

Marlborough Maze

Amidst the recent hype surrounding young British art, the pundits promoting this scam overlooked a number of cultural forms that might have provided a more solid platform from which to promote their rather dubious agenda. Early in 1997 the Norton Museum of Art in Florida hosted a major exhibition entitled *An Amazing Art: Contemporary Labyrinths* by Adrian Fisher. Portsmouth based Fisher has been designing labyrinths for donkey's years and played a major role in organising *The Year of the Maze* in 1991, a celebration of the 300th anniversary of Hampton Court, the oldest surviving hedge maze in England.

Many new mazes were built as part of the 1991 celebrations and Fisher bagged the prime spot in Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. Blenheim occupies the site of the legendary Rosamund's Bower, an architectural labyrinth with heavy defences in which Henry II is said to have installed his mistress Fair Rosamund. According to the story propagated by various popular ballads, when Queen Eleanor finally penetrated the maze in 1176, she forced her rival to drink poison. Blenheim Palace replaced the ruined medieval buildings in the eighteenth century and was given to the First Duke of Marlborough in recognition of his many military victories. The Marlborough family's other famous military scion, Winston Churchill, was born at Blenheim in 1874.

Fisher based his Marlborough Maze design on Grinling Gibbons' Blenheim Palace roof carvings depicting the Panoply of Victory. Seen from above, the lines of yew hedges that make up the labyrinth portray pyramids of cannonballs, a cannon firing, and the air filled with banners, flags and bugles. The maze has entrances on the left and right with a central exit. Two wooden bridges add an exciting additional aspect to the puzzle element of the maze, while simultaneously providing viewing points from which to survey the work. One of Fisher's colour mazes can also be found at Blenheim. This labyrinth consists of nodes connected by coloured paths, the choice of path at each node being determined by the colour of the path previously taken.

Mums and dads stop on the bridges of the main maze to view a piece of symbolism that makes Sarah Lucas look subtle. Children race around the labyrinth enjoying the three dimensionality of the work in the same way that they might relish Tracy Emin's *Everyone I Ever Slept With* tent. The Marlborough Maze isn't difficult to solve, the first time I went in it took about twelve minutes to get out again. Alongside the aesthetic frisson of the mock pompous symbolism, the twists and turns of the labyrinth cause the maze to echo with the noise of laughter and wonderment. The crowds flocking to Blenheim are very different to the audience attracted by young British art. On the surface those using the labyrinth may appear less sophisticated than gallery groupies, but beneath this superficial appearance their aesthetic tastes are actually far more radical.

The institutional defeat of modernism has resulted in an increasing assimilation of art into representational categories of popular culture. The Marlborough Maze is a perfect example of an art that does not have to justify such pleasures to its audience. This has generated a certain amount of confusion in the interpretation of Fisher's work and while his mazes have received coverage everywhere from *Scientific American* to *Der Spiegel*, they are largely ignored by the art press. Art critics generally view Fisher as politically conformist, intellectually timid and an aesthetic revisionist. Such views are extremely parochial since they are based on the surface appearances of Fisher's work at the expense of the wider cultural context.

While young British art has been justified as a demotically voiced assault on politically correct post-modernism, the Marlborough Maze attacks something infinitely more sacrosanct. Woodstock Park in which Blenheim Palace is situated was landscaped by Capability Brown, whose naturalistic aesthetic resulted in the destruction of many mazes and the formal gardens of which they constituted a part. Hampton Court maze only survives today because Brown was told not to touch it. This must have irritated the Royal Gardener, since he lived in the house next to the maze for twenty years!

The Marlborough Maze is much more than simply a slap in the face for aesthetically 'educated' taste or a simple parody that sets ghosts walking. Despite Fisher's unqualified regard for the voluptuous pleasures of popular culture, he does not seek to assimilate himself to popular culture in fazed admiration, as if his only ambition was an anti-intellectual release of libidinal energy. Rather, he treats the aesthetically despised pleasures of maze making and walking as something that is first nature and commonplace and mutually defining of subjectivity. The labyrinth is a vibrant cultural form precisely because it has avoided the aesthetic hype of the contemporary art market. As such, Fisher and maze walking represent the future direction of visual culture.

Stewart Home