

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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England's Creative Coast: the ambitious public artworks making waves in southern seaside towns this summer

Hettie Judah

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Thoughtful and playful pieces from Essex to West Sussex will be an extra draw for coastal visitors



Image: Michael Rakowitz's anti-war memorial 'April is the cruellest month' in Margate, part of England's Creative Coast (Photo: Thierry Bal)

The chalk grassland above Eastbourne is buzzing with newly invigorated insects, hovering and darting between clusters of blue and yellow flowers. The ground is springy, warm and fragrant. Birdsong rings clear in the coastal hush. Looking down from the hill over Whitbread Hollow a perplexing shape becomes visible, chalk-white against the lush early summer grass. Based on the shape of a decorative pin unearthed at an archaeological site at St Anne's Hill, Mariana Castillo Deball's new public artwork looks back to the tradition of geoglyphs cut into the grass of chalky hills in southern England.

The burial ground in which the pin was found dates back to the Roman invasion and was in use for centuries. Remains excavated in the 1990s reveal a diverse local population. Castillo Deball suggests the pin belonged to a "Frankish" (Merovingian) woman whose tomb was found at the site. It is one of seven public art commissions studded along the South East coast this summer, from Essex to West Sussex. While littoral stretches from Cornwall to Tyne & Wear might raise eyebrows at the region dubbing itself "England's Creative Coast", the artworks commissioned under that banner are ambitious, and in some instances challenging.

Most are produced in partnership with a gallery – tying in to exhibition and event programmes – extending their arty business outdoors, and offering cultural sightseers clusters of destinations that might form a sequence of coastal trips across a long weekend.

Castillo Deball's is a contemporary artwork assuming an ancient form, raising questions about what we consider to be authentic and indigenous. It echoes the historical peculiarity of the Long Man of Wilmington, a local geoglyph long assumed to have originated in the Iron Age, but now thought to be only a few hundred years old.

The bright lines of the present-day Long Man were the result of two bouts of over-eager restoration – first with whitewashed bricks in the 1870s, and then with painted breezeblocks in 1969. Castillo Deball's chalk markings are less invasive – her geoglyph is only painted on, and will progressively melt back into the landscape.

A similarly impermanent monument has popped up like a vast puffball on the cliffs rising out of Folkestone. Pilar Quinteros's Janus Fortress: Folkestone is a double-faced Roman deity carved in softish plaster. Like the cliffs below it, the sculpture is subject to erosion – flutter your hand over its velvety surface, and you'll come away with a veil of white.

Stormy rains will leave their mark. There is a second sculpture hidden within this giant head, to be revealed in November, and paraded through the town in a procession marking the end of the Folkestone Triennial, which commences on 22 July.

One face of Quinteros's "fortress" gazes inland and the other outwards across the sea to Europe, suggesting both Britain's imperial ambitions and its insular tendencies. It's a fragile fortress: neither face offers much in the

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way of protection. A symbol of the present moment, caught between past and future, the Janus head warns us, too, of the perils of both prophecy and nostalgia.



Image: Andreas Angelidakis's 'Seawall', a Waterfronts commission with Hastings Contemporary (Photo: Thierry Bal)

Along the coast, outside Hastings Contemporary, Andreas Angelidakis has installed eight massive grey structures that at first look like the concrete jacks dumped in loads along the coast to delay erosion. This Seawall turns out to be rather more inviting, made from blocks of foam covered in printed vinyl, and loosely tethered to the floor. They may

be politely positioned on their upper ends when you find them, but don't let that hold you back – Angelidakis's sculptures are made to be tipped over, rearranged and leant or climbed on.

This is a welcome theme of many of the commissions – they are public artworks that you can touch and play with, rather than forbidding objects that come swathed in rules and restrictions. This feels important. No doubt they will be a magnet for staycationers over the summer, and help bring tourism back to the coastal towns, but they also all occupy neighbourhood space: no one here asked to live in a museum.

Arriving at Bexhill-on-Sea, it was lovely to see small children playing hide-and-seek around the pink canvas-upholstered sand-filled tubes of Holly Hendry's vermicular Invertebrate. Like the giant sand-worms of Frank Herbert's sci-fi novel Dune, Hendry's creature sculpture seems to consume and be composed of all materials in its path, including sections of local pink brick, metal ducting, and cast concrete.

It enters through the roof of the pavilion, chomps its way through a few floors, and surfaces again in the public space outside.



Image: 'Invertebrate' by Holly Hendry at Bexhill-on-Sea, a Waterfronts commission with the De La Warr Pavilion (Photo: Rob Harris)

Hendry's exhibition within the gallery continues her explorations of insides and outsides. The building becomes a working metaphor for a human body and its fear of invasion (by virus or the surgeon's knife) in sculptures combining elements of the mechanical or technical with forms and textures that feel uncannily anatomical.

Four commissions was all I could manage on a day trip – taking in, too, the profoundly moving works of John Nash at Towner Eastbourne and an exhibition of modernist artists responding to Britons on their beach holidays at Hastings Contemporary.

Completists need to plan a second day on the Kent and Essex coast for works by Jasleen Kaur at Gravesend, Katrina Palmer at Southend-on-Sea and Michael Rakowitz at Margate. For next-generation art hunters, there are also geocaches (hidden cultural treasures tracked down using GPS) planted at outdoor locations near the commissions.

Kaur's The first thing I did was to kiss the ground honours Gravesend as a site of immigration: this was where the Empire Windrush arrived from the West Indies in 1948, and since the 1950s has also been home to a large Sikh community. Kaur's playful sculpture borrows the aesthetics of a festival float, decorated with faux marble (a nod to home décor for an older generation) with a head just emerging from the top, crested with a topknot.

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Image: A concrete sound mirror by Katrina Palmer at Southend-on-Sea, a Waterfronts co-commission with Metal in partnership with Estuary 2021 (Photo: Thierry Bal)

At Shoeburyness in Southend-on-Sea Katrina Palmer has erected a concrete sound mirror (structures used as a wireless early warning system between the wars) with the title 'Hello' in military stencil lettering – a mixed message of welcome and repulsion. Both Kaur and

Palmer have sound works installed nearby that add layers of associations and context.

At Margate, Rakowitz has worked with Veterans for Peace to create an anti-war memorial on the seafront. April is the Cruellest Month may lift its title from TS Eliot, but this powerful work takes its inspiration from the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, to whom the artist has distant ties. Sassoon made no secret of his disdain for “heroic” commemorative statuary, writing of the Menin Gate at Ypres: “Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime/ Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.”

The standing figure – based on veteran Daniel Taylor – was cast in an aggregate that includes chalk from Margate, sand from Basra, and memorial objects given by veterans and local residents. Taylor added his own service medals to the mix. In Rakowitz's statue, he stands facing inland, pointing accusingly back toward Parliament in London.