

Critics

## Art

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# Heaven can wait

Having asked people of all faiths how they imagine paradise to be, Saad Qureshi conjures a fantastical dreamscape where only one thing is missing...

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Cumming



**Saad Qureshi: Something About Paradise**  
Yorkshire Sculpture Park;  
until 15 March

The art year begins with a strange and beautiful show by the British artist Saad Qureshi – his first in a public gallery. It takes place in the 18th-century chapel at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Inside this austere Palladian church, with its high windows, white walls and stark black woodwork, Qureshi has built nothing less than a vision of paradise.

A Lilliputian dreamscape of temples and towers that spreads through the building, rising from floor to ceiling, this vision is both large and small. As well it might be, given that paradise is such an uncertain figment in the minds of us mortals.

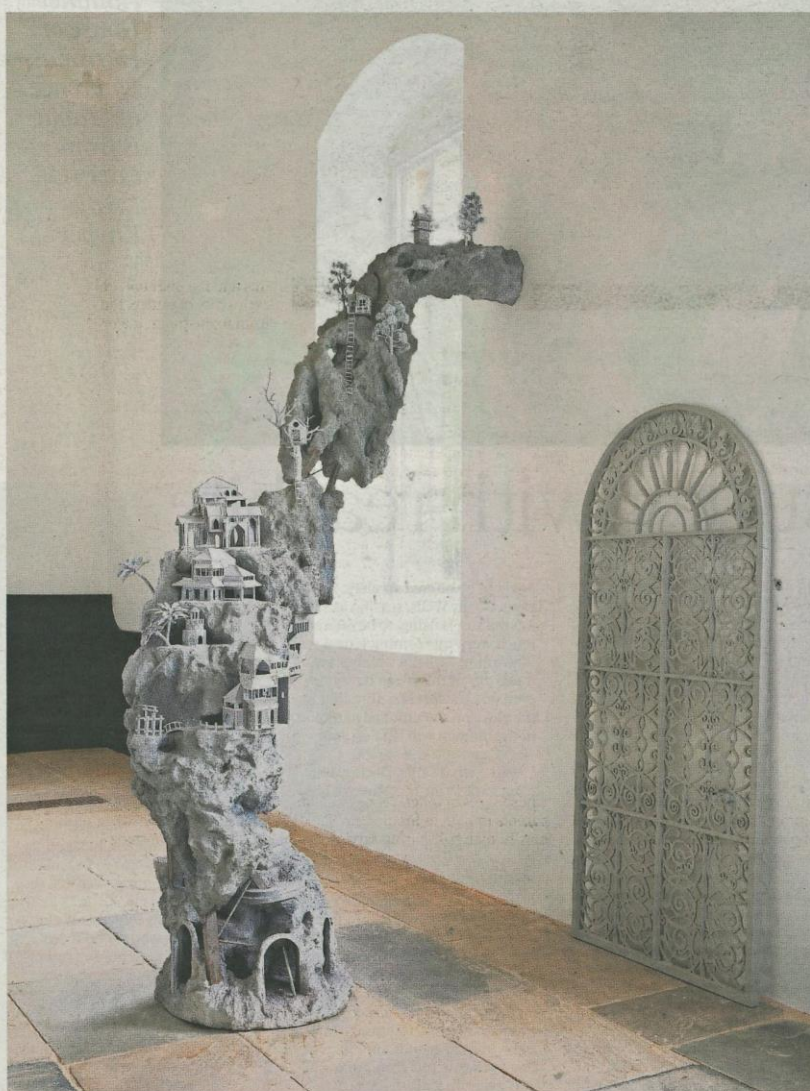
Still more apt is the fact that Qureshi's afterworld seems to emerge entirely out of the elements of this one, from waterfalls and gorges, to palm trees, verandahs, mosques and even Palladian churches.

At eye-height, as you enter, is a Himalayan mountain lightly scattered with snow. Hanging from its slopes, upside down, is what appears to be a Hindu temple. But it might equally be an unusually elegant deer hide, or a shelter for mountaineers. In the foothills way below is an exquisite valley of streams and trees, lined with oriental pagodas.

In another part of the installation, the landscape rolls towards an architectural structure that seems to partake of both the Taj Mahal and Versailles; a palace of remembrance, or pleasure? And a whole new terrain rises up into a colossal tower, something like Brueghel's Babel but with a joyous surrounding helter-skelter.

How you get to heaven is an issue in this case – there appears to be both a gate, and an entrance cave, though no obvious way of rising up inside unless through internal staircases. The architecture is magnificent – mosques, synagogues, perpendicular and gothic spires, modernist churches, the towers of Trebizond.

All of this is created out of wood, steel, sand, acrylic and insulation material, painted a lunar grey. The effect is of something both solid and melting into thin air, densely real in every detail and



'Melting into thin air': *Something About Paradise* by Saad Qureshi at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photograph by Jonty Wilde

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yet spectral. Qureshi shows his workings – a metal strut visible here and there, or an occasional palette mark in the moulding of this eerie grey substance. The facture is humble, but the ideas are sublime and intricate.

Qureshi, at 33, is one of our most pensive and poetic artists. He has a gift for this otherworldliness. In the past, he has created landscapes out of brick dust, Martian red and teeming with memories of fallen

civilisations. His scorched drawings, made with a soldering iron, show imaginary mountainscapes forming and disappearing all at once. And huge images on plywood in charcoal and ink resemble geological territories in which one might almost make out indistinct figures, unless they have returned to ash.

What will paradise be like? This was the question Qureshi asked people all over the country. He was surprised to find many connections

between the seven heavens of his own Muslim upbringing and the floating worlds of other faiths. Everywhere – and in everything he makes here – there was a sense of ascension: a rising up.

The vision here is clearly ecumenical. That is particularly evident in the seven grand gates Qureshi has made for this show, positioned around the chapel, which invoke the wrought iron designs of different cultures and religions. And it is continued in the full moon that hangs in the little vestry, from which grows like a tree a many-towered house of prayer, it seems to each and any god.

None of the works here can be seen in their entirety all at once. You have to walk round and around, looking into each scene, and navigating the landscapes between them. There is a true sense of journeying. And rising up against the wall behind the altar is the simplest yet most concise emblem of transcendence – a marvellous ladder that appears to stretch both high and away into the far distance, its uppermost rungs mysteriously lost in mist.

But the most moving aspect of the show is its generosity. Qureshi has listened carefully to, and pondered deeply, the beliefs of other people. *Something About Paradise* embraces us all in its fantastical mythologies. And in the end, of course, we must notice that this imaginary paradise is deserted. That is the great imponderable: who will be there? Will we make it? None of us can know. In this vision, there is not a soul there.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park is a tireless land of art. It is only ever closed for Christmas and Boxing Day, and new works arrive all the time. Right now you can see what amounts to a miniature Damien Hirst show – the pregnant anatomical woman, 10 metres tall, the mawkish charity box girl, almost as large, and the half-flayed unicorn a flash hybrid of Disney and Stubbs.

In the coming year, the park will show the outside post-pop sculptures of the Portuguese art star Joana Vasconcelos, from March. And there will be an all-out celebration of the French sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle from May, the landscape bursting with her monumentally exuberant female figures.

But for now, there is just one day left of arguably the greatest sculptor America ever produced – David Smith, genius with a blowtorch, welder of some of the most balletic and original creations ever made from what was literally old iron. Go now, if you can, for that day is today.