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See more of Willard Wigan's minuscule sculptures online



Flat out: locals survey the Tour of Flanders. The race, across windswept plains and high-busting cobblestones, is the subject of a photographic exhibition

## The fast show

Cycling's great Tours are inspiring a fresh wave of 'bike-art', says **Alastair Sooke**

This weekend, the Tour de France comes to Britain for only the third time since the cycle race began in 1903. At 3pm today, the Tour's showpiece Prologue, a five-mile time trial looping around central London, begins in Whitehall, with 27-year-old British

specialist Bradley Wiggins gunning for glory. Tomorrow, around 200 cyclists will gather at The Mall for the first proper stage of the three-week race – a 203km "sprint" to Canterbury. Each one will be desperate to finish first and earn the right to wear the prestigious yellow jersey.

Should any competitor stop in Ashford, Kent, for *un besoin naturel*, as the French refer to a loo break, he might come across one or two unexpected sights. Sprinkled round the town will be artists staging performances to coincide with the race, as part of a wider series of artwork called *Lost O*, celebrating the removal of an unpopular local ring road.

French artist Olivier Leroi will lead a band of riders mounted on customised bicycles sprouting antlers instead of handlebars. The 54-year-old British artist Gary Stevens, meanwhile, has come up with a performance piece called *Flock*, consisting of 12 people walking in sync through Ashford's backstreets. "Cyclists are driven by a desire to be at the front," says Stevens. "But *Flock* will be like an alternative race going nowhere. There will be no winners, no losers, just a meandering cluster of directionless people."

The superhuman exertion required to complete the Tour de France has long inspired artistic types. The German electro pioneers Kraftwerk released a single called *Tour de France* in 1983 that sampled exhausted panting laid over a beat which sounded like bike chains switching gear. More recently, the quirky, Oscar-nominated animated French film *Belleville Rendez-Vous* was structured around the race.

Currently on show in London's Host gallery is an exhibition devoted not to the Tour de France, but to an annual cycle race across the sleet-blasted topography of Flanders that, for those in the know, is just as compelling. Like the notoriously difficult

260km race between Paris and Roubaix in northern France that takes place every April, and which was the subject of the 1976 documentary *A Sunday in Hell*, the Ronde van Vlaanderen (or Tour of Flanders) includes soul-destroying stretches along treacherous roads built from cobblestones. *Flandrien* showcases dozens of black-and-white photographs of the race taken by Stephan Vanleteren, a Belgian photojournalist who has worked in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Together they give a visceral sense of how gruelling competitive cycle-racing at the top level can be. In one image, Vanleteren focuses on a cyclist's legs, the veins wrapped like ropes around his muscles.

The exhibition, which runs until July 31, also includes portraits of "Flandriens" or Tour of Flanders champions, muscle-bound men with nicknames like "The Boss" and "The Beast". Most stirring is Vanleteren's portrait of the Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx, who won the Tour de France five times.

His ruthless tactics may have earned him the nickname "The Cannibal", but Merckx still holds two Tour de France records: one for stage wins (34), and the other for the staggering number of days that he wore the yellow jersey (96).

Vanleteren's powerful portraits brilliantly capture the insouciant self-belief required to perform such heroic feats.

To find out more, visit [www.letour.fr](http://www.letour.fr); [loto.org](http://loto.org); [hostgallery.co.uk](http://hostgallery.co.uk)

# Inside the tiny world of the nano sculptor

Willard Wigan makes art that's all but invisible to the naked eye. He tells **Benjamin Secher** about the painful, obsessive work that goes into his pieces

It was one of the worst things that has ever happened to me," says Willard Wigan, a 50-year-old sculptor from Birmingham who will next week be awarded an MBE for services to art. "I was sculpting the whole cast of *Alice in Wonderland* and I was really looking forward to finishing it because it was that good, it would probably have been my best piece so far.

"But just as I was about to put Alice in place alongside the other characters," he pauses to compose himself – this big Brummie with conspicuous tattoos and diamond-encrusted watch, sucking in his bottom lip to stop it trembling – "I inhaled her. I breathed in at the wrong moment, and she was gone. In my panic, I accidentally wiped out some of the other characters too." Inadvertent inhalation of

artworks is not an occupational hazard that one normally associates with sculpture: Rodin famously indulged in fits of heavy breathing while shaping his erotic masterpieces, without inflicting any damage upon the final work. But Willard Wigan is no ordinary sculptor. He describes himself as a "micro-miniaturist", and all of his most significant pieces – over 40 years' worth of painstaking carving and chipping and painting – could fit comfortably together inside a single matchbox.

To the naked eye, each of Wigan's works is all but invisible; an unidentifiable speck that reveals its true form, in mind-boggling detail, only when placed under the microscope and magnified 500 times. In one piece, Henry VIII and his six wives stand side by side within the eye of a needle. In another, a startled cat, eyes wide, back arched, clings to an eyelash taken from Wigan's ex-girlfriend ("I hope she never asks for it back," he says). And his latest work, shown here for the first time, is a startlingly accurate reproduction of the Lloyd's building in London, perched on the tip of a needle.

Lloyd's of London, the organisation housed in Richard Rogers's iconic building, has a vested interest in Wigan's work: last month, they insured a 70-piece collection of his micro-sculptures – recently purchased by former tennis pro, David Lloyd, for an undisclosed sum – for £11.2 million. On July 24, an auction of the new sculpture will be held in their headquarters, accompanied by a public exhibition of 30 of Wigan's microscopic works. "I surprise myself sometimes," says Wigan, fingering a thick gold chain that hangs around his neck. "I've done stuff that I've looked at



Big idea: left, Willard Wigan. Top: his sculpture of King Henry VIII and his six wives, inside the eye of a needle. Above, left to right, Lloyd's building; Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston; Statue of Liberty

afterwards and thought, 'What enabled me to do that?' But I've had years of practice; every day of my life since I was about five, practising keeping my hands still and looking at small things. The microscopic world became my obsession."

