

Martin Creed
in the window
of his studio
in London



Martin Creed, artist

'When I was up for the Turner, people talked about me in terms of the emperor's new clothes. I could see their point'

What got you started?

Not being able to decide what I wanted to study. I was interested in architecture, music, psychology and literature. In the end, I chose art school, because art seemed to contain all of these.

Who or what have you sacrificed for your art?

It's really hard to work, in every way. You sacrifice something every time you make a choice between one thing and another. But I work because it helps me to live: without my work, I'm an empty shell.

Is contemporary art misunderstood?

No, because I don't think there's anything in it to understand. Works of art are just arrangements of colours, or shapes: any meaning they have is given to them by the people who value them, or think they're beautiful.

What's your favourite film?

Gregory's Girl. It was filmed near where

I grew up and came out when I was a teenager, so it's very much of my time.

Is there anything about your career you regret?

Getting sidetracked by having to deal with work I've already made, rather than concentrating on new work. If a gallery is mounting an exhibition of my work, I often have to deal with it personally. It's a bit like writing and recording a song, and then having to be present every time that song is played on the radio.

Is the art world too money-oriented?

No - I'd say it's probably less money-oriented than most worlds, because it's primarily about people trying to express themselves.

What one song would work as the soundtrack to your life?

I once wrote a song called I Don't Know What I Want, which always comes back to me. I guess it's true.

In short

Born: Wakefield, 1968.

Career: Won the Turner prize in 2001 for Work No. 227: the lights going on and off. Has staged 18 solo exhibitions. He is judging the PRS for Music Foundation's New Music award; the shortlist will be announced on 26 April.

High point: "None. Life's hard more than it's easy."

Low point: "Working makes me pretty low."

Photograph
Graeme Robertson

What advice would you give a young artist?

Do what you're scared of. Often people are scared of the things they really want.

Is there an art form you don't relate to?

No. Everything that everyone does is art, or at least a little creation. There's no difference between someone calling a friend or going down to the shops, and someone else waving their arms around and making marks on a canvas.

What's the worst thing anyone ever said about you?

When I was nominated for the Turner, a lot of people talked about my work in terms of the emperor's new clothes. I could see their point: my piece was just an empty room. But it was also a room where the lights were going on and off, like a mini theatrical production. No one would say that the lighting in a theatre was an emperor's new clothes situation, would they?

Interview by Laura Barnett