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Turner Prize finalist Michael Dean's first U.S. exhibition in Dallas speaks volumes

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By Auriel Garza



At the Turner Prize installation at the Tate Britain in London, Michael Dean's work "(United Kingdom poverty line for two adults and two children: twenty thousand four hundred and thirty six pounds sterling as published on 1st September 2016)" consists of £20,436 in pennies. This is the amount of money the government states is the minimum that two adults and two children need to survive for a year in the UK. When installing the work, Dean removed one coin, meaning that now the money you see before you is one penny less than the poverty line. (Photographed in London by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News) British artist Michael Dean is having a moment.

The first exhibition of his work in the United States is [currently on display](#) at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. Only six months earlier, [he was named one of four finalists](#) for Britain's Turner Prize, which is among the world's most prestigious visual arts awards. The winner will be announced Monday.

The [Turner Prize](#), established in 1984 and hosted by London's Tate Britain, is widely revered, hotly debated and always eagerly anticipated. The award is given annually to an artist under 50 who is born, living or working in Great Britain. Past winners include luminary artists Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor and Rachel Whiteread. Previous nominees include Lucian Freud, Tracey Emin and Peter Doig.

So with his nomination, Dean certainly finds himself in good company. He also stands to win a cash prize equivalent to \$32,000. (Each shortlisted artist will receive about \$6,000.)

Nominees are also invited to show their work in the widely attended Turner Prize exhibition, which takes place in the months leading up to the announcement of the winner. Dean's installation is on view through Jan. 2 at the Tate, alongside that of fellow nominees Anthea Hamilton, Helen Marté and Josephine Pryde.

Dean's Nasher exhibition, "Sightings: Michael Dean," has been in the works for almost two years. The fact that it is taking place at such a critical moment in the artist's career is partially a stroke of luck, but it is also due to the efforts of Nasher chief curator Jed Morse, who first invited the artist to Dallas.

The floor, ceiling and walls of the Nasher's lower-level gallery have been made white, producing an absorbing effect that recalls the vastness of a blank white page.

In the space, Dean's sculptures, made from reinforced steel and cast-concrete, resemble written gestures given three-dimensional form. Collectively, the works produce an overwhelming field of characters, whose curves and edges reveal a personal alphabet strictly of the artist's design.



Some of Michael Dean's work is on display right now at the Turner Prize installation in the Tate Britain in London. (Photographs by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News)



Artist Michael Dean photographed in October at his studio in Ilford in northeast London, England. (Photograph by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News)

Dean's sculptures are also adorned with whole volumes and pages from his handmade "books," many of which are filled with pop-culture pictograms: *Playboy* bunny logos, cartoon hearts, pot leaves. In Dean's hands, these otherwise mundane symbols are given new life and possibilities to generate meaning. He gathers them in repeated fashion to collectively form cursive characters and enigmatic phrases that mysteriously coalesce and trail across the surface of individual pages.



Installation view at the "Sightings: Michael Dean" exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas of "Lost True Leaves." (Photograph by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News)

In two areas of the exhibition, these pages appear to climb the walls in swooping collagelike arrangements resembling cursive letters. Following the path of these characters, their loosely layered arrangements both reveal and relate back to the whimsical free-flowing contents of each volume.

Many more of the artist's constructions take the form of swooping cursive f's and also l's. Dean is very interested in the vocal and visual flowing of these characters. The sound of these consonants portends the birth of full phrases that may express joy, affection, the beginnings of an expletive or a statement of disgust. Visually, the rise and fall of their curved script also enacts the motion of taking root and emerging from the earth.

While developing the Nasher installation, Dean thought a lot about growth and the phrase "lost true leaves," which is identifiable in three sculptures that both literally spell and figuratively illustrate the meaning of each word at human scale. Thus, their treelike forms bear leafy elements that seem to quiver as though withstanding a gentle breeze.

Dean discovered the phrase "lost true leaves" being used to describe cacti, which, as a species, evolved prickly spines in place of green photosynthetic leaves to withstand dry desert conditions. The artist's installation seems to visually illustrate this persistence, the pressing on of life in its many unpredictable paths and forms.



Detail of work in preparation for "Sightings: Michael Dean" in Dallas. Photographed at Dean's studio in Ilford in northeast London by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News

Many of Dean's sculptures resemble cacti, with colorful thick bodies that recall the plant's densely ribbed stem. But in place of cactus flowers and fruit, Dean's sculptures sprout tongues, fists and fingers.

Other sculptures appear more skeletal, presumably caught at an earlier stage of regeneration. Less built out than their colorful counterparts, these wiry pieces are dotted not only with cast fists and fingers, but also shredded dollar bills and bits of paper drawn from Dean's publications. Sprouting from the rebar, these elements resemble buds growing on trees, signifying germination and the coming of an abundant spring.

There is no right or wrong way to explore the exhibition, but in order to make it through Dean's installation, viewers must navigate a challenging path that requires their full attention. Crumpled pages, stray bits of cement and lost limbs litter our journey, drawing us into the present moment, where we must constantly renegotiate our course.



Detail of sculpture (work in progress) in preparation for "Sightings: Michael Dean" at the artist's studio in Ilford in northeast London. (Photograph by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News)

Meanwhile, Dean's sculptures outnumber and surround us. Though at first they seem foreign, eventually each viewer translates the forms in terms of their own body, examining its textures, movements and resistance to gravity.



Artist Franziska Lantz (center, left) and Michael Dean (center, right) with their two sons Errol (far left) and Oskar at the opening of "Sightings: Michael Dean" at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. (Photograph by special contributor Nan Coulter for The Dallas Morning News)

In some cases, Dean's textual references may remain illegible to the viewer, but this doesn't bother the artist at all. In fact, he hopes that his mysterious forms enable viewers to conjure meaning for themselves. By calling to mind everything from urban construction zones to ancient ruins and once-recumbent gardens now bursting into life, Dean's installation may tell us more about ourselves than the artist himself.

Editor's note: *Auriel Garza has a bachelor of fine arts with an emphasis in art history, theory and criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and earned her master's in art history from Texas Christian University. She is associate director of Laura Rathe Fine Art in Dallas and has worked for museums, galleries and cultural nonprofits in Chicago, Houston, Miami Beach and San Antonio.*