

culture

Join the Culture Club today and get a FREE Discover pass worth £10, opening the door to more than 80 offers and money-saving deals at attractions, restaurants and venues across the North East



Art ingrained with child's truths

Art is like child's play for Colin Booth, whose latest cityscapes have been inspired by building blocks, as TAMZIN LEWIS finds out

COLIN Booth comments that his life has come "full circle". As the son of a Tyneside joiner, he remembers playing for hours with small blocks of oak parquet flooring which his dad brought home.

Fifty years later and Colin would also collect bits of wood from a factory to burn on the fire. He didn't think much about the off-cuts until his partner's son unwittingly alerted him to an alternative use.

The moment triggered a new direction for the painter: working with small reclaimed wooden blocks which would otherwise have been incinerated.

The blocks now form three sophisticated and elaborate installations called Institute of Play at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, where the Gateshead-born artist is exhibiting for the first time.

Colin says: "This process started when I brought some wooden off-cuts home to burn on the fire. My partner's 16-year-old played with the bag of wood for about three hours, which is something that teenagers don't really do! I began to think, maybe I should look at this wood a bit more carefully.

"So I started collecting wood instead of burning it. These off-cuts of wood would just usually go



INSPIRED One of the works by Colin Booth. above, at the Laing Gallery

straight in the skip from the furniture factory, but I began to keep them."

As Colin began to reclaim bits of wood he stacked them into piles according to size, which naturally became towers, a bit like how children construct with wooden blocks.

The influence of kids on his work became more pronounced after the birth of his sons Reuben, four, and Teddy, two.

Colin, who lives in East Sussex, says: "We do a lot of block play. They come to the studio and build things and knock them down as

children do. Some of the simple structures they make are quite beautiful in themselves."

Colin began to research children's cognitive development, in particular looking at the history of the child's building block. He also researched the pioneering German educationalist Friedrich Froebel, who created the concept of the kindergarten and designed blocks for children in the 1830s.

This coincided with an invitation to create a work for the Victoria & Albert Museum's Museum of Childhood in London where Institute of Play was first shown.

The Laing brings it together with two other installations in wood: Colony and Streamline.

Colin, 59, says: "These three works have never been shown together and they are a response to the space at the Laing. I am really thrilled to be showing in my home town.

"Institute of Play is similar to that in London but different as I work intuitively to place the blocks. It can't be the same as I would have to embark on a laborious process of numbering or photographing each element.

"The installations use a fraction of the wood I have collected, so the work doesn't stop, these sculptures can get bigger and bigger."

Colin studied fine art at Newcastle Polytechnic in the early 1970s and subsequently worked as a freelance journalist and arts critic until 1993 when he moved to Hastings and resumed painting.

He says: "The work that I started producing in 1993 was exactly the same as the work I had stopped doing in 1979. This wasn't intentional. It was like I had stopped eating something and come back to the same meal."

Colin took on a large studio overlooking the seafront at St Leonards and he cites the south coast light as having a big influence on his work.

Institute of Play is also directly inspired by modernist architecture

and, in particular, buildings by Erich Mendelsohn.

In an essay about Colin's work, V&A curator Gill Hedley notes that international modernism "never really took root in the North East: Victor Pasmore's 1969 Apollo Pavilion in Peterlee has not been much loved; Owen Luder's notorious Brutalist Get Carter car park of 1962 was demolished in 2010."

However, Mendelsohn's pioneering De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, close to Colin's studio, remains a much-loved building. The pavilion, commissioned in 1935, was first a "people's palace" and now houses an art gallery.

Colin says: "It's a modernist masterpiece, a radical building and a place open to everyone. All my work is influenced by modernist architecture."

Institute of Play is at the Laing Art Gallery until October 2.

In addition to Colin Booth's exhibition, there is a large interpretation space for play and construction.

You can build your own Modernist masterpiece on Google SketchUp with the results being shown in the gallery.

Also on show is a collection of toys loaned by collector Jackie Britton who works for the V&A.

● For more information visit www.twmuseums.org.uk