

Nathan Coley: ‘I’m the travelling storyteller who’s come to town for the summer’

Nathan Coley tells the stories behind his two text-light sculptures in the Bruges Triennial, peeling back the layers and exploring the meanings. Ultimately, he is happy that he still doesn’t know the definitive answer himself

by ANNA McNAY

Nathan Coley, who was born in 1967 in Glasgow, sculpts words and phrases out of light – but, very particularly, he uses old light bulbs and scaffolding to create a nostalgic, fairground aesthetic, eschewing neon and its advertorial connotations. Although he accepts full responsibility as the author of the work, the words come from all manner of sources, and, in the varying contexts in which the ensuing works are shown, they gain all manner of meanings, some universal, some unique to the individual viewer.

Coley’s works explore architecture and religion, although he is more interested in what is built by whom and where and why than the building itself. Likewise, he holds no formal faith.

Coley was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2007, losing out to Mark Wallinger. [Tom Lubbock wrote](#) in the Independent: “He may well be the most boring artist in Britain. His work is so dull to look at that you swiftly turn to a printout in search of an explanation – and find the work is wholly explained by its explanation but not made the slightest bit more interesting.” I disagree. Coley’s works are as appealing as they are subtle, as intriguing as they are seemingly simple. They carry layers of possibility and, as Coley points out, are “very photogenic”.

Anna McNay: How and when did you get involved with the triennial?

Nathan Coley: Rather nicely, they invited me maybe 18 months or two years ago. It doesn’t always happen that way. Sometimes invitations are with such short notice that it dictates the kind of work you can do. They were exemplary in terms of a long

lead-in time. Not that I, as an artist, do anything until the last minute any way, but it's nice to have gone on a site visit and then to have gone away and forgotten about it and been active on other things. I don't know if that affected the work I made – I guess it probably did.

I'd never been to Bruges before and I'm a professional visitor. The first time I went, it was pouring with rain and cold, and I was asking: "Why am I here?" It was hard to imagine what it would be like in the summer when it was full of people. I liked the city's history and the feeling that time had stood still. Coming from Scotland, I liked the fact that it looked like the centre of Europe. It felt like one of those lowland cities. I liked the people who invited me, too. They were interesting and their conversations seemed to be genuine. There was an openness as to what we could do and that's more important to me than the place. Anywhere you're asked to do work has a history and a context. I think what matters to me are the people and whether I can trust them and feel comfortable.

AMc: You've got two works in the triennial: one that has been shown in various places already and another that was made specifically for Bruges.

NC: That's right. [A Place Beyond Belief](#) is now three or four years old. I'm always looking for a new text: anywhere, everywhere. I'm never the author. The texts always need to come from the world. I don't make all that many text pieces: I've made maybe one a year for the past seven or eight years. That's not to say to say that I don't have notebooks full of ideas, but they generally come to me. I don't have a team of smart people. I'm not going to phone you up and say: "Anna, I need an idea." It doesn't happen that way.

Anyhow, the story is: I'm at home and I'm in the kitchen, on a Thursday afternoon, and I've got the radio on. It just so happens that it's 10 years after 9/11 and the BBC is running a day-long series of reminiscences and people are giving evidence of their relationship to the event. A lot of journalists are talking about what it was like being there and trying to report, and there are some family members of victims, so it's a real mixture. It was a day about trying to come to terms with this historical event, which we are all very familiar with, but which maybe now, with time, after 10 years, we can start to be objective about. As part of this day, a woman comes on to the radio and she's telling a story about what happened to her. She's telling it in the first person. And the story is that she's sitting in a New York subway carriage, a week to 10 days after the attack on the Twin Towers. She's tired, she's scared, she's apprehensive.

She's uncertain as to what her future's going to be. Sitting opposite her is a Sikh man in a bright orange turban and her fellow passengers in the carriage are exerting a blatant hatred towards this man. In return, he is saying nothing and doesn't catch anyone's eye. He is just gazing at his shoes and quietly sobbing. The train moves on to the next stop and people get on and off and this torture happens for a further four or five minutes. Finally, the man starts to gather his belongings and moves towards the exit. Standing in that area is a young black woman, carrying a small baby in her arms. The Sikh man, without saying anything to anybody, goes into his pocket, pulls out some money and shoves the money into the clothing of the child. The whole carriage bursts into tears and the woman, who's narrating the story, says that, at that moment, she understood that for New York to be the city that it once was and to move beyond the terrorist attacks, it had to find *a place beyond belief*.

