

Arts review: Lee Mingwei

By Susan Mansfield

LEE MINGWEI: TRILOGY OF SOUND ** MOUNT STUART, BUTE**

MOUNT Stuart, the late Victorian palace of the Third Marquess of Bute, is a masterpiece of Gothic Revival architecture and decoration. Every inch of wall, floor or ceiling has a carving, a painting, a piece of an allegory. Not so much a feast as the kind of pleasurable overindulgence which leaves you needing the visual equivalent of antacid tablets. So the contemporary artists who take part in the annual programme here need a certain amount of brass neck. Every year, an artist is invited to respond to an aspect of the house, gardens or grounds. But what's a visual artist to do in the midst of so much ocular stimulation?

That's what makes the strategy of this year's artist, Lee Mingwei, so clever: he doesn't attempt to add anything visual, instead he has added sound. Near the bottom of the marble staircase, you can begin to make out the sounds of someone practising a woodwind instrument - an oboe, perhaps, or a bassoon. The source is indeterminate, though perhaps it comes from the corridor behind the 18th century organ, one of the parts of the house not open to the public.

The player is not an experienced musician - some of the notes feel uncertain; there are false starts, snatches of scale, the occasional mistake. At times, a small group is playing together, accompanied by a piano. A little later, a group of children seem to be playing Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

A melancholy folk song echoes up the marble staircase, lined with portraits of the ancestral Butes, by artists including Ramsay and Reynolds. It also carries softly into the long Drawing Room, where the Titian and the Tintoretto hang. The visitor guide grimaces: "Could they not have chosen a better tune?"

But, of course, Mingwei's choice is entirely deliberate. His works are often subtle, domestic in scale - these are musicians from a local school, Rothesay Joint Campus. At times they will play live, at other times the music is a recording; visitors will never know which they are listening to. And the sound of their playing brings a gentle air of domesticity into this gorgeous museum piece of a house, full of priceless works of art and signs asking you politely not to touch.

Mingwei has noticed, and makes good use of, the building's dramatic response to

sound. It has its own quality of silence. Voices from the Marble Hall echo in and out of the surrounding rooms. Visitors might find themselves walking softly, lest they disturb the echoing quiet.

You might think your ears were deceiving you if, in the upstairs hallway, you thought you heard birdsong.

In fact, if you trust your ears and follow the sound, it will lead you to the Horoscope Room, built by the third marquess as his sitting room, and its conservatory. Here, Mingwei has placed three canaries in ornate cages, little yellow puff-balls, tweeting, warbling and occasionally shrieking. Absurd and anarchic, they assert their small, vigorous voices in the house's great silence. And the visitors respond. We may have seen countless great works of art since darkening the door, but we are unaccountably charmed by a little yellow bird, preening, pecking, fluffing its feathers, bursting with life.

Since the Mount Stuart Visual Arts Programme was launched in 2001, few artists have been so bold in their interventions, or so subtle. Many have preferred to work outdoors - the tree which was coated in silver by Anya Gallaccio still glitters in the Pinetum. By daring to work within the house, Mingwei is challenging us to be attentive to more than just the treasures on display. But we need to meet him halfway. Often his work requires some participation - viewers have been asked to eat a meal or write a letter in his exhibitions. It's the same here: we need to pay attention, these works can be missed. If we choose not to find our imaginations sparked by his musicians, or to find ourselves charmed by his yellow birds, the loss is ours.

The third piece of his trilogy is in the grounds, a large circular windchime made of bronze and wood suspended in a grove of four lime trees. On the perfectly still day on which I visited, it was issuing only the rarest, softest chimes. But listening for it did make me attentive to other sounds: seagulls wheeling, a tractor cutting the grass, the pitter-patter of rain on leaves. Made in Taiwan (Mingwei's country of birth, although he now lives in New York) it both looks and sounds Eastern, in this highly Western-looking landscaped park.

The symbols inherent in its simple shapes are the circle (enlightenment or the realisation of the ideal) and square (earth): the transcendent and the mundane. If you were not looking for it, you might happen upon it here, catching the soft sounds of its music on the wind and wondering what magic produced them. Or you might not. The challenge of Mingwei's subtle, undemanding interventions is that they may be too easily missed.

- Until 30 September. For further information, see www.mountstuart.com.