

Charles Sandison's poetry of light

26 October 2010



Currently one of the nominees for the respected Ars Fennica award, this imaginative visual artist continues to find a place in Finland for his unique expression.

SITTING in the fading afternoon light with a cup of coffee in his hand, **Charles Sandison** comes across more as a regular down-to-earth fellow who loves to chat, than the visionary artist that he is – until he begins to talk about his art, that is. Originally from Scotland, this renowned artist found himself in Tampere 15 years ago, and continues to live there to this day. "An artist needs to be seduced by his tools"

Year and place of birth:

Haltewhistle, England, 1969.

Place of residence: Tampere.

Education: Master of Fine Arts.

Family: Wife and two children.

As a child I ... Got Lost.

An artist that I'm inspired by ... Monet.

In the future I'd like to ... get better.

The most important thing to me in life is ... Love.

Sandison's works are one-of-a-kind, to say the least. He creates poetry of light with the use of computer programming, and fills a space with moving language with the use of projectors. His art has been exhibited in numerous corners of the world and in a wide variety of locations from public buildings to small art galleries. One of the nominees for the Ars Fennica, the most prestigious art award in Finland, Sandison's work is currently on display in Kiasma, as well as also across the Atlantic in Boston.

Before we talk about your art, can you tell me how you ended up living in Finland?

I studied at the Glasgow School of Art. When I graduated they gave me a job teaching, so I ended up being in the same

institution for over eight years before I got this feeling that I 'may have been here too

long'. The thing to do for a starting artist in Scotland is to move down to London, get a studio and enter that incredibly competitive field, so I felt that perhaps I ought to do that – though it wasn't really something I wanted. We had a group of artists in Glasgow who supported each other, and we could carry on as artists. No one was getting rich, and there were days you were scraping up coins just for a can of beans, but then there was the odd break when you could make a bit of money. One of these days when I'd been paid for some work I'd done I decided to move to Berlin, but along on the way I agreed to be a part of a group show in Tampere.

But never left?

In a way. I was only planning to be there for max of ten days to do the show. I found a place to stay in a former children's home on the shore of Pyhäjärvi where some students lived. Suddenly I'd inherited a whole bunch of new friends who were artists or musicians, I was waking up in the morning and going for a swim in the lake and it was great. Coming from Glasgow, which is a hard place to live, sitting there watching the sunset over this lake one night I couldn't believe I'd been living in something comparable to a war zone for the past eight years. I didn't want to leave. There was just one problem: I enjoyed sitting in bars a bit too much and I had a habit of buying drinks for people, so one day I found myself out of money. So, I scraped up what I had, went to Alko and bought myself a bottle of Koskenkorva.

And turned into a Finn.

Yes, turned into a Finn! (Laughs) I sobered up the next day and decided I'd get a job delivering newspapers, but I couldn't get the job because I didn't speak Finnish. This was 1995 and Finland had just joined the EU, so I went to Kela and told them I'm starving and I'll do anything for work. Luckily, I got put in touch with the School of Art and Media in Tampere.

I was offered some part-time teaching in multimedia, which I knew nothing about but I knew I could wing it. During this course I met another teacher in the coffee room and she had a terrible flu, I felt sorry for her and we started talking. A few months later she was pregnant and then we had our first child! I made it my sole purpose to make myself indispensable at the school and establish a life here in Finland. I ended up working there for just over five years before I started concentrating on my own artwork.

"An artist needs to be seduced by his tools"

To talk about your art, how would you define it or can it be defined?

I'm not quite sure. I'm not really good at putting a name on it. I didn't wake up and want to become the kind of artist I now am, I'm more of a product of a generation of creatively minded people who grew up with the background of this stuff existing and therefore naturally simulate it into their lives at different levels. If I'll be lucky enough for my art to outlast me, I'll leave it up to the art historians to decide what this stuff belongs to. I think to preserve mobility and be receptive to the environment you live in you have to be without label.

Have you always made this kind of visual art?

