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## Barry Flanagan at Tate: hare today, but not gone tomorrow

As an exhibition of Barry Flanagan's work opens at Tate Britain, Richard McNeff remembers his friend, whose wit is set in stone



📷 Hare-raising ... Leaping Hare, 1980, by Barry Flanagan is on display at Tate Britain. Photograph: Tate/estate of Barry Flanagan/courtesy Plubronze Ltd

**A** conversation with my friend [Barry Flanagan](#) could be a baffling affair. Stiffly whispering one minute, barking jokes the next, he delighted in wordplay and biographical confidences easily lost on the listener.

Sometimes in mid-flow, the sculptor paused. Then he leant forward and sniffed the air, with his chiselled features and unruly greying hair, the image of the animal he had made his trademark - [the hare](#).

In 1979, inspired by one of these creatures glimpsed on the Sussex Downs, he bought a dead one from a local butcher and modelled it at his East End foundry. His leaping hare was instantly iconic. Bordeaux wine producers and Japanese hoteliers queued up to buy one. [He represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1982](#). Showered with fame and money, he was a trailblazer for commercially canny artist-stars such as Hirst and Emin.

Yet the mercurial hare, also a motif in the work of such key influences as [Miró](#) and [Joseph Beuys](#), had pedigree in the out-there territory that Flanagan first explored in the 1960s and 70s when he was an adventurer on the furthest shores of conceptual art. But far from being a departure, the hare was an integral feature on the journey Flanagan first set out on.

Born in Prestatyn, north Wales, in 1941, Flanagan resolved at the outset of his career to embrace every direction, and poetry not sculpture was his first track. In 1964-65, with others at St Martin's art college, he produced the magazine *Silâns*. His writings display a gift as formidable as that he applied to stone and marble: prose and concrete poetry full of subversive, offbeat humour. Such poetry spilled over into his sculpture, inspiring titles such as [aaing j gni aa](#).

As a sculptor, Flanagan rejected the stark metal structures of "girder-welders" like his tutor Antony Caro and reverently stuck with non-traditional materials like rope and sand. He flirted with Land Art and [Arte Povera](#). He made and filmed a hole in the sea off the Dutch coast. He worked with [Yoko Ono](#). With some students at St Martin's and John Latham, their tutor, he took a chunk of [Clement Greenberg's Art and Culture](#) and chewed it for a work called *Still and Chew*. Greenberg, an American critic, also advocated Caro's formalist school. Flanagan and his contemporaries recoiled, preferring a less shackled approach. When the college library wanted the book back, Latham returned the detritus distilled in a vial and was summarily sacked.

Family was paramount, and Flanagan brought up two daughters in Camden Town. He did casual labouring to supplement art's meagre returns, but he disliked the way "money punishes art" and resorted to making his own lino-printed currency. These Flanagan notes were issued in fives, tens and fifties and were redeemable against his estate. He used them to pay for labour and materials. Yet when real money came, he believed in unburdening himself of it as fast as possible. In 1971, he distributed the payment he received from the organisers of [Art Spectrum London](#) for his involvement in the new 50p decimal pieces at the show's opening at Alexandra Palace. A decade or so on, when the amounts he received were much larger, he continued to display mind-boggling generosity, passing on his prize money to a struggling young French sculptor, for example, or sponsoring a young woman after casually hearing her complain to her mother that she lacked the funds to do a teacher training course. For Flanagan, flow was the important thing, with money as much as anything else.

He moved to Ibiza in 1987, which is where I first met him. In his dusty green cord jacket and tradesman's cap, he became a fixture of the local artists' colony. His favourite drink was whisky, though he made it clear he was a "pissed artist" not a "piss artist". Restless and itinerant, he moved between Dublin, Barcelona and Amsterdam, keeping a room on permanent standby at

the Chelsea Hotel in New York. But he brought up his second family on Ibiza and met his untimely death there from motor neurone disease in 2009.

His rambling house, which I visited on many occasions, was fitted with wall-to-wall green carpeting, something he stipulated for shows as well. He also used some walls of his home as a notebook. "Is it my fault I chose life over employment?" read one scribble, a riposte made to a belligerent tax inspector. Another notation, "the hues of the ripple", crystallised the multi-faceted approach he always applied, where different meanings revealed themselves in language and form like the layers of the onion. He could be very droll, remarking that there was "so much stone a sculptor could get indigestion" when we were driving among mountains.

He called me his "spontaneous fixer" and it was in this capacity I curated his show at the contemporary art museum in Ibiza in 1992. Working with him could be hair-raising, and he was prone to vanishing. On the morning of the Ibiza exhibition, I tracked him down to the museum. He was asleep in the gallery, keeping vigil over his treasures. The ample cellar of that 16th-century building was filled with his own collection of 1960s and 1970s work, making the exhibition a forerunner to the one at [Tate Britain](#). Some pieces were the same: the wood and hessian *And Then Among Celts*, for example, or *Light on Light on Sacks*, a heap of sacks against a wall with a projector framing a square of light on them. He bought those sacks (which were full of carob beans) from a bemused local farmer on Ibiza. Rats would later infiltrate the museum and feast on the contents. Also on show there were ceramics and pieces in clay such as *Bes*, in which the rounded, compressed slabs evoked the voluptuous *Venus of Willendorf*. Flanagan's work had a playful eclecticism: it showed his willingness to take ideas from mythology, literature and art as diverse and sometimes heretical as his use of solid material.

At work, Flanagan's mind drifted on still waters until an idea struck like a tsunami. He made an on-the-spot decision to run a ring of salt from Salinas around two triangular works in steel, the white crystals on the floor superbly setting off the rusting metal. Each of the triangular structures - jointly called *Homage to Miró* - had a crescent, a wing and a large circle cut out of it, symbols first employed by Alfred Jarry and later borrowed by Miró.

Another ad hoc decision was to place *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse* on top of wooden blocks which already supported a female torso. The book supported a dark head and was opened at a poem I had read to him. When the poem's author, Antonio Colinas, turned up to give his blessing, I was glad Flanagan had put his book-chewing days behind him. The poem celebrates the way a sculptor's work lasts beyond him. Flanagan's ingenious creations, full of verve and wit, surely will.