So I hear this and start running up and down the house trying to find a pen and paper to write this down thinking: "That's a new one! That's the next one!" Then I test it a little bit. By that, I mean, what I do with all of them is I send the text to my friend James, who sets them – he's a graphic typologist. He's my first audience. He sets it and makes it into a graphic. He's very good because sometimes he passes comment and then those ones, no one ever knows about. He's a kind of trusted editor. I don't think he's aware of that. I think he's quite relaxed about it all. But one of his recent comments crushed me! Then the text is measured against all the other ones. They need to stand alone, but they also need to work with what is now the history of all the other texts. *A Place Beyond Belief* was first shown at Haunch of Venison in London; then it was shown in the city square in Priština in Kosovo; there's one in New York in the apartment of a private collector; it's been shown in the Kunstverein in Freiburg in a building that was a Nazi swimming pool during the second world war.

What happens with these works is that I think they accrue a history and a meaning as a result of all the different places they've been in. The triennial curators were keen for an existing work and I thought *A Place Beyond Belief* would be good. I chose the spot on the Burg, which is the main square right opposite the church where the supposed blood of Christ is kept and the mayor's office is there. The Burg is also where the Christmas tree is placed each year and I always think the site of the Christmas tree is the centre of any city. It's important that *A Place Beyond Belief* is sited there.

AMc: It's also the site of a church that now no longer stands, isn't it? St Donaaskathedraal, which was destroyed by the French army in 1799.

NC: Yes, it's on the footprint of that church, which is long gone. *A Place Beyond Belief* can be read as being positive – this is an amazing place, like nowhere else – but, if you find out the backstory, which speaks of politics and religion, then I think it is optimistic. I'm always really keen to test the works and see how they will manage in a different context. I think the texts are about creating an image in your mind, as much as anywhere else. The works and the context are the work, I think.

AMc: **That's what I was going to ask you, actually. What, for you, is the work of art? Is it the concept? The words? The physical structure you create with the scaffolding and the light bulbs?**

NC: I always talk about the works as sculptures and that's a deliberate position so they are not spoken of as texts. I think the works are the sculptures in the contexts in which they've been placed – so then they become images. They're very photogenic. People love to take photographs of them and I think that means they're working. I think of them as being formal, as well. They're always upper case and there's an order to the words and an emphasis. I think the key word in this particular phrase is *belief*: *A Place Beyond Belief*. But it's nice because there's the two Bs, so formally it looks good. The B is quite controlled and the whole thing becomes less aggressive because of the shape of it. We never really know who's saying this: who's telling me that this is a place beyond belief? Or is it a question? I think of the works as images because I could say those words to you, tell you a story or sing a song, but the fact that somebody has fabricated this thing means everything to the work.

AMc: **You've picked up on the word "belief". There seems to be a religious underpinning to many of your works. Your other work in Bruges uses Islamic tenets; elsewhere you have a series called *Why I'm Not a Christian* (2009); then there are your miniature architectural models of churches and other sites of worship. What role does religion play in your life and your work?**

NC: I don't have a good answer to that, yet. I think the first thing to say is that I don't believe in any of the formal religious structures and I don't believe in the supernatural. However, I find myself fascinated by the fact that so many people do. Of course, it's a fruitful area for study because of the association with art and the articulation of the invisible; making objects and images of something that we cannot see or touch is a fundamentally interesting thing. To articulate the invisible is what the history of art is about.

I'm also interested in the architecture side of things and how religion and faith manifest themselves through architecture, because this is symbolic in terms of power and wealth and knowledge and control. I find architecture interesting in terms of who built it and why they built it rather than what it looks like. The fact that there's no longer a church on the Burg site is hugely important to me. It doesn't even matter what faith that church was, but just that the manifestation of faith was there and is no longer there. I was born and bred in Glasgow and, less so now, but, when I was younger, it was a city divided by two sides of Christianity, and I guess that's had an effect on my way of thinking and I find myself drawn to something that I don't believe in. It's not about being evangelical and trying to convert people, it's more about questioning and wondering why. They're all as bad as each other, I think. I'm not a fan of any of them. But there's hundreds of thousands of people out there who have a faith and I think it's foolish for us middle-class western art aficionados to ignore that. It's probably fair to say that most people will think that the "belief" in *A Place Beyond Belief* means belief in God, but I don't read it that way. I think of that word in particular as being about love. I have a nine-year-old daughter and I believe in her. It's a feeling of endearment and love. It's not about something that's higher than me; it's much more a relationship without question. But maybe that's just me.

AMc: When I first saw it, I thought of it in terms of being a place beyond imagination.

