

Déjà vu
Nick Hornby's eerily familiar art.
Jason Farago

Looking at Nick Hornby's art is an uncanny experience: it looks like nothing you've ever seen, and yet you still think you've seen it before. The enigmatic, almost alien forms of his sculptures – some small enough to sit on a table, some weighing more than a ton – derive from quotations of iconic works of earlier artists, mashed up into new and surprising shapes. A single work of Hornby's can graft together the disparate outlines of works by Rodin, Calder, and Brancusi, each of which becomes thrillingly visible as you circle around. But then, just as one of the fragments comes into view, it disappears again – and you're back with an object that's at once familiar and indecipherable.

Hornby's strange, inexplicably beautiful sculptures are far more than the sum of their parts. He puts old material into new circumstances, creating singular forms out of the clutter of history. "They're always on the knife edge of revealing their sources, but they also hold back," the artist explains. "You can think of the sculptures as three-dimensional collages, and in three dimensions you can have layers of things. You walk around a work and it unfolds, but the question is: what do you see between the facets? I'm interested in that synthesis, that new thing."

Hornby, 32, generates his works on a computer, casting the resulting hybrid in plaster, bronze, or a striking marble resin composite that brings Enlightenment-era aesthetics right into the present day. Often they're a brilliant white, but this year he began to experiment with color: two massive new sculptures in London's Canary Wharf, created in collaboration with the painter Sinta Tantra, are done up in eye-popping blues and pinks.

As a teenager Hornby spent his days working with clay. Even then he was mixing things up: what would start as a pot would end up as a portrait bust. Now he works out of a studio off Portobello Road in Notting Hill – curiously, the same space where MTV shot the pilot of *The Real World's* London season – but his artistic practice extends far beyond its splattered walls. "I'm not a traditional studio artist at all," Hornby claims. "I never have ideas in the studio. The ideas happen on the bicycle, on the way to the V&A, on the Tube.... All the ideas come out of conversation, which get researched and developed on the laptop, which then get fabricated." Many of the most ambitious sculptures are constructed in Pietrasanta, Italy, at a state-of-the-art shipyard that normally produces yachts. "Each sculpture is the product of years of research, but when it arrives in my studio, I see it for the first time the same way a viewer does," he says. "I get to judge my work like a critic."

Hornby's art has been exhibited everywhere from Eyebeam in New York to the Institute of Contemporary Indian Art in Mumbai, but his newest project – and perhaps also his most impressive – is closer to home. This June in London's Kings Cross, a once grotty neighborhood that's now home to the Guardian and the Eurostar, he's installing a 13-foot permanent bronze sculpture, in which Michelangelo's David converges into a precarious conical form. David has a special place in Hornby's artistic formation: there's a plaster cast copy in London, although the stud's genitals are covered by a fig leaf at the command of a flustered Queen Victoria. Hornby's reinterpretation of Michelangelo's masterpiece takes the outline of that David, tilts it to the sky, and extrudes it down to a single, infinitesimal point.

It's a major creative challenge for him, but a practical one too. The work, situated at one of the city's busiest intersections, must be able to survive rain, wind, vandalism, and the odd traffic disaster. "It has to withstand a car driving into it. It has to stand up. So I'm still dealing with the same problem as when I was working with clay back in the day."