

## The Florence of Essex

Harlow Museum and Walled Garden, Muskham Road, Harlow CM20 2LS

23 October - 30 November 2018

Open Tuesday, Friday and Saturday 10:00 - 16:00

Harlow Museum is pleased to present an exhibition consolidating 12 months research and work by artist and researcher Nicholas Smith. Featuring a film which has been made about the special relationship between with people of Harlow and the sculptures in the town, and a display of photographs that have been curated by Smith from the archive at the museum. The exhibition will act as a starting point for a large scale project which is using the photographic archives of periphery towns across the UK to tell the story of modern Britain.

Smith's work investigates the construction of publicness through site and image, specifically focusing on moments of departure and or arrival in society that link history to place-making. His current work is using found archival images to better understand the shift from civic to public ideologies in the UK over the last 60 years.

Nicholas Smith (b. 1982, Liverpool) lives and works in London, recent projects include *Image of an Exhibition* a publication created and edited through a series of touring events investigating the changing uses and roles of exhibition photography and *Relief Journal* a three part publication which invited artists, curators and writers to make a work specifically for the printed page responding to themes that articulated the implicit role of photography in contemporary practice. *The Florence of Essex* has been made possible with the kind and generous support of The Henry Moore Foundation, Harlow Arts Trust and the Harlow Museum and Walled Gardens.



Children playing on 'Chiron', 1978. Photographer unknown.

*When Sir Frederick Gibberd claimed that it was his trips to Florence that inspired the decision to have sculptures on public display in Harlow, I imagine it came across somewhat unrealistic, patronising even. How can you compare a town in Essex with the greatest classical city in the world for sculpture? Working in Harlow for the last 12 months has given me a unique opportunity to find out more about how a collection of over 80 works in the public domain can contribute towards society and everyday life, and if the comparison to Florence was a valid one.*

*Following my first interactions with locals in the town it became apparent immediately that there was huge pride about Harlow, and while that sounds obvious, this pride felt different, it was a civic pride demonstrated by the various societies and groups and individuals that contacted me about my work. All of whom had their own personal stories and histories to tell about Harlow and the sculptures. I was unprepared by how much attention that I would receive from locals in all honesty, being based in London I am used to doing projects in isolation then trying to get people to notice once the process has finished. So it has been an eye opening experience to have so many people involved with the creative process, if not a little jarring. The main question I did try and ask everyone that I spoke to was: 'do you think the collection is appreciated'? And I think that what I was actually asking was, 'what does appreciation mean'? Does it only mean to understand something from a classical perspective? Is using Lynne Chadwicks Trigon as a place to meet your partner after shopping not also a form of appreciation? Or to simply lean or sit on a plinth at lunch time less valid than writing an essay on the work the plinth is supporting? Is a bronze donkey not also a fantastic object of play for generations of children? Dare I say it, is vandalism and theft not also a form of appreciation?*

*The main area of interest however was simply observing how people get on with their lives around this astonishingly vast and varied collection. In the words of one resident 'it seems like nobody notices that they're there, but if they were to be moved or disappear, all hell would break loose'. The sculptures in Florence can hardly be compared to the sculptures in Harlow, like comparing the architecture or the people of each place, they're too different. But, I am pretty sure there are Florentines walking straight past 'Perseus With the Head of Medusa', Michelangelo's 'David' and the 'Fountain of Neptune' without taking one glance. To appreciate art is one thing, to live with it is another and I think Harlow is similar to Florence in this respect.*

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