NC: Yes, that's a very British phrase. You can say that a party or a plate of food was "beyond belief". It's a kind of popularist phrase, in one sense. But I think, for foreign ears, it has a slightly different meaning. Something more than something else. It's like the hill beyond the hill that you know of, or the knowledge after what we know. A place beyond belief. I love the fact that I still don't really know what it means. I refuse to pin down what it means. I've been accused in the past of shirking my responsibilities as the author, which is quite an accusation. Ultimately, of course, it is a work by Nathan Coley and I take full responsibility for that, but who am I to say what a middle-aged German tourist on a bus trip to Bruges thinks that work means? I think that's where the meaning lies. He gets back on the bus and talks about *his* life, not mine. So the work is non-evangelical and also the work is in no way a portrait. It's not about me telling anybody who I am. It's the opposite of Tracey Emin. It's not about you understanding yourself through looking at me.

AMc: And it works even if you don't know anything about the backstory.

NC: Yes, but do you get a sense that the words come from somewhere that's not here? I think you get a sense that the phrase must be from somewhere. The thing that's important to it is that it's clearly been fabricated in a very careful way with power and electricity and a scaffolding structure. That changes everything. Had it been spray-painted on to a wall, then it would be fundamentally completely different. The temporary nature of the scaffolding and the very particular aesthetic that the fairground bulbs afford is, of course, crucial to the language and how you read it, as well. The work is made manifest. It starts with the story of the woman on the subway in New York and it ends up in Bruges and something's changed along the way, of course. And also there's some degree of trust that what I'm telling you is the truth! I guess I am aware that I'm the travelling storyteller who's come to town for the summer. I like the idea that the works are only here for a period of time before moving on to the next village. You feel that the proposition has happened prior to your being in front of it. I think that's nice.

AMc: That idea of its moving from place to place fits with the fairground aesthetic as well.

NC: Yes. Getting back to that, back in the day when I made the first one, I was very conscious of the fact that I didn't want to use neon and I got very pissed off with lazy journalists and critics calling it neon. Very obviously, and very particularly, they were not neon. One reason for this is that there's a whole history of artists making works using neon and I wanted to stand away from that a little and, more importantly, I think neon has an association with advertising, and I don't want the work to have any reference to advertising. I want the works to have reference to the theatre and to public presentation and celebration. It's almost like the Gypsies have come to town and they're setting this up for you. I think it's a little bit seedy, a little bit dirty, a little bit uncomfortable. The scaffolding and letters are low culture but the phrases are very pithy and poetic and serious.

AMc: The way it's placed is important as well. When I was there, there were people sitting on the bottom rungs and children playing on it.

NC: I don't have any problem with that. There are pictures all over the internet: people Instagramming it. If I had a dollar for every time it's been photographed, I'd be a rich man. There's no way of controlling that in a digital age – you've just got to let it go. The photographing of it is almost like its being a memento, which is quite

interesting – rather like how you used to buy a postcard in the old days, or, before that, a set of 5mm slides. You can't do that any more.

AMc: Your second work in Bruges consists of five words – *belief, mind, land, wealth* and *life* – illuminated on the interior walls of the Stadshallen. The five words are the five concepts that Islam considers necessary for life. Can you explain this a little more?

NC: Primarily, I felt the courtyard of the Stadshallen was, and is, a really magical space. I liked its proximity to the market square, which is really hustle bustle, busy with tourists, but then the controlled courtyard has different acoustics and a different temperature to it. I thought it might be nice to deal with it rather like an interior gallery space. Thinking about the history and origin of *A Place Beyond Belief*, I thought it might be pertinent to make something that, rather than dealing with terrorism from a Christian perspective, introduced this text from a completely different root.

The five words come from a previous work I've made, a very large sculpture called *Palace*. It's a big, black, wooden stage set, almost like a cowboy movie stage set. Part of that work is these five words, which, by some people's discourse, are the five rights of man under Islam. I say that in those terms because the rights of man under Islam are somewhat undefined and, if you do a Google search for the rights of man under Islam, it's not going to come up with those five words. Sometimes it's seven, sometimes it's longer phrases, but this is one of the interpretations of that faith in a condensed version and I've appropriated that version to make it mine.

Out of the five, there are three that I think are correct and true and honourable, and there are two with which I disagree. You and I have the right to mind – I think that's without question. I think you should be able to think freely, have an opinion and question the world. So mind, knowledge, and the right to act on that knowledge, yes, absolutely. Life. You have the right to life. Absolutely. I think that's really quite fundamental. And then belief – and belief can be belief in God, or belief in your god, or love or passion or commitment – yes, again. But here's where it starts getting a bit difficult, I think. The right to land? Clearly we can just think about the problems in the Middle East. That's an issue due to ownership of land and occupation and where my idea of who my people are and where they come from comes into conflict with your idea of who your people are and where they come from. And that leads to war.

