

Marcus Coates: 'Eventually something serious comes through'

The artist talks about dreaming up alternative visions for the now derelict Heygate estate, near the Elephant & Castle shopping centre in south London

Tom Lamont

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Marcus Coates on the Heygate estate: 'the incongruity of these situations can seem ridiculous.' Photograph: Katherine Rose for the Observer

Wearing a silver suit, sunglasses and a stuffed horse's head, Marcus Coates stares at the empty Heygate estate in south London. The eccentric artist, 44, has been visiting this site near the Elephant & Castle shopping centre for years – getting to know residents before they were evicted in 2008 and 2009, listening to

stories, even moving in with some before eviction day. His dad helped build the estate in the 60s (when it was thought of as a fine example of urban planning, not a local council sore spot perpetually marked for redevelopment) and Coates has used this as background to help him as he mulls over the site's unknown future. His methods are curious.

He explains: "There are millenniums-old traditions of 'visions'; of shamen whose imaginings were used to try to solve intractable problems. These days that has become a corporate thing: rich developers have visions, councils have visions. Archaic culture has become part of corporate culture." So Coates decided to counter this with some visions of his own, using a combination of meditation, self-induced trances and novelty headgear to see what ideas for the redevelopment of the site he could muster. A film, *Vision Quest – a Ritual for Elephant & Castle*, follows these efforts, including Coates's well-attended on-stage trance at a nearby music venue in 2009.

"Getting to know people from the estate, I began to understand what an intricate community existed here. Residents depended on each other, doing each other's shopping, checking in – ways that you would never know if you were the council visiting to do an assessment." And how did the council react to his findings, which included visions of seals, of hillocks made of animal excrement? "They were aghast that a guy in a silver suit was coming in to talk about his daydreams," admits Coates. He still hopes he had an influence.

Is Coates for real? He has covered similar ground before, in a project based around a condemned Liverpool tower block. He gathered residents in a room, donned the skin of a deer, and fell to noisy meditation before them; footage of it formed a central part of his 2004 artwork *Journey to the Lower World*. From clips, it looks a bit like a hidden camera skit. Is this all a big joke? "It's an earnest thing for me," he insists.

"I agree, the incongruity of these situations can seem ridiculous."

He refers to the horse's head, from a knacker's yard in Staffordshire, and the silver suit, from an east London clothes shop. "It seems facile, but eventually something serious seems to come through." In 2009, he went to a shopping centre in Israel, donned shades and a badger hat, and offered people vision-based advice on request. A long queue formed and he was there for hours.

"Ultimately," says Coates, "people on the Heygate estate felt like they were being discarded. There was a huge sense of loss. I wanted to try and tap into a collective imagination, represent it and offer an alternative to the scripted, corporate vision." Does he think he's helped? Coates isn't sure. "But I like the idea of an artist trying to come up with answers rather than posing questions."

Redevelopment of the estate continues uncertainly.