

Haroon Mirza: Play that funky cardboard

He plays records made of cardboard and creates machines that turn water into mist. Jonathan Jones enters the world of Haroon Mirza, winner of the Northern Art prize

Jonathan Jones

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Fun and liberating . . . Cross Section of a Revolution, 2011 Photograph: Ken Adlard

When Haroon Mirza won the Northern Art prize earlier this year, the regional news programme *Look North* followed its report on his victory with some studio banter. "The weatherman threw some clothes on the floor," remembers Mirza, "and said he could win a modern art prize. It escalated into a controversy – but I just thought it was a bit funny."

The joke is now on *Look North* as the award has led to an exhibition of Mirza's work at the prestigious Lisson Gallery in London. But the truth is there's something nostalgic, rather than offensive, about *Look North*'s response. In the 1990s, when British contemporary art leapt into the limelight, tabloids were constantly making jokes in the same vein. The *Sun* took a bag of chips to the Saatchi Gallery: "We bring the chips to Damien Hirst's fish." That kind of mockery has long lost its edge in London: the art world rules down south. But in the north, apparently, artists still have to endure taunts. And this is not bad for art at all, if Mirza is anything to go by.

Mirza is something new: an exciting young artist – he's 33 – who chooses to work in northern England, despite being born in London. Before 1,000 people write in to point out that the north has many fine artists, can I just say this: pull the other one. The north has for years been the dog that did not bark in British art. Liverpool, Manchester and other cities have staged high-profile art events and commissioned public art, not least Gateshead's *Angel of the North*; a visiting Martian might even have concluded that the region was the epicentre of British art. But it's not. No matter how much effort has gone into fabricating an art scene, there is a world of difference between being a place that promotes art, and being a place where artists choose to live and work. Northern English cities never became real centres of artistic creativity in the way Glasgow and London are. But if Mirza is anything to go by, that is changing.

"It's an incredible place to work," he says of Sheffield, where he has his studio. "I don't know why other artists don't work in places like Sheffield and Leeds. Everything's so easy, materials are so cheap." By materials, he does not mean canvases and paints, as *Look North* so astutely pointed out. No, Mirza, who studied painting at Winchester

school of art and design at Goldsmiths in London, is something of an amateur scientist. As technicians toil to install his show at the Lisson, he shows me some of his gadgets. Inside a mirrored cube, a pool of water is agitated by a tiny electronic device that vibrates at the exact speed required to discombobulate water and turn it into vapour, making the cube fill with mist. He likes this effect as it expresses "the chaotic nature of water. Rivers never run how you expect them to run." Later, he shows me a circuitboard he cooked up.

So, to put it simply, Mirza makes art that involves moving parts, electrical wizardry and video, all of it held together by sound. Music, the human voice and odd noises (including the sound of cardboard records being played at 33rpm) feature in his show, which he conceives as a single musical entity in different movements (or galleries). "It's like a composed piece of music," he says.

So would he call himself a "sound artist", a term seized on by journalists last year after Glaswegian Susan Philipsz won the Turner prize for installations that used recordings of her singing a Scots lament? "No, probably not. I prefer to say that I'm a composer than a sound artist." In fact, the way Mirza builds with blocks of sound in unexpected synchronisations puts me in mind of the composer Steve Reich.

To some people, though, it might sound like what Frank Zappa called "noodling", by which he meant pointless experimental jazz drivel. I tell Mirza that my first reaction to his art was to find it funny: there's an absurdity to it, with its record players playing cardboard disks, that is liberating and fun. He seems happy with this response.

It is also political. At one point, Mirza starts pondering "the responsibility of the artist"; meanwhile, off in one room, a video of drummers at a ceremony in Kenya is juxtaposed with a man in Lahore making a speech about terrorism. It's a piece reminiscent of an early work by Reich, featuring a passionate civil-rights speech. Mirza recorded his drummers at "a stick-fighting ceremony where the groom has to fight for his bride. My attention shifted to the drummers, who provided the driving force to the ceremony." They drum on plastic bottles, anything that comes to hand. "A subtext," he says, "is the place of music in Islamic culture. In some Islamic cultures, music is forbidden. An underlying theme to my work is a criticism of religious faith, and the dogmas involved in religious faith."

It strikes me that Look North couldn't have been more wrong-headed. Without a confident grasp of electronics and avant-garde classical music, Mirza's work isn't easy to make at all. "Art is about posing questions rather than giving answers," he says. "You can get as much or as little meaning out of it as you wish. Art is the stuff you can't say."