

Richard Hughes: 'Its about finding that element of romance'

The sculptor on locating the beauty in junk

by Skye Sherwin

The suburban hinterlands of the Midlands might not be everyone's idea of an inspiring landscape, but for sculptor Richard Hughes, who grew up skateboarding and hanging out under flyovers in rainy 1980s Birmingham, it has a special allure. "Like many people, I'm massively romantic about the formative years: mine just happened to be spent in a car park," he says.

For the past 10 years, Hughes has scoured rubbish tips for old furniture, broken bicycles or lone shoes: junk that speaks both of low-key desolation and illicit, youthful energy expended on the city's shabby fringes. He then meticulously recreates his finds in resin, adding subtle twists that turn cast-offs into enchanted objects.

His latest exhibition, at Colchester's Firstsite, *Time is Over, Time Has Come*, includes magic mushrooms sprouting in a split rugby ball and a grubby sleeping bag concealing rainbow crystals. Everything from the sleeping-bag zipper to the nesting fungi is a hand-painted simulation of the real thing.

Born in 1974, Hughes remembers his dad being out of work and constant strikes during the Thatcher years. But while his sculpture addresses decline, his own experience of the 1980s was quite different. "There's so much you're unaware of at the time," he says. "You learn about it later."

Raised a Catholic, his boyhood belief in transubstantiation and sacred objects led to his interest in transforming the everyday in his art. During his MA at Goldsmiths, he began attempting to mimic the effects of time. The way we rose-tint the past interests him as much as time's ravages.

Time is Over, Time Has Come is a sequel of sorts to his critically acclaimed show at Glasgow's Tramway, which saw him fashion an entire community centre based on one in the Birmingham suburb of Druids Heath. "It's an attempt to replicate those anonymous acts of bravura, or showing off, where you see trainers hanging on a lamp-post." Critic Moira Jeffrey likened him to fellow-Midlander, the painter George Shaw, hailing his ability to "invest the ordinary with a perverse value".



'My formative years were spent in a car park': Richard Hughes in front of his *Chapel Perilous* at Colchester's Firstsite gallery last week. Photograph: Sophia Evans for the Observer

He's also revisiting a specific moment from his adolescence. For *Chapel Perilous*, he's put a photo of his oldest friend's teenage bedroom under a kaleidoscope and recreated the trippy results in 3D. From a distance it looks like a stained-glass window; up close it's a riot of simulated Super Mario merchandise and skateboard stickers, encrusting a section of radiator and double glazing.

Hughes describes it as "a shrine" to a moment when his friend's room became a hub for local skater culture, and his own defining interests took shape. "It's about finding that element of romance and making it very concrete," he says.