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James Lee Byars: Milton Keynes Gallery - review

Byars' touching work uses simple means to address life's knottiest questions. Rating: * * *

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Published: 4:16PM BST 27 Apr 2009



The knot symbolises the insoluble questions all of us must ask and none of us can answer: what the hell are we doing here, what is this all for?

An alcoholic, manic depressive and exhibitionist, who habitually dressed in a gold lamé strait-jacket and wore a black face mask under his stovepipe hat, the American performance artist James Lee Byars was loved and hated in roughly equal measure during his lifetime. To his detractors, he was an obnoxious creep who made gestures, not art – or at least very little art of the kind you can look at. To others, he was as much a poet as a visual artist, and the ephemeral nature of much of his work is what made him unique among American artists in the last decades of the 20th century.

Byars was born in Detroit (or possibly Tennessee, depending on who you believe), although his peripatetic career mostly unfolded in Europe where his dandyism was viewed with less suspicion than it was back home. But since his death at the age of 65 in Cairo in 1997, his work has been acclaimed in America, even though its deepest affinities are with the European avant-garde, from Yves Klein to Joseph Beuys.

This small show of his sculptures, works on paper, and filmed performances at the Milton Keynes Gallery opens with his last work, the installation Byars was working on at the time of his death. It takes the form of a static tableau staged in a gallery in which the walls, floor and ceiling are draped in billows of gold lamé. In the centre of the gallery is a plinth, also swathed in golden silk. But instead of the precious object you might expect to find displayed in such flamboyant surroundings, Byars places on the plinth a massive knot, hand-woven out of camel hair.

It's as though Indiana Jones has penetrated the innermost sanctum of the *Temple of Doom* in search of the crystal skull, only to discover a tangle of old rope. By using gold to surround the knot, Byars creates a sacred space with the knot in the centre, the place of veneration. For him, the knot symbolises the insoluble questions all of us must ask and none of us can answer: what the hell are we doing here, what is this all for?

In this beautiful work, a dying man is trying to give visual expression to what he saw as the intractable mystery at the heart of human experience. Far from being gloomy or pessimistic, however, I think he saw the knot as the whole point of life. Look again at the intricate loops of rope and you see that it is in itself a thing of beauty, a perfect sphere that looks as though you might be able to untie it if only you had strength and time enough to devote to the task.

Seen in the context of other works in this show, it is obvious that Byars is also referring to the Gordian Knot. Byars's interest in myth and legend recurs in a film in which he is shown pointlessly and endlessly pushing a heavy stone sphere through the streets of Berne like Sisyphus pushing his rock, or when he appears in public blindfolded in the guise of a seer or prophet like the blind Tiresias, or even in a performance when, like Danaë, he is covered in gold leaf.

My own take on Byars is that his closest affinities were with the Arte Povera artists active in Italy in the Sixties and Seventies. In *Rose Table Perfect*, first made in 1989, a ball made out of 3,333 red roses sits on the gallery floor. On the opening night when the flowers were fresh, the sight and the scent must have been overpowering. When I saw it last week, the roses had died and the dark orb was the colour of coagulated blood. Simple as it is, in this one piece Byars sums up in purest form his awareness that beauty is inseparable from death and decay.

Is this sentimental tosh? Well, yes, maybe. But like most of the work in this show it is also simple and touching and comes from the heart – a sentence I can't remember having written about a work of conceptual art before.

Rating: * * *

- James Lee Byars is at **Milton Keynes Gallery** until June 21