

We may have caught up with Alex Hartley, in the particular shape and texture of our fears anyway. For much of his career Hartley has been imagining the terrible beauty of ruin, promise gone awry, existential threat realised and 'nature' swallowing up human material, even the best of it, with indifference.

Now those concerns seem general, in the air, viral. They are there in the collapsed but fecund cities, fungal zombies, stragglers and survivors of *The Last of Us* and the post-pandemic, horse-drawn Shakespeareans of *Station Eleven*. Ruin and post-ruin, how we crawl out of the rubble, are clearly on our minds and obsessively so for preppers, survivalists, natalists and post-humanists. The reasons are obvious. 'I wonder whether that means I have to move on,' Hartley says, but with little conviction. His work has never seemed more prescient and precise.

Hartley is a maker, builder, sculptor, photographer and installationist. Recently he has been creating a kind of layered, sculptural photo-montage that questions how space works or how our thinking about space works.

A lot of his work prods at the promise of modernist and modern architecture and its uneasy – when not outright destructive – relationship with nature. He recreated a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome, adopted as a base camp by Drop City, an experimental artists community in the mid-60s. He put large-scale photographs of white-cube art spaces and pristine

office buildings in glass vitrines and reconstructed a nine-metre slice of an Eames' Case Study House. He photographed many of the classic LA Case Study Houses through foliage and in washy black-and-white, fading into mist.

Most famously, in 2012 he dragged an island – *Nowhereisland* – from the High Arctic and took it on a 500-mile trip along the southwest coast of England and then sent some of it into low orbit. His most familiar work though might be *A Gentle Collapsing II*, the imagined fractured remnants of an International Style house set in a tropical swamp in the back garden of the Victoria Miro gallery in East London. Originally installed as part of his 2016 exhibition *After You Left*, it stuck around for two years, the eerily intriguing backdrop to summer drinks parties. 'I think in a lot of the work, I'm just trying to drop in the question about what happened here and run back the narrative to see what that is,' Hartley says. 'You don't really get an answer but it's clear that things haven't gone well.'

His latest show, *Closer Than Before*, at Victoria Miro Venice takes on those themes again. How could it not. Venice is the poster city for existential threat and elegant ruin and Hartley acknowledges a long-term fascination, it speaks directly to his work.

The show was born of a residency at the gallery – Hartley is the first non-painter to be offered one – with the instruction to create work rooted in Venice. It was a gift but the trick would be to avoid the clichéd and tread-worn. It's a new-ish problem for Hartley. It's hard to avoid climate change art these days but that's been his beat for two decades, a space he pretty much had to himself.

An obvious point of departure – the show was designed to coincide with the Architecture Biennale – and an intuitive fit for Hartley was the city's most famous modern architect, Carlo Scarpa.

Born in Venice in 1906, Scarpa spent most of his working life in the city. His best-known works are elements of the Biennale site, the Venezuela Pavilion and the now redundant ticket office, his restoration of the Querini Stampalia museum, the city's Olivetti showroom, and, his magnum opus, the Tomba Brion, a meditative, mortality themed micro-village created around the tomb of Giuseppe Brion, founder of the Brionvega electronics company, in San Vito d'Altivole, about an hour's drive from Venice. It is also where Scarpa is buried.

While alive, Scarpa was an architectural outlier. He was no *tabula rasa* modernist and his buildings are not paeans to the machine age or the space age. They are not celebrations of new materials, industrialisation or novel engineering, not even his Olivetti showroom, built when Olivetti was Apple-ish in its dedication to advanced product design. He built little that was entirely new and modernity was not his concern.

Scarpa wanted to bed his architecture in history, into the flow of time. Scarpa's work though doesn't just reference the past, it reconfigures it until it is unrecognisably past. Indeed, so outright strange and singular is his work that, as Hartley says, it often comes off as sci-fi, outside and alien to our history. (The director Denis Villeneuve used Tomba Brion as a location for the upcoming second serving of his intergalactic epic, *Dune*.)

Scarpa's star has risen posthumously and for the last decade he has been the architectural name to drop.

