NEW LOOK
NEW EEL

ARTIST
MARTIN CREED
says hello

MARC JACOBS
chics it up

VENICE BIENNALE
vs.
DOCUMENTA

ALLISON SMITH
takes smart
art public

the heavenly
sadness of
BAT FOR LASHES
SUNSHINE & RAIN INTERVIEW WITH...
British artist Martin Creed wants to say “hello.”

This, he earnestly maintains in writings and interviews, is why he makes the works of art—visual, musical, written—for which he is now famous. Critically categorized as conceptual and minimalist, the Scottish-born son of Quakers is perhaps best known for his *Work #227*: a bare gallery whose lights flicker on and off in measured intervals, for which he took home the Tate’s Turner Prize—an award (presented to Creed by Madonna at the televised ceremony) as notorious for the purportedly-provocative contemporary art it celebrates as for the media blitz it inspires.

No “shock and awe” shark in formaldehyde, the materials Creed employs are often modest: balloons, neon signs, bouncy balls, a bit of blue tack, a crumpled sheet of paper, a room fluctuating between darkness and light. Isolated for observation, they appear openly denuded and achingly vulnerable, both keen on being in the spotlight and gently trembling with stage fright, or as Creed intones in his written piece, “If you’re lonely, I want to be on my own, but I don’t want to be alone.”

Not alone was the Brit when he brought his recent performance project, “The Martin Creed Variety Show,” to New York with help from the Public Art Fund, in March. The night included his long-time band Owada (Creed on guitar and vocals, Keiko Owada on bass and vocals, Karen Hutt on drums and vocals), a local string quartet, stagehands, a smoke machine, a strobe light, filmstrips (of people vomiting and of wandering dogs), dancers, a piano, a pot of tulips and plastic-wrapped bouquets of dahlias.

Months later Creed returned to prepare for “Feelings” his first-ever North American survey (running through Sunday September 16, 2007 at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies). *TOKION* made the trek up to Avondale-on-Hudson, days before the show’s opening, to witness the installation of his most recent work, a tree sculpture, planted on the lawn adjacent to the bunker-like museum and galleries that would house his retrospective. A Creed-proclaimed “departure,” the sculpture was designed to “give body to the Creed-o that ‘all trees are created equal’.” Selected by Kevin Smith of Rosedale Nursery, with simple directions from Creed to choose them based on “maximum variety,” and planted by laborers in evenly-spaced holes, the five trees stand in ascending height, arranged based on their projected maximum growths (the shortest a 6 ft. Japanese Maple; the tallest 90 ft. English Oak).

Inside the museum and galleries, more than eighty works spanning the now-39-year-old’s career, as well as works by other artists (from Bard’s permanent collection) chosen and arranged by Creed with the hope of dashing up the egoism and repetitiveness of such one-man bonanzas, will be on display through September. Outside on the lawn, baring unexpected death or injury, the trees will remain for centuries, “a family of little and big,” as Creed happily explained to a curious passerby on the morning of their arrival.

*TOKION* talked to Martin Creed in the month and days leading up to his retrospective on “Feelings,” what it means to be taken out of freedom, heaven on earth, equivalence, islands, cats and what it is he’s finally after.
When and where were you born?
I was born in 1968 in Wakefield, in the North of England in Yorkshire. The only thing I remember about living in this place until I was three is throwing a cat out of the window—a black and white cat, a stray we took in. We lived in a bungalow with a pitched roof and I wanted to see what would happen. It slid down the roof you know, and fell to the ground... it was fine! In fact, I still have a cat.
At my house in Italy there are wild cats that come to the door, to look for food. I feed them a bit and after a week there's about twelve or so all coming for food.

You've said there's a connection between the way you work and your Quaker upbringing.
Yeah, there is a connection. Before eating a meal at home with the family, instead of saying a little prayer, we always had a silence. There's this mixture between the spiritual side of things and the silence and meditation, combined with this very practical living in the real world and trying to change things politically. So, in fact, God never really got mentioned. People always talked about trying to be honest, trying to be true to yourself and trying to understand others. I used to go to Quaker summer school as a teenager every year. One time I remember playing the national anthem cause it would really piss them off because Quakers are all into the peace movement—this was in Thatcherite Britain—and I did that to try to be cheeky.

What was the reaction?
They clapped. The thing about Quakers is they always try to understand [laughs]. So if you play the national anthem, they'll try to understand why, to take you seriously and treat you with respect.

Kind of an ideal audience...
Aye, in fact, yes.