Wigan traces that obsession back to his unhappy school days when, suffering from undiagnosed dyslexia, he was treated as the class idiot. "When I started school, what little confidence I had was taken away," he says. "The teacher would use me as an example. She used to show the other kids my work and make me feel, well, small. So I absconded a lot to get away from the misery of it. I would run across the park and hide in a shed and just sit there looking down at the ants on the floor."

"I started to construct tiny houses for them from splinters of wood. But then I thought the ants needed furniture as well so I made little chairs and tables that could fit inside the houses. Then I got thinking that they were going to need something to wear, so I started making shoes and little hats for them too. "I became obsessed with making more and more tiny things. I think I was trying to find a way of compensating

for my embarrassment at having learning difficulties: people had made me feel small so I wanted to show them how significant small could be."

Wigan creates his sculptures in an isolated studio in Jersey, far removed from the public eye or potentially disastrous traffic vibrations, using tiny home-made tools. "I have to put

*"I need to work between heartbeats, or else the pulse in my finger will cause a mistake"*

myself in a sort of meditative state to do it," he says. "I need to work between heartbeats, or else the pulse in my finger will cause a mistake. I'll grind down a piece of tungsten to make a little hook which can grip the material, or shove a fragment of broken diamond into the tip of a needle to make a micro scalpel blade." Although he will occasionally use a chip of white gold or a fleck of diamond in his works, his regular material of choice is zip tie, a nylon fastener more

conventionally used for binding electronic cables. "While looking through the microscope I'll cut off a fragment of this stuff and then, holding my breath, hold it down with one hand and start moving the other hand very gently, scraping and slicing and then sort of bending it into a recognisable shape."

The work only really comes to life once it is painted, a process for which Wigan uses "a hair plucked from the head of a housefly and thinned-down oils. It is murderously difficult, painful even to talk about. It doesn't matter how much money they offer me, it's impossible to enjoy it. The only pleasure is in finishing the work, and in watching other people look at it."

Looking at Wigan's sculptures is a bizarre experience. The first time you see the microscope transform what appears to be a dot of nothingness in the eye of a needle, into a minuscule Statue of Liberty or a familiar celebrity, the effect is breathtaking, almost miraculous: a secular, down-to-earth version of angels dancing on pinheads. But after seeing four or five, the critical faculties – temporarily suspended – kick back in. At one point I find

myself looking through Wigan's microscope at a doll's house on the head of a pin, complete with lights and staircases, and feeling a sense of disappointment that the doll inside looks a touch clumsy. Then Wigan reminds me that the figure under scrutiny is three times smaller than the full stop at the end of this sentence, and my sense of awe is restored.

Nevertheless, some viewers of the work will find the nagging voice of scepticism hard to dispel. The idea that this apparently regular guy, a man who knocks over his cup of water midway through our interview, can create a Yorkshire terrier on the point of an acupuncture needle without the use of machines is indeed tricky to explain.

Wigan is, by now, accustomed to doubters. "People find it very, very difficult to believe what I've done," he says. "Scientists have seen my work and they can't explain it. Even nano-scientists have seen it and been totally shocked. But if any man on earth wants to challenge me, I'm ready. Bring it on. Those that don't believe how small my work is should just come along and see it for themselves." This year there will be two opportunities to do just that. The Lloyd's of London show

this month will be followed later in the summer by the installation of a permanent display of David Lloyd's collection in the Mailbox retail complex in Birmingham.

In the meantime, Wigan's thoughts have already moved on to future sculptures. "I want to make the Coronation coach with all the horses, and put it on the head of a pin," he says. "That's going to be my ultimate challenge. But I'm going to have to psyche myself up for it. I also want to do more celebrities – to bring them down to size a bit. And somewhere along the line," he adds, with a big bold grin, "I'm going to do Alice again."

For more information on Willard Wigan's forthcoming exhibitions, see: [www.thedavidlloydgallery.com](http://www.thedavidlloydgallery.com)

### MUST SEE

**EXHIBITIONS**  
Chosen by Richard Dormant

**Dutch Portraits: The Age of Rembrandt and Frans Hals** Unmissable – if only to see two of Rembrandt's most famous group portraits, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* and *The Syndics*. National Gallery, London WC2 (020 7747 2885), until Sept 16.

**Seed** Peter Randall-Page's huge granite sculpture carved with a complex pattern based on the principles of plant growth. Spectacular. Eden Project, near St Austell, Cornwall (01726 811911).

**Antony Gormley: Blind Light** The enormously popular British sculptor in a show that includes the famous casts of his own body, plus one work that looks like a gigantic space station, and another made out of steam. Hayward Gallery, London SE1 0870 380 4300, until Aug 19.

**Peter Blake: A Retrospective** The grand old man of British Pop Art. Tate Liverpool (0151 702 7400), until Sept 23.

**OPERA**  
Chosen by Rupert Christiansen

**Tosca** Jonathan Kent's spectacular new production is revived with Violeta Urmana in the title-role. Mikko Franck conducts. Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000), tonight, Tues, Thurs.

**Lakmé** Delibes's delightful Oriental romance receives a welcome new production, with Allison Bell as the Indian maiden who falls in love with a French officer. Opera Holland Park, London W8 (0845 230 9769), Tues, Thurs.

**Roberto Devereux** Mary Plazas sings Elizabeth I in a new production of Donizetti's terrific historical melodrama, conducted by Andrew Greenwood. Opera House, Buxton (0845 127 2190), Mon, Fri.

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