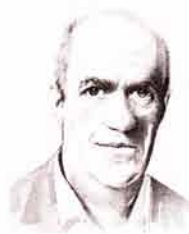


ART ORDINARY WORLD

Whether it's sprinters in a gallery or crumpled paper, Martin Creed's simple ideas provoke complex thoughts, says Colm Tóibín



WHAT ARE WE going to do about ordinary life? It is always out there demanding our attention in tones sometimes muffled, sometimes shrill. Most artists wish it

would just go away so they can get on with framing and hanging up little squares of painted canvas, or producing nice mysterious videos, or making pieces of abstract sculpture, or inventing strange, mad installations.

Martin Creed is unusual in that ordinary life interests him. Now that his collected works will finally appear in book form — *Martin Creed: Works* (Steidl) is due this spring — and he has a show running at the moment at Hauser & Wirth in Zürich, it is worth trying to define what he does.

Martin Creed was born in Wakefield in 1968 and lived in Glasgow from the age of three. He won the Turner Prize in 2001 — controversially — for his "Work No 227: The Lights Going On And Off".

What happens is that he sees something as simple and ordinary as a pile of plywood sheets. Instead of thinking then about food, or sex, or money, his mind holds on to the

image of the pattern that the plywood made. The image doesn't just lodge there, however. Somehow, a light inside his mind shines on this image of the plywood.

He is amused by what he sees, sometimes startled. But he is modest and serious so he knows, unlike most artists, that he has very little to say. He is intrigued by images of the known world, ordinary things such as paper, lights, words, doors, chairs, Blu-Tack, people vomiting.

For most artists who are so intrigued and fascinated the problem becomes what to do next, what images to make. Creed has turned this problem around so that he doesn't have a problem at all. There is something sweet and gentle in his imaginative procedures, but there is also something severe, tough, cerebral in his make-up as he insists on allowing nothing much to mediate between the viewer and what he, as an artist, has made.

What he has done is so simple and beautiful that he is hard to write about. Earlier in the year, when he asked me to write a piece for his book, I had a lovely time trying to imagine what it must be like to be him. The piece I wrote was not about an artist at all, but a young Pakistani immigrant in Barcelona who often has time off to wander in the street, for whom the slightest thing has high intrigue value, for whom an ordinary image is both mysterious and amusing.

I was thinking about a James Thurber cartoon where one character tells another: "Leave your mind alone." When my character managed to leave his mind alone, something entered, and it was often funny how ordinary it was, and how it lodged there like it was philosophy.

In the days when I was thinking about all this, I went to the Tate Britain to look at Martin Creed's sprinter, "Work No 850". He had the idea of getting sprinters to

Maybe what Creed makes is better somehow than most of life and most of art

make their way through the central high gallery in the Tate building, to whiz past you at speed. And then another one. And then another. And then the one you saw earlier whizzing past again.

It would be fun to go on about the meaning of this (as it would about the meaning of most of Creed's work), but it would get you no further. I enjoyed the sprinters, they usurped the space and made it exciting. I looked at each one and then I looked forward to the next one coming. I wish I could say the same for life or indeed for art.

This means maybe that what Creed makes is better somehow than most of life and most of art. It is simpler and more ingenious all at the same time. It is more intense and more easy-going all in the same breath. It is funnier and, oddly, more grave. It merits immense concentration; it merits a single glance. It arises from reticence, from silence, from not knowing what to do — and from a grand ambition not to create anything that is untrue.

Part of Creed's motivation for making the work, he has said, is that he wants to be loved. For this remark alone he deserves all our admiration, and for the rest of his work, he deserves much more. **☺** *Martin Creed is at Hauser & Wirth Zürich from 24 January to 7 March (www.hauserworth.com)*



FROM LEFT MARTIN CREED'S "WORK NO 850: PEOPLE RUNNING AS FAST AS THEY CAN" (2008), WHICH TOOK PLACE IN TATE BRITAIN IN LONDON; "WORK NO 88: A SHEET OF A4 PAPER CRUMPLED INTO A BALL" (1995); "WORK NO 273: DON'T WORRY" (2001)

HUGO GLENDINNING | MARTIN CREED | TATE BRITAIN | HAUSER & WIRTH, ZÜRICH, LONDON