

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian
Brave front: thought-provoking art on England's south-east coast
Emma Stephen
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Image: 'This worm's a metaphor for uncertainty' Holly Hendry's Invertebrate at Bexhill-on-Sea. Photograph: Rob Harris

The new Waterfronts exhibition – part of the England's Creative Coast project – brings contemporary sculpture to seaside towns to attract, and challenge, visitors

I'm escaping a downpour in the Margate shelter where TS Eliot sat in 1921 scribbling *The Waste Land*. I'm not the only one: holidaying families huddle in waterproofs, wet dogs shake, tinny music emanates from smartphones, and a boy skips rhythmically with a rope. All the while the rain lashes the low-tide sand beyond. I'm here to see the town's newest public artwork, *April is the Cruellest Month*, its title inspired by Eliot's poem. Positioned next to the shelter, it's a lifesize sculpture of Daniel Taylor, a soldier who served in Iraq, by Chicago-based artist Michael Rakowitz.

One of seven temporary site-specific commissions – known as Waterfronts – it's part of a new project, England's Creative Coast, which spans the Essex, Kent and East and West Sussex shores, spearheaded by Margate's Turner Contemporary and connecting key galleries and arts organisations. Visitors to the participating towns – the others are Eastbourne, Bexhill-on-Sea, Hastings, Folkestone, Gravesend and Shoeburyness – are offered "the chance to consider the natural, historical and political aspects of England's coastline through the eyes of seven artists from five countries," says curator Tamsin Dillon.

The sculpture is pointing inland towards parliament, where the decision to invade Iraq was made, not at some enemy across the water

It's the latest in a long line of ambitious art projects along this coast, from the Whitstable Biennale, which launched in 2002, and the Folkestone Triennial, beginning in 2008, to the gamechanging openings of Turner Contemporary in 2011 and Hastings Contemporary (originally the Jerwood) in 2012. Having been put back a year owing to Covid, the Creative Coast initiative is also aimed at helping rebuild after the pandemic, especially with so many British residents holidaying at home this year.

Back in Margate a volunteer from the Turner, tablet in hand, is asking the sheltering audience what their thoughts are on the new sculpture. An aggregate of chalk, sand, concrete and other materials, it's embedded with military medals and items donated by veterans and local residents. A local man turns to me to say that while he personally loves it, some think it "an insult to those serving Queen and country". This stems from the fact that the figure is pointing inland in the direction of parliament, where the decision to invade Iraq was made, not at some enemy across the water. It's in striking contrast to a 19th-century memorial of a lifeguard nearby gazing out to sea.



Image: Michael Rakowitz's soldier points accusingly towards parliament. Photograph: Thierry Bal

The Waterfronts project is not just public art, however. It's accompanied by the "world's first art Geotour", a digital trail made by local communities

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to help visitors venture off the beaten track using a free app. As the rain eases, I head along Margate seafront to discover six geocaches hidden across town: each have clues to help you find them, revealing a QR code on a building or object. It's both fun and educational listening to observations and memories about the historic Theatre Royal, the lesser-known Dane Park and the multicultural Northdown Road area in Cliftonville.

The following day, a breezy sunny morning in Bexhill-on-Sea, I'm standing before Invertebrate, Holly Hendry's large-scale work, whose main segment is on the seafront lawn outside the De La Warr Pavilion. "My starting point was really being here on the edge of the land, on the edge of the coast, thinking about borders," says the 31-year-old Woolwich-based artist.

A composite form in three parts strewn around the Pavilion, Hendry's sculpture appears to burrow its way up to the first-floor balcony and the roof of the gallery. "It's a worm, or a gut, or some kind of processing organism," she says. "I wanted it to feel like it goes under the ground and through the building."

The various sections of its anatomy resonate with its location: metal ducting, brickwork and sandbags are welded together, each suggesting varying degrees of vulnerability. "One thing that really became evident about the De La Warr is it's struggling against the elements," Hendry says, sighing as she spots a bit of rust after the rain. "This worm's a metaphor for uncertainty ... it feels very timely in relation to everything that's happening." Her exhibition continues inside the gallery, showing the apparent after-effects of the invertebrate's actions, with the modernist building imagined as a "porous body", its gallery walls playfully munched.