I actually went to study fine arts and wanted to become an impressionist – but I soon found that that box has been ticked, so I studied photography instead. At the same time, computer programming had been a pastime for me since I was 12 years old. I lived in a remote area as a child and the computer was my best friend! The computers I use now are of course ten times more technologically advanced and powerful than what I started with, but I don't want my art to market that.

Is technology more of tool for you then?

It's a seduction. An artist needs to always be a little seduced by his tools. A painter has to almost want to eat his paint! The problem often with media art, and also art that I've made, is that the technology becomes so dominant. You try to make it do what you want and it's hard enough to turn on your computer in the morning and write an article – imagine doing that with 30 different computers! I'm trying to use the material as intuitively and spontaneously as possible.

What inspires you?

Nature. There I see patterns and structure. I can watch ants cross the forest floor or flowers blossom into different colours, and if I were a poet I'd go home and write a lyrical poem about the sound the ice makes when it melts. Instead I write a computer programme that tries to simulate that and create genetic algorithms, which manifest this. For me my art is a kind of poetry, it's a way to recreate experience. A lot of my beginning sketches come from me going to the forest with my ponsie notebook and walking.

Words seem to play an important role in your work as well.

They do, but I approach the use of words through different reasons. One very concrete reason for using language in a visual way is that as a kid I had particularly bad eyesight, and nobody noticed until I was about seven. I learned to read and write at a much older age than other kids. Words were these evil things to me. I had a different relationship with written language than many people do. I kind of anthropomorphized anthropomorphised language and words, I really hated certain words. Computers became a way for me to collect these words and this foamy universe of signifiers. When I write computer programmes I still see words as kind of Lego blocks, not as the individual words.

So individual words do not hold such importance in your work?

It depends. Sometimes I use a very small limited number of words. Or, at times, like with my current work here at Kiasma, it's a whole Encyclopaedia Britannica from 1911. But what's more important than the individual words is the space between the words, and the movement of the words. That's where the story lies. In a sense I play a game between expectation and trying to stay ahead of what I imagine somebody's perception of the artwork would be.

You've had exhibitions in both public spaces and galleries. How do they differ and does the exhibition space affect what you create?

If I had a formula for all this it would be great – I'd be a much more organised and academic person. Instead I tend to bounce around like a pinball. Sometimes I just end up in a place and decide that I want to do something there, even if the audience is ten people. Sometimes it can take a couple of years to develop a work into a certain space. The idea is to have different approaches to location. I try to build my art in a space where I can completely reinvent it if needed. I try to keep it real, in a sense.

Do you feel you have a certain mission with your art?

Every artist has a different answer to this. I've always liked doing things with my hands. But, at the same time, some of the decisions of what we do are not really ours. I feel like I'm more of a product of Western culture and I was kind of spat out as this kind of person. As an artist you can't take your idea into a conclusion without the other: the audience. I'm as much part of the public that views my work as they are of me. It's important to me that people go to museums and see art and experience what they see and are not frightened by it.

How does it feel to see people's reactions to your work?

Most of the time when I can I'm like a spider, I crawl into a corner of my work and watch people and their reactions. With this piece at Kiasma it's interesting to see how people kind of hesitate before they step onto the mirrored floor – it's amazing to see I'm affecting them physically. I'm in a position of pulling neurons a little bit. It's like a weird kind of creepy privilege!

How does it feel to be nominated for the Ars Fennica award?

Back in Britain I'd often feel like: 'Why wasn't I invited to that exhibition?' or: 'Why did he win that prize?', but moving to Finland changed my point of reference and it was a humbling experience. Every time I get invited to something now it feels like a miracle. It's a bonus. To get nominated felt like: 'That's interesting!', and second: 'Do they know what they've done?' (Laughs) It's my job to just do the best that I can with it and learn.

What would it mean for you to win?

Being a part of this is enough for me. I learn the most from doing this really well, whether I win or not is another thing.

The winner of Ars Fennica will be announced on 25 November. Exhibition of the nominees at Kiasma until 12 December.

Petra Nyman