His celebration of materials and materiality, of the play of light and texture, of detail, craft and craftsmanship, and of renovation, renewal and playful intervention rather than demolition and re-start, chime perfectly with current trends and concerns. And the chimes keep coming.

Scarpa's work investigates and embraces ruination and is often, in parts, pre-ruined. Scarpa doesn't just acknowledge the prospect of ruin – which modernism, by definition, never does – he seems to welcome it.

Hartley admits though that while he'd been aware and intrigued by Scarpa's work, it hadn't fully connected. The residency gave him time to connect. 'I'd looked at books and the Biennale spaces but it just left me a bit cold,' he admits. 'I think in the past I'd been looking at the art and not quite engaging. But the gallery got me into a few other spaces and I went out to Tomba Brion a couple of times. One of the people I've been working with lives in a Scarpa house. And the more time you spend in those spaces, the more magical they are.'

Taking pictures of Scarpa's work forged new connections. 'Taking out a tripod and a big camera slowed me down and made me really look at all those details. Even if I didn't end up using the pictures, it made me really consider the space.'

'I've done quite a lot of architectural tourism and normally I can look at a building and understand why the architect came to the decisions they did,' he continues. 'But in a Scarpa building, there's no real logic to it, or not a building logic. It's more like a mathematician's logic. Particularly at the Tomba Brion, you can't believe someone would make it. It's like you've signed up for some weird cult that you don't understand.'

You have to spend time with his architecture for the details to add up to a whole and I find that fantastically exciting.'

Hartley says he took that experience away and worked with it, as a maker and sculptor. *Closer Than Before* is 'very Scarpa' he admits. 'I tried to resist it but it just kept coming back in everything I made.'

Part of that effort is getting at the way Scarpa's work reveals itself slowly, in layers and details. There are instant wow moments in his architecture, particularly at Tomba Brion, but Scarpa's buildings reward time and close attention. 'The show is largely built of those details, that layering and accumulation of detail,' says Hartley.

The show includes layered Photoshopped montages and paintings of Scarpa details, set under an obfuscated surface, generating what Hartley calls a 'kind of hum', and mounted on huge slabs of raggedly edged marble.

The marble slabs are deliberately set off the wall, creating, as Hartley says, a sense of 'impossible depth'. They are sculptures that ask to be walked around. But they are more than three-dimensional, they create what Hartley calls a 'time-slip' or the sense that time and space aren't behaving as we might expect (let's not, though, get multiversal).

'It's this idea that there is this separate architectural register where if things don't line up properly, you can get these other spaces,' Hartley says. 'Sometimes I worry that it's too childish sci-fi but I just thought that if I can make it work on a physical level, it can be powerful.'

For Hartley, the marble pieces also reference the continental Catholic habit of mounting pictures of deceased loved ones on tombstones, an effort, even in

the acknowledgment of their passing, to pull them back, or perhaps, establish a portal between this world and the next.

It also appears as if the *acqua alta*, the Venice-specific high tide, has hit the gallery and washed away the lower section of a wall to reveal a hidden Scarpa-esque under-layer. Again, this is not a strict replica of a Scarpa space but a re-imagination and re-configuring in board-formed concrete.

The first image the visitor sees as they enter the gallery is a photograph of a marble quarry overlaid, in part, with a Hartley drawing of that photograph. 'Taking the photograph took five minutes,' he says, 'the drawing took a month.' Marble, Hartley might be suggesting, is super-condensed time, layers laid down over millennia. And those layers can perhaps be prised apart, releasing time, or causing strange temporal shifts. And so a Scarpa building can exist within an older building.

Hartley calls the spaces revealed by the flood or opened in the marble slabs 'ghost spaces', spaces that never were but might have been or might yet be. They do what Scarpa did, deny that anything can be completely new, a clean slate, a fresh start, and that history is accrued and undeniable. You can though, they suggest, play that history backwards and forwards and perhaps establish a different order and logic, reconfigure the details, make different shapes of it, make it strange and otherworldly. You can remake the world anew.