I'm stopped in my tracks by a hand-written notice, 'Regulars only, sorry', pinned to the door of the George Inn In Gravesend the next day, I'm stopped in my tracks by a handwritten notice, "Regulars only, sorry", pinned to the door of the George Inn. Is this what Rakowitz means when he says, in his artist statement, that coastal towns are where "hospitality and hostility mix"? With Covid restrictions on indoor drinking now eased, the note perhaps suggests something about borders and boundaries. It's in stark juxtaposition with the town's new Waterfronts artwork by Glasgow-born artist Jasleen Kaur, a glorious celebration of immigration.

This ancient estuary stronghold at the mouth of the Thames has long been London's gateway to the world, notably for Caribbean immigrants arriving on the Empire Windrush in 1948. It's now home to a large Sikh community with whom Kaur, a third-generation Punjabi immigrant, has collaborated for her commission with north Kent arts organisation Cement Fields. Her work, to the right of the pier entrance (an accompanying sound-piece is sited at the tip of the pontoon), is entitled The First Thing I Did was to Kiss the Ground. Its luminous base is topped with a wave painted to look like marble, echoing the faux marble render of the nearby Gurdwara temple, while a Sikh head with long top-knotted hair refers to "uncut sacred hair – often cut by early migrants to counter racism," says the artist in her statement.



Image: The First Thing I Did was to Kiss the Ground by Jasleen Kaur, near Gravesend pier. Photograph: Thierry Bal.

The semi-abstract figure gazing out towards Tilbury Docks, where the Windrush landed, is a reminder of "when migration was welcomed and bound up with rehabilitating a postwar Britain". Fittingly, it's Tilbury Docks where I head via a small ferry on the way to my next destination.

I stand on the open deck as we speed over the wash, watching the receding spire of St George's church, home to the statue commemorating Pocahontas – another symbol of Gravesend's diverse history.

From the docks I walk to the station for the 45-minute journey to Shoeburyness, the end of the line. Its low-tide beach is epic, all rickety pontoons, rocky outcrops and wild bushes. A mile-long defence boom is visible, built in the second world war to prevent submarines from accessing the Thames.

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"It's the precarious edge of England," says artist Katrina Palmer. "This particular spot is between the MoD relics of Gunners Park and the military testing site, an unusual recreation area and nature reserve. I spent time here, walking, and thinking about the coast, and borders, about how we're having a sort of vacillating relationship with Europe and the rest of the world."

In response, Palmer, with Southend's Metal gallery, has created a concrete-form acoustic mirror adorned with one word: HELLO. While sound mirrors once dotted the coast to detect enemy aircraft, her welcoming sculpture "faces out over the sea, rather than the estuary, towards the rest of the world. It's actually directed towards Brussels," she says, adding that that shouldn't be interpreted too literally.



Image: The sculpture section of Katrina Palmer's Hello Retreat, in Shoeburyness, offers a welcome to those arriving in Britain. Photograph: Thierry Bal

It's nearly time to leave. I walk along the promenade to Gunners Park, where the second part of Palmer's work, Retreat, is accessed by QR code on the locked door of a brick powder magazine, one of its many Victorian military structures. It can be scanned to hear a short story and audio-visual documentation of Palmer's time in Southend.

As I sit on the train from Shoeburyness to London, I wonder if the other three artworks, not yet installed at the time of writing (launching on 29 May), will prove as powerful: Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball's silhouette in Eastbourne; Chile's Pilar Quinteros' double-faced Janus on the clifftop in Folkestone; and Athens-based Andreas Angelidakis' Seawall outside Hastings Contemporary.

Of course, ultimately Waterfronts can be seen simply as a starting point for a memorable day trip to the coast – whether or not you choose to reflect on Britain's complex history, borders or landscapes. "It's about using the power of partnership to forge human connections," says project director Sarah Dance, "allowing people to explore a place, an artwork, and its community, together – something that is needed now more than ever."