

Paul Fryer in conversation with Anthony Haden-Guest

by [Daryna Andriy](#) on July 23rd 2010



A blobby entity, a sea anemone of raw light, was pulsing moodily in a bell jar. I wondered just what I was looking at? "You're looking at a star really," said Paul Fryer, the artist. "The bottom line is that you can make a star but it's difficult. And the best way to do it is you create a particle accelerator. Like the Cern one. But it's a small version. The object in the centre is a gaseous ball of plasma. It's ten million degrees centigrade. Effectively a star-in-a-jar." The notion of the End of Days as Performance art suggested itself. What would happen if, um, the jar cracked? "There would be an implosion. An explosive implosion," Fryer said. Fryer's star-in-a-jar was exhibited at the Simon Dickinson Gallery on London's Jermyn Street as part of 'Let There Be More Light', a show that occupied two spaces, the second being the former Holy Trinity Church, which now bills itself as "London's most glamorous events venue." At the doorway to the deconsecrated church was a further bell-jar within which throbbed another mousse of light, this one lilac, and the artist-fabricated equivalent of an Aurora Borealis. Paul Fryer, who is now in his early 40s, has had a most unusual art career. He effectively dropped out of the art world for 23 years and returned to full-time art making just four years ago. Why such a long absence? "It's a difficult question. I made some work in the early days when I was nineteen, twenty. I did a year's foundation at the Leeds College of Art. I wanted to make art. I believed in art. I was a teenager when my dad died and the only thing that kept me sane was art. And then I lost it. Ultimately I didn't think it was something I had a right to do. I thought it was a vocational thing. And I had to prove it. And I was very insulted by what was happening in art. It was all going in the same direction. At college everybody was like lemmings! I thought I can't do this. So I took a sabbatical basically." Fryer sensibly chose to go into Electro-Pop instead. "I enjoyed singing. I'm quite a good singer. I've got a natural voice. I was in a couple of bands. A bit like Joy Division, New Orderish, that kind of thing. And you know what? I stand by that stuff. It wasn't all bad. Because I knew that I could do the art later. It's like a weird bookshop where I worked in Leeds, The Sorcerer's Apprentice, where I would get esoteric books. I realized that you could do all that when you were old. You can be an old man and study books. You can be an old man and make art. But you couldn't be an old man and be a transvestite DJ and fuck girls and be a singer in a rock band!" Fryer doggedly hung on in Leeds, where he helped put together a couple of successful Art 'n Rock clubs, The Kit Kat Club and Vague. He was a designer for record labels and fashion houses and he only recently gave up a job as musical director for Fendi. In 2001 Trolley Books published a book of his excellent poetry, 'Don't Be So...', which was strikingly illustrated by Damien Hirst. And he put together a multi-media show, Electronic Elvis, which was released on vinyl in 2005. In 1996 Fryer had tentatively returned to art-making and began exhibiting in shows and galleries, such as James Birch's space in Laystall Street. But he only returned to full-time art-making in 2005. It was then that he had his first solo show at the Trolley Gallery in London's Shoreditch and he executed a commission for Sudeley Castle's annual sculpture exhibition, which was where I first saw one of his pieces, a recurrent lightning bolt, in 2006. Why the gap of 23 years? "I never stopped doing it. That's what people find hard to believe. But it's the truth. In my mind I was always making art. So I started to do it. And it was actually like I'd been holding my breath for 23 years. I had nowhere left to go. I had exhausted every possibility. So I felt. I'd worked in music, I'd worked in design, I had worked in nightclubs, I had been a DJ, I had done everything I could. And it was just a waste of time. I had tried in every way to get around it. And ultimately the only thing I had left was art." But how on earth had

he acquired the handiness with such heavy duty hi-tech? "I literally would go into TV repair shops and beg somebody to teach me about electronics. Because I knew nothing! But then I got on the web and I met Colin," he says. This was Colin Dancer. a physicist and engineer. Without Dancer, Fryer could never have made such pieces as, for instance, the star-in-the-jar. Fryer had an artist's mistrust of gallerists, but raised to the power of ten. Through the exhibition at Sudeley Castle, though, he became close to Joe la Placa. A former gallerist, curator and arts journalist, La Placa is now a partner with Mike Platt, the creator of BlueCrest, one of Europe's largest hedge funds. Together they have set up [All Visual Arts](#) (AVA), a Fitzrovia-based operation whose aim over the next five years is to finance and promote chosen artists. "I had been approached by different people," Fryer says. "And then, out of the blue, Joe said to me, you know what? We're not a gallery. But we'll do everything a gallery will do and a lot more. Whatever place you want to show in! And we'll back you to the hilt. We'll buy your work. We'll offset everything we give you against your work. You don't have to worry about money. We believe in you." Pause. "It was perfect timing." Fryer's work is a seamless blend of very different art-making impulses. He is clearly as enraptured with the frontiers of scientific invention as Joseph Wright of Derby, the 18th-century painter of such canvases as 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump', or such early modern writers as Jules Verne and HG Wells. He is also meticulously, indeed obsessively, "crafty" and his willingness to be full-bloodedly religiose in a super-realist manner brings to mind Caravaggio and John "Mad" Martin. Overall, the work has huge ambitions and a fetish finish but no elements of Pop or irony intrude on Fryer's Dark Sublime. The work at Simon Dickinson included three pieces depicting a nano-second in the life and death of an atom bomb, fabricated in marquetry; another three recreations, also in marquetry, of the explosion into near nothingness of a test-blasted hut at Los Alamos; and Demon (for Laplace), in which three winged white waxwork devils adopt different postures atop twisting library-type stairs that are presumably their own stairways to heaven, an insight I owe to the gallery release. And an egg suspended above a nest depicting the rebirth of Christ. The work in the church - a perfect venue, of course - included the world's two largest tuning forks, which are made of aluminium, five metres high, and which vibrate at 39 hertz, producing a low hum. Physically the space was dominated by 'Time We Left This World Today', a 47-foot long wooden replica of a V2 rocket, which carried a sign on its rear end, warning: PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH. THIS ARTWORK CONTAINS STROBE LIGHTING. A winged Lucifer, as wickedly ugly as Nosferatu, decidedly fallen, and entangled in power lines, was in front of the altar and the iconostasis. And upstairs were eleven replicas of Telstar. Fryer chose the V2 because it was "the first man-made object to leave the atmosphere." And why Telstar? "Because it was the first non-military project in space. It was the first communications satellite. It changed the world!" Fryer said, his thoughts tumbling out in a telegraphic rhapsody. "It brought real time in America. It accelerated the imagination. Joe Meek made a record. It was Margaret Thatcher's favorite song. With the Tornados. He made it on the Holloway Road. It went to number one in America. The first independent number one. "A beautiful song. A lonely thing. It's still in space. It's dead now. They killed it. Radiation killed it. Why Telstar? I love Telstar! Lonely little Telstar! I wish I could own Telsar. I really do. I really love it. Most people are making shit. Telstar wasn't shit. It was the revolution!" I asked Joe la Placa whether the financial turbulence was affecting AVA? "Of course," he said. "It's affecting everything. Anyone who says it isn't is lying. But, that said, we sold 600K." He added that AVA are fine-tuning some deals but expect the Fryer show to realize a million. And la Placa is currently negotiating a show for Fryer in America. "It will either be next Spring or in the early Fall," he says. Anthony Haden-Guest

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