So I think that's problematic. But you could argue that my people need to live somewhere, so it's not quite as easy as all that.

AMc: You could always argue it in the sense of having the right to be on whatever land – so almost in a sort of self-contradictory sense, where you don't have the right to own land and to keep it. Actually everyone's got the right to be there.

NC: Yes. I guess it's the ownership thing that makes the difference. If you think about history and people being moved from land. Of course, land is not just where you stand but it's where you grow your food and where your children are safe, where your shelter is. Then wealth. Wealth can be wealth of knowledge and wealth of experience, but I don't know whether you have the right to wealth. I sound like some kind of soothsayer or something, trying to convert the world. I mean, I am interested in making money, don't get me wrong. I'm running a wee business here, you know? But that I have the right to wealth? That's different from its just coming along and being fine.

So, I thought it might be interesting to take those five words out of the context that I found them in and, in an unauthored way, to place them in that courtyard in the middle of Bruges. I think they could be read as being words that have historical importance to this old trading city in the middle of Belgium. It could be that the words come from a particularly important piece of text that's in the town hall or a parchment declaration. Or they could be read as something to aspire to in the future. I like the way that they take ownership of the architecture so it almost feels as if the guilds and the societies of Bruges have picked a letter each and the words have been carved into the architecture. The way they sit and formally are really incorporated into the space is important, yet they have their own dynamic and seem to pepper the walls a little bit. It's the newest work I've made so, other than that, I've no real sense of what it is. The words just fascinate me and, I think, I hope, they kind of fall between your fingers and you don't know what they mean. Whereas I think *A Place Beyond Belief* is much more gutsy and confident. I guess very deliberately I like the fact that both of them together set up a conversation as well. *A Place Beyond Belief*. Mind. Life. Belief. Land. Wealth. It's kind of enigmatic. What do you think?

AMc: When you say it like that, it's almost as if those words are a possible answer or definition to *A Place Beyond Belief*. But then you think, well no, it can't be, because "belief" is in the question and the answer. There's

also something kind of musical and lyrical about it, particularly the way you have them displayed at different heights around the courtyard, it's almost like notes on a musical score.

NC: Were you in there when the carillon rang?

AMc: No, I heard that separately when I was outside.

NC: When that gets going, the whole place becomes lyrical and song-like. I like the fact that you found it musical. I wanted it to be a bit like the imagination, when a thought bubble comes out. But there's something formal about it as well. "Mind" is the first one you see as you walk through the archway from the square. The rest of them come once you're in there. That courtyard is a destination. Of the 5.3 million tourists who come to Bruges, every single one of them will go to that courtyard. I hate the phrase "tourist attraction", but that's what that is. Not everyone will go up the belfry tower, but everyone will go and stand in that courtyard. I guess I'm playing with their expectations. They go in there and they get their photograph taken with the tower and it's a very complex social and cultural performance. I wonder if people go in there and completely ignore that work. That would be quite interesting.

AMc: It's quite a subtle piece. I went in there and it was a bright daylight and not all the words were that obvious because of the way the sun was shining. The words almost felt as if they belonged there.

NC: I quite like that about the works generally: that there is a sense that their reason for being there is to be looked at, but not now. I think it's interesting to make an object for which there are some times that are good for seeing it and other times that aren't as good. There's an expectation of everything being immediate and available at the drop of a hat these days, so I like the idea that you might need to come back in a couple of hours and see the work when the sun starts setting. I didn't make the work for the triennial, I made the work that I was interested in making, with the knowledge that it was going to be shown in that context. I'm happy for the work to be shown and seen in the context of the triennial, but my ambition is for it to be much bigger than that. It needs to fulfil other more challenging conditions as well as the ones in Bruges.

That's how I think when I'm making a work. The audience is not in one fixed place. There are many audiences; it's not just one fixed audience. I guess I kind of rebelled or worked against this whole notion of art inspired by the city. You move quite easily

from art being public to it being civic. I don't want to be part of some civic experiment or civic celebration. I don't want to add to the reason why people would go to Bruges on their holidays – enough people do already – and I don't think I have. There's a danger that adding culture to such a place does nothing more than simply add culture to such a place. We're cultural agents and I'm very aware of my role and whether or not I go along with other people's intentions. We could say no, but, in this instance, I chose to say yes.

• *A Place Beyond Belief and Palace can be seen at the Bruges Triennial, Contemporary art and architecture in the historical city of Bruges, 20 May – 18 October 2015.*