

# SEANKELLY

Cornwell, Tim. "In an Idea World," *The Scotsman*, February 25, 2010.

## THE SCOTSMAN

EDINBURGH NATIONAL NEWSPAPER



### In an **IDEA** world

After a faltering start at A-level, Peter Liversidge has made a career in art by coming up with hundreds of eccentric 'proposals' - from making it snow in summer to creating living shadows in tulips. Interview by Tim Cornwell

**I** PROPOSE to install a group of handmade dice on various tin supports," runs the 64th of Peter Liversidge's 160 typed proposals for his newest Edinburgh show. "The dice are made from off-cuts of wood, painted with acrylic to give the impression that they are commercially available dice."

Liversidge tapped out this idea at his kitchen table, on his manual Olivetti Lettera 35 typewriter with its ageing ribbon. The tin used, he specified, was to come from the Metal Box factory, makers of biscuit tins in Carlisle, the city where he did his foundation art course.

Then the 37-year-old artist started work on the dice, and was at it off and on for the next three months. He made 1,400 brightly coloured cubes, with some help from assistants, but hand-painting every dot himself, sanding and repainting hundreds of them.

"Twenty-one dots per die - 1,400 - that's a lot of dots," he says (I make it 29,400 on my calculator). "I quite liked it, I knew it was a process I had to get through, like washing-up."

The dice installation will go on sale as one of the "realised" proposals for his show at the Ingleby Gallery. Typed on a single sheet of A4 paper, others run from the simple to the impossible, from the surreal to the philosophical.

"I propose to reinstate the Nor Loch," says one. Others, equally unlikely, range from visiting all Scotland's offshore islands (more than 700) during the exhibition to running a wire "death-slide" from Edinburgh Castle to Waverley station.

In this very conceptual and absurdist oeuvre, the original proposals themselves are a single artwork; they will also be sold in book form. Then there are others that

Liversidge has chosen to make real. They include the lightbulb sign of the exhibition's title, *The Thrill of It All*; constructing three boats from flotsam and jetsam; projecting the inside pattern of an envelope from his passport application papers on to a wall and painting it.

He will find a costume for "I propose to dress as a well-worn path", invite a gospel choir and a cello quartet, cook lunch for the staff, install black walnut trees on one floor. "I propose to sit with my sons George and Thomas and eat biscuits," he writes, and more unlikely: "I propose to make things simple."

It would be very easy for all this to become pretentious and tedious. Yes, there are a few tartanised clichés in there: asking The Proclaimers to walk another 500 miles and promising to roam in the gloaming. But in the hands of this Lincoln-born artist, the ideas are often quirky and cool, not dictatorial or bossy. The covers of Liversidge's books of proposals are made from unwaxed card, to change with the grease from fingerprints as people look through them. Are they coffee-table items? "I would imagine people have them in their loos," he says.

When Peter Liversidge got his A-level results, he knew they were going to be bad, but they were much worse than he thought. "I didn't do any work," he says.

"They were terrible. I got an E in art and a U in one because I didn't go to the exam."

He lucked out with a place on a foundation art course in Carlisle, but he knew his mother, a midwife, and his father, a medical physicist, were expecting something better. A few years later he built that thought into the very first of his published proposals. "I suggest that I follow in the footsteps of my mother and train to become a midwife," he wrote, for the Beak Art Gallery in Dublin. "I will install myself in the gallery and set up a practice between the opening hours of the gallery, whatever they might be."

From the Cumbria College of Art and Design in Carlisle, Liversidge progressed to the University of Plymouth and then went to the USA to study film and photography in Bozeman, Montana.

"I used to have breakfast with an Indian guy called Chris," he recalls. "I said I was from Lincoln which was very flat. He said if you like flat land you should go to the north Montana plains."

It was from there that Liversidge built an imaginary vision of the American West that he sees as precursor to his proposals. He painted watercolours of the north Montana plains, but never visited

them. He chose watercolour because it is a portable medium, used by artists on the move, to heighten the fiction of landscapes sketched quickly in the open air.

Since 1997, his proposals and subsequent work have taken the father of two from Dublin to the Chicago Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Liverpool. He's done proposals for Brussels, Miami and Barcelona. For each exhibition, they are written within strict time limits, on the same Olivetti, and cannot be corrected.

The Kunstmuseum in Basel has one of his apple trees, made from grafting consummately British apples such as

James Bond films, to dramatic effect. In May, Jupiter Artland will unveil a project for which he planted the shape of the winter shadow of an oak tree, a living shadow in black tulips.

If you dared to ask if it was art, Liversidge would welcome it; his texts are brought to life by the way people read, react to and feel them. "In the same way you experience the snow, you can be there. You can go there and pick apples and have an apple pie."

The Ingleby director, Richard Ingleby, puts Liversidge in a tradition of conceptual art dating back to Marcel Duchamp and his urinal artwork, *Fountain*. "I like the things that he makes, I like the object, I like the sensibility of the thing itself," he says. "When you scratch the sur-

face of that and find out a bit more about the person behind them, I absolutely love the conceptual starting point and the lateral thinking, the whole history he has."

Sitting with Liversidge, listening to the riff of ideas, I find his train of thought is catching. *The Scotsman's* photographer, Jane Barlow, was enlisted to record his proposal to "go cross-eyed". I would propose an installation artwork of the hours of recordings my digital recorder makes when it turns on in my pocket by accident.

Or I'd propose playing back a recording of Liversidge, and analysing his speech patterns.

One proposal he plans to realise is making a "motivational speech" to Scottish business leaders. Asked what message he plans to put across, he launches into a meandering, but possibly meaningful story. His Auntie Doreen and Uncle George met in Alexandria, in Egypt, during the war; before their return home, Uncle George gave his wife a leather-bound book on the city.

"In one of the pages there was a seed, and this seed stayed there until 2006 and Auntie Doreen took it out of the book. She had very green fingers," he says. "There's a single seed, how it got there we have no idea. She planted the seed and the seed grew. It had been in this book for probably 80 or 90 years."

"I don't know whether there's a business message in it at all, actually, but I just like it as a lyrical, romantic view of potential, I suppose, and what it means to actually wait. And sometimes, in the waiting, it means you are at the right point when you should be at the right point... do you see what I mean by that?"

● Peter Liversidge: *The Thrill of It All* is at the Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, from 1 March until 10 April.

It would be very easy for all this to become tedious, but Liversidge's proposals are often quirky and cool, not dictatorial or bossy

Cox's orange pippins to European root stock.

His first Edinburgh exhibition was in the 2006 Festival at the Ingleby Gallery. A commission followed for Jupiter Artland, the contemporary art estate near the airport, where Liversidge created a summer snowstorm last year. His proposals often bring other performers to carry them out: for the Jupiter Artland artwork he hired a company called Snowbusiness, which created snow scenes for the Narnia and