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LOST TRUE LEAVES: *Rising Art Star Michael Dean appears in first solo U.S. show at Nasher Sculpture Center*

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By Christopher Mosley



The first thing you notice about **Michael Dean's** work at the **Nasher Sculpture Center** is that you can't see it. The lower level window of the gallery is almost completely blotted out with white paint. While a recent exhibition by artist Mai-Thu Perret notoriously used petroleum jelly to obscure the museum windows, this willful shrouding is even more extreme. Dean is on a shortlist of artists to win the **Turner Prize**, one of Great Britain's most coveted awards, and one that is only given to artists under 50.

Appearing in a talk in front of a packed house on opening day of Sightings: Michael Dean, the artist explains that it is a reference to the English practice of white-washing shop windows when an establishment goes out of business. The paint is intended as an allusion to Brexit. "Maybe you've heard of it," jokes Dean. It's merely the first hint of the activist streak running through much of Michael Dean's sometimes fiercely political work.

Michael Dean is a sculptor, but he often emphasizes that he is much more than that. Dean's work as a writer manifests itself physically by way of actual books that he makes specifically for his shows.

Crumpled up bits of paper are wedged into guard rails and the random pages of what appear to be a sort of fictional dictionary are strategically placed around his imposing sculptures. The cactus-like figures manage to be both alien and yet vaguely alive.

If the art seems to be hidden away like precious cargo, it's no accident. The internationally acclaimed artist reveals he has much to protect. Four different levels of eyeholes appear in the streaked paint covering the gallery windows like a cheap Halloween costume. The marks in the paint represent the varying heights of Dean's wife and two children.

Once inside the space, the family metaphor repeats again and again, by way of grouped figures of four and actual casts of the fists and fingers of Dean's family members. While it's easy to assume that an artist using such close source material is dangerously meta or self-reflective, Dean often finds a way to shed light on issues that impact millions.

Dean created a book for the show which he has titled *Scare Hate*. The title is interpreted by the artist as a commentary on the idea of the traditional war memorial and is a take on the word "scarecrow." In Dean's interpretation, his work is intended to "scare" away the violent concepts that have long been glorified by such public art. The common pest (the "crow") is replaced by more ever-lasting perils, such as poverty and hate in Dean's substitution of literature for the classic scarecrow trope. To hear Dean explain his practice makes even his most off-putting material feel deeply human.

Michael Dean Grew up in Newcastle, a place that suffered the economic and environmental consequences of being a former coal-dependent community and declining porting hub. The poverty rate tends to be higher than most of the rest of the country and Dean references the hardships of a lower middle class childhood. During Dean's talk he recalls seeing a shuttered library during a critical time in his youth when he was especially hungry for information. Such struggles gave Dean what he refers to as a "chip on his shoulder."

21st Century art critics and observers often posit that work must speak to the rapidly transforming and often dangerous world outside of the safety of the gallery space in order to remain relevant. This is no issue for Michael Dean. The artist has addressed the international refugee crisis caused by the upheaval in Syria and its complex relation to Europe in a recent show at London's South London Gallery. Dean went further than mere paint in order to keep his audience from his work. According to the Nasher Sculpture Center Chief Curator Jed Morse, Dean purposely blocked the entrance to the gallery and forced the viewer to go through a long winding path outside in order to see the work.

As Dean's profile rises, one wonders if perhaps the artist will someday be tapped by some prestigious institution or state to formally reimagine the war memorial concept he clearly feels need an update. Why wait that long? His work at the Nasher provides a way to see what a relatively young artist has to say right now.

Sightings: Michael Dean is on view through February 5, 2017.