the work. It tends to be adults who don't like it.

Your largest public work to date is a red neon sculpture that forms the word “understanding” in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Why did you choose that word?

I think of it very much as antiwar. I was initially thinking of doing “peace, love, and understanding” in three parts, which came partly from the way I started saying good-bye to my stepdaughter a few years ago. Because I was her stepdad, and not her real dad, I was never quite sure what my exact position was. We developed this thing where we'd say “peace, love, and understanding” and make a peace symbol crossed with two hands together, then the two hands would make a heart symbol, and then we made up a symbol that meant *understanding*. It's kind of like a wave, like brainwaves between two people. So it's a way of saying good-bye, a way of communicating with someone, but it's not saying “I'll see you tomorrow” or anything specific like that. I worked on this sculpture more as a three-part work, but then I thought that just “understanding” was enough. It was simpler. Basically, I feel that if you can understand someone, you can live with them.

Do you consider yourself an artist?

I just don't like using that word. I'm superstitious about it. I think it's like if you asked me to tell a joke and make you laugh, I don't think I could do it. I'd just freeze up. So the idea that I'd make a work of art, that just makes me freeze up. Talking about art is like talking about a big abstract idea that's amazing and beautiful, but that's not helpful when trying to make something amazing and beautiful. If you think, I really want to make people laugh, it becomes very difficult because you're setting a goal, and that's counterproductive. Because what gets called art in the world is something that I think is very much worth trying to do.

Now people going to art school think it's one of the few areas where people can do stupid things, and therefore it's much more true to life, because life is stupid and weird and crazy. In a lot of parts of life, you have to drive on the right side of the road or follow the rules because otherwise you'll get put in prison or whatever. But if I go around saying I'm an artist and it's such a big important thing—that's the problem with the word *art*. I say art is important if people collectively think it's important. But that significance is not created by the person who made the work. MP



ALL IMAGES: MARTIN CREED AND HAUSER & WIRTH



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