

Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience



The Carlisle Memorial Church, Belfast, is an overlooked victim of the conflict here in the North, situated as it is in an 'interface' area where the strident voices of the Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Chapel drowned out the often gentler tones of Wesleyan Methodism. Closed in 1982, it fell into disrepair, so much so there was talk of it being replaced by social housing.

A sparkling gem of an exhibition has now found an unexpected home amidst the grime and decay of the city, beneath its sheltering spire and behind incongruously painted corrugated iron hoardings.

I first became aware of the exhibition by sheer happenstance, watching a US police procedural drama where it featured in a cameo scene. As my mother's birthday was forthcoming, it seemed a worthwhile experiment to enjoy visual art away from the hallowed walls of austere galleries.

The initial experience was less than auspicious. We needed the assistance of a guide to gain access for a wheelchair around the back, and so navigated through the exhibition backwards, which was quite odd. However, once we began again in the right direction, it became immediately apparent that this exhibition had been professionally curated, despite the access issues.

Massimiliano Siccardi, a former dancer and production designer for choreographic performances, is the person responsible. His skilful integration of videography with standard tropes of art exhibition, like informative texts, cleverly creates a narrative that both informs and inspires as one experiences Van Gogh's work in a whole new way. It is now thought that he was probably colour-blind, so his colour palate was informed by the way he saw the world, literally.

The highlight of course, is the Immersive Room where a videographic journey, is light-projected on the walls and floors of the room. Having the paintings envelop you was a unique and indescribable experience. Rarely have I felt that intensity of experience with art; it was breath-taking. The 40 minutes of the show flew by. The art just kept flowing over you, clutching your attention in its vice-like grip. I would go as far as to describe it as spiritual. I was glad that they chose not to project the work upwards as

well. That might have been a little too immersive, and the newly restored vault of the church roof enhanced the ecstasy that I felt.

Next was the recreation Van Gogh's humble bedroom at Arles. I found it hard to keep my emotions in check, I was quite overwhelmed by it all. My mother repeatedly asked me what I thought, but I had no words then. She had a go at producing her own work in the Creative Space, but I was still too emotionally wrapped-up in what I had experienced.

The final part of the exhibition was with Virtual Reality headsets, unfortunately I was unable to participate due to a health condition. I watched a simplified screen version and that looked incredible, even from the more basic display.

The Shop was well-stocked with all the Van Gogh-themed over-priced tat that you would expect, but that in no way undermined the experience.

Immersive video-graphic techniques have been around a lot longer than many would think, beginning with the Japanese conceptual artist, Yayoi Kusama's psychedelic displays in the 1960s to more recent exhibitions of artists like David Hockney, Claude Monet, Salvador Dali and Gustav Klimt.

I do not believe they will replace seeing the actual pictures at a conventional Gallery but, professionally done, I think they joyously augment the experience of art for many people.

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