How did the “Variety Show” come about?
From doing talks about my work. I thought, “I may have been invited to give a talk, but for me, this is a situation in which I'm being asked to create something.” I started thinking of them as little works. When I was showing slides, it was as if there was a third person in the room. I got this feeling I should try to look at the audience because I was always so scared of looking at the audience, and that the best way I could talk about my work was not to talk, but to try to make a work in front of people. To try to improvise, to try not to plan so that it wouldn't be fake, even if that meant it was desperately difficult—the moments of being in silence—and try to make something using words in front of people as the best way to show the process of trying to make something, rather than holding forth about a work I made once that was perhaps successful and therefore, I feel confident about. When you're really making a work the first time, there's this huge fear of failure and embarrassment, a feeling that you have to protect yourself from feeling vulnerable.

With a new piece you're wondering: are people going to like this or not?
The first time I did that was the National Gallery in London. I brought one slide and an acoustic guitar. I did a couple of songs. I must have talked for two hours straight—there were a couple of long, long pauses. It was scary but such a relief to be without notes or slides like the freedom people feel without their luggage or a cell phone.
That's what this “Variety Show” thing is about, trying to make it up on the spot. Because the thing about trying to make things is that the best way to proceed is to always be open to the possibility of failure and try not to be scared, but usually that happens in private, that process of working on something and perhaps rejecting it as sad or pathetic... or something [laughs].

Tell me about an early memory or a first memory of feeling loved.
A memory of feeling really loved? I don't really have one.

You do!
Well... I have a memory of feeling really loved when I was in Italy. I was living with [former partner Paola Pivi], in this house we bought with the cats. Me and Paola. It was sort of love at first sight. We were like kids. After a year or so of living a bit together and traveling a lot, we ended up buying a house there in Sicily. We lived on this desert island—the nearest I've come to a sort of heaven on
Earth. But it was an end point. If you end up on an island, it's a stop.

What do you want?
I want to jump in. I want to be happy. I want to do my work. I want to try to be true to myself.

What pulls you away from being true to yourself?
The reality of situations, the reality of other people. I'm trying to think of everything as a form of nature. I want to see what it's like to let it come—other people, me, things, inanimate objects. I used to go into my room, to shut out the noise of other people—they're insistent, they know what they want. I end up feeling knocked around in this sea—I would go away to an island, to be alone, to think, to make decisions. But now I don't find any excitement in that. Excitement—that's what I want. Excitement of all kinds. I find it in meeting people, being on stage, sex, seeing things. At the moment I really like being with people. I don't seem to need to go away into a room and shut the door to make a decision.

I think we're like plants. We don't really know that much but we think we do. With the trees, it's like making a piece of music; my work is done, I can let go, it's like trying to make a landscape where things can be what they are, so that I don't feel a pressure to control it. I want other people, I want need other people. Maybe that's what used to scare me about other people; you can't control them. A lot of artists try to control people. I hate that.

That's when I feel terrible, when I feel I have to be in control of the situation. So, this (the trees) feels like a new direction. I find that the works that are better are made in this open way. When I'm not trying to control things too much.

Are you nervous about your retrospective at Bard?
Aye. When I see survey shows, even of artists I like, I can't think of one I like. Maybe it's overdoing it—like playing a gig—you don't want to do too many songs or you start repeating yourself. I want to install all the work like it's mine and to install my work as though it isn't mine. Maybe separating from my work can solve this solo show problem.

Which works are you most excited about?
At the moment I'm happiest about the trees. This piece was a long time coming. And, it's—a departure. I've never made a landscape piece. When I was really getting into art I always read about Christo, Richard Serra, Richard Smithson. It's quite worrying to me also—if I don't like it—I want to make work I can live with and am excited about. Most things, if you don't like them, you can hide them away.

And "The Variety Show." I feel weird about it. Happy, Excited, Proud, Exhilarated, Humiliated, Vulnerable, Embarrassed.

And these portraits I've been doing, by hand, drawings, some from life, with dolls. It's embarrassing, having someone in front of you. Like looking into a box and finding something, rather than the drawing being a demonstration of what I like or think, getting them to look at me—it's uncomfortable, but I'm looking at the model, so... It's about balancing things, a bit like doing these performances. It's about making these performances, the best of a situation as you find it—not just the walls of a museum—but also the technicians, and the personalities of the people involved, you can't ignore these things, the details. One of the problems with the "Variety Show" is its narcissistic nature. Open—I want that show to be totally open and not closed in on itself. It's a matter of trying not to be fake—in all forms.

What does that mean—to be fake?
Well... If you try to imprint yourself on something too much, that's when it feels fake. Because, it's not really you that's creating the situation. I feel fake if I'm trying too hard or saying something because I think someone would like to hear it. Even if you're the one on stage, you might be the one everyone's looking at, but everyone's creating the situation.