

A Perfect Place

The Royal Academy of Arts' CEO talks to Cally Squires

I commute through Paddington quite often when going down to the West Country; I've always thought it was a rather wonderful station. The work that has been done in restoring the [Isambard Kingdom] Brunel roof is fantastic," Charles Saumarez Smith tells me, as I chat with him after the unveiling, back in October, of the RA's 2015 Exhibition Programme.

It turns out that Saumarez Smith, who lives in East London and works in Mayfair, is a frequent visitor to our fair corner of W2. "My hairdresser Matthew Mulhall has a lovely salon upstairs in Chilworth Street. He used to work close to the academy, in the basement of Richard James's first shop in Savile Row, but subsequently found this space in Paddington – and I've kept going to him there ever since." Charles says that the charming streets are the perfect place for an early-morning haircut and capuccino. "My dentist Geoffrey Pullen is also in Paddington – now on Connaught Street, but he used to practise from his own house in Albion Street. It's fantastic because I can walk back to work across the park, after having had my teeth done!"

On the matter of the Crossrail juggernaut, which is soon to hit not just Paddington, but stations all across London, Saumarez Smith admits he has recently been called in to consult on the scheme's art programme. Not on Paddington's chosen artist Spencer Finch (who was selected some time ago), although he does tell me that "I did see the presentation about Spencer's A Cloud Index [which will be built into the 120 metre-long glazed canopy in the station]. But we [The RA] started discussions with Crossrail recently to find the artist for Bond Street, having suddenly become aware of what the implications of Crossrail are going to be, in terms of the number of people using it." Those estimations are that there will be around 220,000 people per day emerging at Bond Street, which includes an exit near to the academy at Hanover Square.

Controversially – I venture – Crossrail have said they are negotiating for corporate sponsors to have their names associated with the artworks appearing in the major stations like Paddington. Does he – as someone who has to consider the economic realities of running an institution like the RA – sympathise with the Crossrail bean counters? "We do have to pay close attention to the economics because we are so dependent on visitor numbers, but generally I find that is a good discipline. We've just announced that we're doing a big exhibition of Ai Weiwei next year and we're looking for sponsorship for that."

He does concede, though, that not being government-funded might afford organisations like the RA more day-to-day autonomy. Tate Modern did manage to do the Sunflower Seeds project with Weiwei in 2010. But the fact is that with a publicly

funded institution you do have to ask more questions about issues like international cultural relations, the fact we are private puts us [in] a more privileged position. Even if there are problems getting his work out of China [Chinese authorities confiscated Weiwei's passport in 2011], we'll still do the exhibition as there is plenty of his work available to us in Europe."

Of course the flipside for culture and art voyeurs is that a lack of public funding can lead to prohibitive entry charges, "I sense that this government has remained true to the previous government's commitment to free entry for the national museums, although inevitably they are being squeezed with the cuts on public funding," he admits. "It does make it difficult for private institutions, because they are competing against museums or galleries with a big subsidy."

Of course many of us are already familiar with his thoughts on art, politics and everything in between, thanks to his frequently-updated blog and Twitter feed. "I keep on thinking I'm going to run out of things to write about, but I really enjoy doing it. It gives an extra dimension to my life."

Clearly a tech enthusiast, what does he think about gadgets interfering with peaceful enjoyment of a portrait? "In galleries themselves I've actually come round to the view that allowing people to take photographs is a good thing. Unfortunately we still have to restrict photography because the terms of most loans prohibit it. But you can feel that the culture is changing – and since I like taking photos myself, I can hardly be puritanical about other people doing so!"

Paddington Now, November 2015