

ART | NEED TO KNOW

## Gavin Turk's neons at the Bowes Museum

The British artist's lights fantastic



Image: © Andy Keate, courtesy of Gavin Turk

JANUARY 24, 2014

EMMA O'NEILLY

Invited by The Bowes Museum to create an exhibition, but faced with the challenge of how to light it, British artist Gavin Turk had a moment of inspiration or, as he put it, "an inkling of an idea". Since 1995, he has created a substantial stockpile of works in neon, most of which have been hidden away unseen in his studio. Grouped together, they form quite a collection (15 pieces to be exact) and go on show from the evening of Friday January 24 at the museum in Barnard Castle, County Durham.

SHARE THIS ON...


 EMAIL THIS

The tongue-twisting title of the show, *Seven Billion Two Hundred and One Million Nine Hundred and Sixty-Four Thousand and Two Hundred and Thirty-Eight* (second picture), is emblazoned across the decorative façade of the country house and refers to the estimated population of the world at 6.30pm, the exhibition's exact opening time. Inside, another neon sculpture, entitled *24th January 2014* (£16,000), estimates the amount the global population would have grown in the time it took to walk from the front of the museum to the exhibition space (it's larger by 2,175). Though these are new pieces in which Turk – part-wit, part-philosopher – wants to pose the question of how we understand ourselves, many of the other works are older and reference favourite themes.

*Port*, a series of half-open doors in black, pink and purple, in editions of nine (£40,000 each, first picture), follows on from his bronze casts of semi-open doors (also popular motifs of Rene Magritte and Marcel Duchamp, whom Turk admires). *Neo Egg* (£35,000) continues the artist's fascination with the egg as a symbol. "When I was a child, I had a magic egg that would appear in my dreams and chase away anything bad," he says. He deploys this childhood talisman frequently, most famously in his 1997 work *One Thousand Two Hundred and Thirty Four Eggs*, where he carved out his signature on a canvas field of white eggshells.

The show is not so much a summary of his work ("the found objects and trompe l'oeil elements are absent") as a neon timeline marking various points in his career. There's a new, double-size version of *Star* (£30,000), which, first created in 2005, hangs above the entrance to his East London studio, and *Cross* (£30,000), a Maltese cross similar to that worn by Yves Klein (and later Turk himself) at both their weddings. Other works, such as *Lite* (a lit match, £25,000, third picture) and *Argon Cundie* (£10,000), are visual puns, the neon version of a light.

"The Bowes is such a perfect museum, you could almost put it into a museum. It's such a timepiece, untouchable," says Turk. "When you enter the exhibition, it feels like a crazy game or a strange children's toy." In some ways, The Bowes was exactly that to its founders. In the years after their marriage in 1852, collectors John and Joséphine Bowes devised the space to be both an architectural gem and home to their vast collection of artefacts (among them Sevres porcelain and Canalettos). Although the couple didn't live to see its completion, The Bowes opened in 1892 and is still one of Teeside's best-loved museums.

*Seven Billion Two Hundred and One Million Nine Hundred and Sixty-Four Thousand and Two Hundred and Thirty-Eight*, until 21 April 2014 at The Bowes Museum, Newgate, Barnard Castle, County Durham DL12 8NP (01833-690 606; [www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk](http://www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk)).

See also

[Gavin Turk, Exhibitions, Museums](#)