

SEAN KELLY

Conrad, Peter. "The best art books of 2015," *The Guardian*, December 7, 2015.



'Cell for theosophical work': a reconstruction of Mondrian's Paris studio.

The artist, as Antony Gormley says of his fellow sculptor Brancusi, is someone who "tries to remake the world on his own terms in his own studio". This definition, at once cosmic and domestic, is beautifully exemplified in *Piet Mondrian: The Studios* (Thames & Hudson), edited by Cees W de Jong. In Amsterdam, Paris, London and New York, Mondrian lived inside modular, rectangular spaces like those on the canvases he painted – cells for a theosophical monk, who believed that a studio should be "a small sanctuary". He preferred the Paris Métro to Notre Dame, and objected to the garden behind his studio in Hampstead because it contained too many distracting, ungeometrical trees: the world, remade by him, was a paradise for aesthetes with OCD.

Gormley himself is what he calls a "post-studio artist", whose ambitions extend beyond such clean, well-lit places. In *Antony Gormley on Sculpture* (Thames & Hudson), he conducts a tour of the work he has installed on Austrian mountains and in the Australian desert, in the Hermitage museum, St Petersburg, and on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. His commentaries on his own creations tend to float off into metaphysics; he is best when poetically extolling the work of others – Jacob Epstein's sea-washed pebbles, Joseph Beuys's fuzzy, absorbent figures made of felt, and Richard Serra's palaeolithic-looking steel plates.

Although Hayden Herrera's biography of the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi is titled *Listening to Stone* (Thames & Hudson), the materials Noguchi listened to were not only marble, granite and basalt. He also used paper, rubber, wood and – to the disgust of a snobbish dealer – aluminium. Sometimes his forms were uterine and earthy, but his hollow statuettes also illustrated the levity and emptiness of Zen. Herrera is brilliant on the work, and acute about the man – his schizophrenic cultural heritage, his nubile muses and his bossy clients, one of whom, an American socialite, insisted after having cosmetic surgery that he re-chisel the nose on his marble portrait bust of her to bring it up to date.

Noguchi sculpted water in a series of monumental fountains; the medium of the video artist Bill Viola is light, and – for instance in the tableaux of martyrdom he installed at St Paul's Cathedral – he reimagines religious miracles for an unbelieving age. The text in John Hanhardt's *Bill Viola* (Thames & Hudson) is clouded by electronic jargon and quotes from fashionable savants, but the images are glorious.

Mystics such as Viola seek to transform the world; artists with a political agenda try to change it, and generally fail. In *Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit* (Yale), Mark Rosenthal describes one such quixotic campaign, when in 1932 the Mexican muralist Rivera was hired to design a "Sistine Chapel of industrialism" for the garden court of a new museum. Rivera thought he could "promote a communist message in a capitalist land", although police had recently fired tear gas at striking labourers from the local automobile factory. Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo, practised subversion in her own way by declaring Americans to be ugly and stupid, or by innocently asking the viciously antisemitic Henry Ford if he

happened to be Jewish. The citadel may not have crumbled when Rivera painted on its walls, but his grandiose frescoes have survived, while post-industrial Detroit decays around them.

In Derek Boshier: Rethink/Re-entry (Thames & Hudson), Paul Gorman introduces another ingrate immigrant who, like Rivera, questions American sanctities. Boshier attended the Royal College of Art with David Hockney and they remain friends, although their visions have diverged. Hockney moved to California as a passionate pilgrim, liberated by its paganism. Boshier's images of Texas cowboys and transsexual LA prostitutes are more sourly satirical, yet he understands, as Rivera didn't, the futility of his own protests, which diverts the anger in his work into witty frustration. One of his ink drawings assembles a pile of art magazines, presumably full of radical diatribes, and entitles the job lot *How to Make Leftwing Jewellery: art, after all is decor, co-opted by the consumer economy it derides*.

Giles Waterfield in *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914* (Yale) recalls a time when art, while not wanting to change the world, at least made earnest efforts to improve it. Waterfield's engaging, anecdotal book about the public galleries of Victorian Britain emphasises their mission to enlighten and uplift a weary, dispirited populace. The worthies who founded these institutions were impelled by a gospel of civic altruism, which Waterfield defends against dreary contemporary assaults on museums as agents of social control and colonial oppression or "mausolea for the vanities of the wealthy".

It's a noble story and – now that museums pass themselves off as retail outlets while historic houses left to the nation are "reduced", as Waterfield remarks with a sniff, "to functioning as wedding venues" – its retelling has a sharply cautionary intent.

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