**Alex Chinneck**

**Age: 33**

**Artist/sculptor**

**Onward & Upwards installation interview**

**Your website states that your work produces “contextually responsive interventions that animate where they stand” how does this relate to your ‘Onwards & Upwards’ project? How is the piece set to respond to its location in Sheffield?**

The area in which the artwork will stand it particularly resonates with, largely historically. It’s a region where there was a hive of industrial activity and the architecture of that period was reflected in the large red brick chimneys. Along the Tinsley Locks and also across Blackburn Meadows where the art work will stand, were [many] of these architectural structures. There’s something nice, there’s this notion of architectural reintroduction. Where all of these chimneys are gone, they are now being reintroduced, it felt appropriate.

[The artwork] looks at the industrial heritage of the area but simultaneously utilises the manufacturing capacity that’s presently within the region. The artworks themselves despite their simple nature do present extremely complex challenges in terms of design, fabrication and installation. The entire artwork is being made in the region and it utilises these strengths and capabilities of Sheffield. In many ways it is contextually responsive historically but also in terms of utilising the skillset that was available close by.

[The sculptures] are contextually responsive materially as well, red brick chimneys once stood there. The material choice had to be one that worked well in this particular situation. Red brick is synonymous with Sheffield and that particular area but also it’s a material that works really well along a canal. I think in areas where there is high vegetation the colour palette will work really well. It’s a material that matures well in an aquatic context. So, the piece is contextually responsive materially, historically and logistically.

**Can you tell more about the local involvement aspect of the project?**

Because of the size of our project, collaboration is a necessity. That extends across all areas of the artwork, from the development of the idea following the initial conception, to the design of the idea, to the making of the idea. As well as focusing on the location of the piece and the documentation of it. [There are all] of these different areas, the signage that surrounds [the piece], the branding, the website. It’s not only about construction but it’s also creative collaboration.

From the outset of the project we celebrated this notion of ‘made in Sheffield’ and we made a commitment that the entire project would be born from working with companies and creators across the region. I was quite anxious to make that particular commitment, given we are going in to unknown territory but it’s really bled through. We are working with people now that we are going to continue to work with on all of our projects. It doesn’t just make sense from the logistical perspective using people from close by, I think there’s something very important about it. It allows the city the best possible chance to accumulate a sense of ownership while the work is in development. It is born from the region. It’s working out really well. I suppose we’ve pissed off a lot of the people we normally work with because we aren’t working with them, but at the same time we are making new relationships within the region and that’s great. I would like to do that more often, increasingly we are making work outside of London. It’s really nice to meet new collaborators and forge partnerships which are again in many ways contextually responsive.

**Why is the piece title ‘Onwards & Upwards’ ?**

My titles are normally incredibly wordy and pretentious (or poetic I don’t know one of the two or maybe somewhere in between.) Given the scale of the artwork and the accessible nature of its personality - in the way that anyone can understand it and enjoy it - and the fact that we are really trying to create this landmark as a public project, it needed a simple title. A one word or a two-word familiar expression, one that will become second nature and how the piece is just known. Onwards & Upwards felt good in that respect, its short and snappy with layers of familiarity. It’s also literal, in a really basic sense we are creating a one-mile trial of four really tall structures, you have to move onwards and look upwards.

It’s also about the fact that we are using modern manufacturing and we are using companies not only based in Sheffield but are thriving there. It also serves optimism, it’s no longer “the industry is dead” “oh the good old days”, it’s contrary to the go to expression of “it’s all gone” and all that doom and gloom because that’s not what we are seeing. We are seeing that there is a huge amount of capacity in industry in Sheffield and the work celebrates that. It’s optimistic, it’s positive and it’s playful. These aren’t relics of the past; they reference the past but they are only possible through contemporary processes and collaboration. It fits, it makes sense, it felt right.

**The four brick chimneys will create an immersive mile-long trial along Tinsley Locks, what type of experience are you hoping people will have when they visit the sculptures?**

I think the best experience will be when you don’t know they are coming. But when you are visiting there will be a process of immersion. [The trial] can be over an hour long and you can slowly detach yourself from the world, the M1 viaduct slips into the distance. I like the idea that you become deeply immersed and integrated into the experience, the artwork and the environment. I think there will also be a process of discovery that this location exists and that it is lovely, it’s great because I love it down there.

But as the artist, I hope people enjoy it. I hope people are in awe of the physical structures, are uplifted by the ambition and also the playful qualities of the work. [The chimneys] all have playful personalities and I hope that comes across. What we try and do is deliver accessible artwork that can be enjoyed by anyone. The work isn’t intellectually elitist in anyway but we serve that accessibility in massive complex structures. I hope some people like them on face value while others are engaged from a more technical sense and interrogate.

But each to their own, I hope everybody has their own response and connection to [the work.] I hope it’s a positive reaction and I think it will be. They (the sculptures) will be endearing things. They talk to the past but also to the present.

**Do you think the installation will bring long term benefits to the local area?**

That’s certainly the objective. We are setting about trying to facilitate extra funds to install toilets, a café, improvements to the pathways, improvements to lighting, a zebra crossing, all to improve access to the artwork. We are insisting that contractors exercise a process of training so that there is an opportunity for local apprenticeships. We are dedicating well in excess of £100,000 to community engagement activities which extends to the wider community in terms of art programmes. I do think there is a real opportunity for long term benefits. I think there is a really exciting opportunity in that respect. The one thing that an artwork of this scale and eccentricity does is generate footfall. Some people see that as a negative thing because they want to be left alone. But with footfall comes people and with people come opportunities.

When we did our introductory artwork ‘The Peeling Road’ in Tinsley, it was there for five days and we had 5000 visitors. In one weekend we had 2500 visitors and they were largely people who had never been to the area before. Just in that short space of time people were coming and suggesting this could completely change the area. Landlords of the neighbouring buildings, one of them said that they have been waiting for something like this to come along for 20 years. A food truck came and parked up for the day, the woman selling food had never been down that road before in her life. But she came in her mobile food truck because of the footfall. So already by installing this short temporary piece for a weekend, there were already suggestions that it would bring footfall, activity and potentially trade. The project is being managed to be delivered with an enormous amount of attention towards community and I’m really encouraged by it. I really think it can have positive effects and outcomes. Not for everyone, some people don’t want it or to be engaged of course.

When we did ‘The Peeling Road’ we brought every single child down from Tinsley Meadows Primary Academy one class at a time. The first day we installed it we had 400 children there, they were really excited by it and arguably inspired. A lot of them came back with their parents. A lot of them were fascinated with how it was made and were asking these really exciting questions. So I really do think [‘Onwards & Upwards’] will succeed in capturing people’s imaginations but will also have ongoing positive and lasting impact.