

Museum plans once-in-a-lifetime artistic tribute to Charles Darwin

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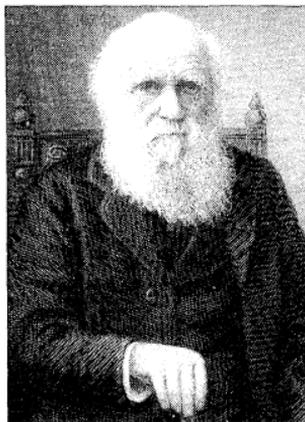
Some of Britain's leading artists, including the Turner prizewinners Rachel Whitehead and Mark Wallinger, are competing to create a commemorative ceiling at the Natural History Museum, London, as one of two art projects to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Both are sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

The artists are to create proposals for "Darwin's Canopy" on what had been a panelled ceiling on the museum's mezzanine when it was built in the 1880s. The original decorations were destroyed in the 1960s, and the room was converted into a cafeteria and the ceiling covered by polystyrene tiles, which have now been removed revealing the panels, now white.

In a scheme that was announced by the museum on Tuesday, the 199th anniversary of Darwin's birth, Whitehead, Wallinger, Dorothy Cross, Christine Borland, Mark Fairnington, Tina Kovats, Alison Turnbull, Richard Woods and Richard Wentworth, plus Matt Clark and Chris Bird who work together as United Visual Artists, are working on schemes that will be the subject of an exhibition in the space this summer. The eventual winner will be installed and unveiled on the bicentenary next year.

"Artists and scientists have often been assumed to be completely different in their perceptions, but in fact there are many similarities, which have been brought out by working with these artists to create this ceiling," says Bob Broomfield, the project director for the museum.

Speaking after a two-day familiarisation at the museum, Richard Wentworth says that the museum was inspirational for artists.



"Many British institutions are pretty well sealed as far as the inner core, and I always tell youngsters to 'try to get yourself behind the counter'. Well, we've been behind the counter and what we've seen of the museum and Darwin's work is very inspirational."

None of the artists would reveal where their thoughts were heading, but the range of their accomplishments — only two of them confine themselves to painting — suggests that the exhibition, which opens on June 4 and will run for three months, will show contrasting responses.

The scheme is part of the museum's contemporary arts programme, of which Bergit Arends is curator. She says that artists were unconventional in their approach to issues, as Darwin had been, and that the competition was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to contribute permanently to the historic Alfred Waterhouse-designed building.

The space will be part of the newly opened-out mezzanine level of the museum, and will be known as the Darwin Room.

In the other commemorative initiative, the Natural History Museum is sending 12 artists to the Galápagos islands to help

to focus the world's attention on the plight of the endangered World Heritage Site, whose dramatic flora and fauna helped the young Charles Darwin to shape many of his ideas when he visited during his famous voyage on board *HMS Beagle* in 1831 and made the observations and discoveries that became the bedrock for his theories of natural selection.

Next year is also the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* that brought his conclusions about evolution to public notice amid great controversy.

A preliminary visit was made recently by Dorothy Cross and the actor Fiona Shaw, who says that the archipelago is in serious peril largely because of its rampant tourism industry.

"The ecology of the place has been perfectly balanced and it has only been disrupted by humankind," Shaw says. "What is required is some restraint and that, of course, is something that humans can't do."

Other artists will be visiting over the next three years of the scheme, which is supported by the Galápagos Conservation Trust, whose chief executive, Toni Darton, says that the rapid growth of tourism and population over the past 15 years had led to Unesco declaring the Galápagos officially at risk.

"We are always looking for new ways to raise public awareness of conservation and the issues that make the Galápagos as relevant to the world today as in Darwin's time," she says.

"Artists are uniquely able to express the many different aspects of the Galápagos, conveying a distinct impression of the habitat and the threats they face, and engaging with both the human and scientific issues."