

And now for my next trick – artist answers his critics with another simple slice of life

Martin Creed's first exhibition in Scotland repeats the formula that earned derision and a Turner Prize, reports Mike Wade

Strange interior this. A set of tables, the largest at the bottom, is stacked so that the smallest almost touches the ceiling. Along the mantelpiece a line of terracotta plant pots is arranged from smallest to largest. In the drawing room a pair of curtains is repeatedly opening and shutting.

This is the world of the Scottish artist Martin Creed, in his first solo show in the country that raised him. For those who come out in a rash at the mention of the Turner Prize, Creed is there in the pantheon of irritants. After Damien Hirst's cow and calf pickled in formaldehyde *Mother and Child, Divided* (which won the prize) and Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (which didn't) came Creed's installation, *The Lights Going On and Off*, which carried off contemporary art's most famous award in 2001.

It was a witty work of minimalism — his admirers said — that comprised an empty room in the Tate Gallery in which the lights were switched on and off. For that, Creed was presented with a cheque for £20,000.

Here in the upmarket Park Circus district of Glasgow, in the Victorian townhouse of his friend Douglas Gordon, Creed, 41, has been set loose in a domestic setting for the first time, filling two storeys with his ever-so-familiar works.

A stack of A4 papers piled up near the staircase. A wall that has been criss-crossed in red paint, applied with a paint roller. And, on the first floor landing, a standard lamp is going on and off again in an exhibit entitled — you have probably guessed — *The Lamp Going On and Off*.

"One of the things with works like this is that you can describe them in words and you can carry them about in your head," he chuckles. "I like that. It's like the way you can carry around a poem, if you can hold it in your head as an idea."

Critics protest that anyone could come up with this stuff, and Creed's answer is disarming: yes, they could. What sets him apart is "dogged repetition", the same thing produced again and again until someone takes a good long look at his work — a crunched-up paper ball or a lump of Blu-Tack — and decides to make a purchase for, it is said, a five-figure sum.

For some people this trade in the art of the stationary cupboard is no laughing matter. But then Creed, for all his self-deprecating humour, can strike a serious note about his work.

The word "art", he says, as much as it means anything, is about "putting things in front of people for their enjoyment". There is no difference between his stack of tables "and a painting by David Hockney. It is an arrangement of colours and shapes. The fact that it is made of tables or paint is a detail. To me, the more I think about it, all artists are the same. But I don't even like to say I am an artist, because the word art is so difficult."

Creed, who was born in Wakefield,



Martin Creed's new work, which includes a wall criss-crossed in red paint, is on display over two storeys at his friend Douglas Gordon's townhouse, below



Masking tape and white balloons

● As a teenager at Lenzie Academy Martin Creed loved art and often visited Glasgow School of Art, where his father taught

● At the Slade School of Fine Art he met Douglas Gordon, another Glaswegian-born artist. Gordon, two years Creed's senior, was a rising star in his own right, who went on to win the Turner Prize in 1996. Gordon was responsible for exhibiting Creed's work in Scotland for the first time, in *Outta Here*, a 1992 group show at the Transmission Gallery

● Creed's reputation as one of the bright lights of BritArt grew rapidly. In 1993 he installed a tin cube of masking tape in the middle of every wall at the offices of the London publishing firm Starkmann, a piece

said to evoke the hemmed-in world of the 9-to-5 worker

● In 1998 he created one of his most celebrated works, *Half the Air in a Given Space*. This consisted of enough 12in white balloons to half-fill the gallery. He has made variants with black, red and multi-coloured balloons

● Creed won the Turner prize in 2001, accepting a cheque for £20,000 from Madonna, right. Having said that he regarded Turner as "just a stupid prize", he said of his installation:

"It doesn't make it a better piece of work just because it wins a prize"

● The Tate Gallery has offered this appraisal of his work: "Creed's art is characterised by a gentle but subversive wit and by a minimalism rooted in an instinctive anti-materialism. His often extremely self-effacing works such as *Some Blu-Tack Kneaded, Rolled into a Ball and Depressed against a Wall* have been characterised as 'attempts to short-circuit our visually overloaded, choice-saturated culture'."



West Yorkshire, was brought up in Milton of Campsie and Lenzie, a buttoned-up little town on the north-east fringe of Glasgow. When he was growing up a single pub served Lenzie's population of about 8,000, and the notion of opening and closing a door represented a good night out. The local psychiatric hospital forms one of his strongest memories — he recalls as a teenager guiding lost and confused patients back to the hospital gates.

He left Scotland to study at the Slade School of Fine Art in Central London and, in the following 20 years, only twice exhibited north of the Border, each time in group shows. This

year Creed returns with a vengeance. He has a second solo show at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh and will convert the dark, dank Scotsman Steps — close to Waverley Station — into a £100,000 artwork lined with marble.

In August a dance work premiered at Sadler's Wells in London will be reprised at the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh. To cap it all, a collection of essays, with an introduction by the artist, will be published by Thames and Hudson and introduced at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

It all adds up to the image of an artist who appears to have been accept-

ed into a kind of critical and commercial mainstream. But when he is back in London, as he makes his way down to his office on Brick Lane, he still won't tell taxi drivers what he does for a living. "I just say I work in the city," he says. "Which I do."

In an office? "Yes, in an office. I did have a studio for two years but it was a waste of space. Most of my work is planned in private and done in the world, it is not made in a studio and then moved out."

And in an office, of course, he has his palette is to hand: the desk lamp, the Blu-Tack, the paperclips. "Yes everything is there," he says. "Masking tape too."