

EDDIE PEAKE

In the following reportage the British fine artist EDDIE PEAKE takes a voyage from the back streets of Peckham to an active volcano in the Tyrrhenian Sea, via the origins of pizza, a naked football match and a fitting room inside a seafaring fake fox. If that sounds confusing, fair enough. 36-year-old EDDIE's work touches on the blurry boundaries of gender, truth, identity and everything else, really. His ephemeral works exploring the crazy paradoxes of life have gained him fans and collectors all over the world.

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# EDDIE PEAKE BAFFLES IN ITALY

FANTASTIC MAN







“Do you want to stand over there?” says the artist EDDIE PEAKE. “The paint might spray in the wind.” We are stood in the alley in front of his studio in Peckham, south London. EDDIE is tall and softly handsome, with friendly eyes. He is dressed in a T-shirt and sweatpants. His words come at a measured pace, each properly considered. With a Graco GX FF 240V Airless Sprayer he is applying the colour green to the edges of a taped-off area on a vast canvas which already holds layers of orange and blue. It’s a Wednesday afternoon. We head inside for a cup of tea.

EDDIE, 36, made his name with spray-painted works. Another strand of his practice is performance. He is preparing to stage four days of performances in Italy, between Naples and the volcanic island of Stromboli, in a ‘Volcano Extravaganza’ organised by the FIORUCCI ART TRUST. (The trust is nothing to do with the legendary FIORUCCI fashion label; it was set up by the family behind the FIORUCCI brand of deli meats.) Each year the trust arranges a different ‘Volcano Extravaganza’. Past instalments have involved artists including HAROON MIRZA, ED ATKINS and CAMILLE HENROT.

EDDIE was born in Finsbury Park, north London. His mother is the artist PHYLLIDA BARLOW and his father is the artist and poet FABIAN PEAKE. He is a great-great-great grandson of CHARLES DARWIN. He studied art first at the Slade School of Fine Art, then at the Royal Academy, and is now represented by the White Cube gallery in London, as well as by Galleria Lorcan O’Neill in Rome. In 2015, he staged an exhibition, ‘The Forever Loop’, at the Barbican in London, bringing together spray-painted work, sculpture, installation

and performance. It had over 30,000 visitors. “I think EDDIE is one of the geniuses of his generation,” says LORCAN O’NEILL, who first met EDDIE when he was on residency at the British School in Rome. LORCAN staged ‘History’, EDDIE’s first exhibition at his gallery in Rome, in 2010. “So much of EDDIE’s work is to do with his sensitivity to labelling, naming, confining or the attempt to define people, their personalities, their abilities.”

His work is focused on male emotion and mental health. One spray-painted mirrored steel work has the word ‘Erections’ in letters created by peeling back tape. ‘Grrls who love dick’, is another. Others are more introspective and troubled. ‘Only ever alone’; ‘Destroyed by desire’. His performances have evolved into highly choreographed works, often performed naked, that look at the tensions and realities of gender. “I like to think that all of the work I make really attacks the viewer with a high energy,” he says. “The performances, I think they all do that.”

The rocks beneath us in Peckham are between 250 and 500 million years old. They are super-solid Silurian mudstone and sandstone from the Palaeozoic era. How does he feel about performing on a volcano? “That aspect of it feels quite abstract, to be honest,” he says. He has visited the island before. “It’s constantly present in your mind, that you’re on a bit of land that could blow to smithereens. It doesn’t feel vulnerable. Even in spite of it all, it feels very solid, stable and secure.” But still. “I’m a bit excited that it could explode when we’re on there making a performance.”

It’s a Thursday evening in July in Naples, the southern Italian city where pizza was invented. It is located near several volcanoes, most famously Vesuvius, which destroyed the ancient town of Pompeii in AD 79. At around 7.30pm, ten naked men take their positions on a temporary football pitch in the courtyard of the art foundation Casa Morra. Standing on the touchline are an invited international art crowd, plus friends of EDDIE, his partner, artist CELIA HEMPTON, and curious locals. Each team is denoted by the socks they wear, white versus blue. Two of the players have nipple piercings. A coin is flipped and the game begins.

It is only the second football match I’ve watched in my 43 years on the planet, so I’m not the best human to provide commentary. It’s a serious match, not choreographed, and the footballers play as if they are clothed.

A bearded man knocks into another man with a full body blow. It doesn’t look very sporting, but apparently within the rules of football it is allowed. Some goals happen, and someone says the score is 5–1.

Initially, the mood between the spectators and the players is very us-and-them, but after a few minutes, the strangeness of their nudity dissipates. A goalkeeper takes a ball straight into his crotch. He smiles to show he’s okay and the crowd claps, like when a plane makes a safe landing after a bumpy descent.

It’s half time. The teams switch ends. Play gets scrappy, and fewer goals are scored. Conversation in the crowd turns to which player has the nicest penis. From afar it looked like it was an older player with a necklace, but up-close it clearly belongs to a younger, firm man. Indeed, his uncircumcised penis seems very welcoming. It is deeply unusual, watching men engaged in a stereotypically male act, completely unclothed. The game is over, and EDDIE is happy. Who won?

“The white socks team won 7–6,” he says. “I think.”

It is later decided to be a 7–7 draw.

unbridled heterosexual maleness is supposed to be afforded the liberty to express itself end up looking like something that isn’t necessarily that.”

EDDIE says his work, whatever the form, is all about looking at meanings of masculinity. “It’s one of the things I want to challenge,” he says. “What are those conventional roles of a man? Why do they exist? How can we scrutinise them? It’s not me wagging my finger from the outside; it’s from within.”

What we’ll see in the rest of his ‘Volcano Extravaganza’ will be more complex, across genders, more diverse of background, and often with a queer slant. “I think if you’re a white man at the moment, you do mainly just have to listen,” he says. “If you’re a white middle-class male, who has a girlfriend, and if you’re interested in challenging the privileges you’ve been handed at birth, I do think your role is to listen very carefully to what everyone else has to say and take a lead from them.”

On Friday at 3pm, in the courtyard of Naples’ contemporary art museum Madre, a crowd is gathered around the edge of a

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Late the next morning, EDDIE is sat on the hotel rooftop. “There’s a very particular attitude I want the players to play with,” he says. “I say to the footballers: ‘Don’t play like you’re performing in art. Play like you’re in a football match to win.’ If someone is, like, ‘wa-haaaay,’ wagging his willy around, waving his arms to the audience, that kills it straight away.”

It is the third time that EDDIE has staged the match. “I have a funny relationship with the work, because it’s easy to convey it in one sentence: it’s a naked, five-a-side football match. But it’s nice to see it because I remind myself: ‘Oh I fucking love this work. It’s great, it’s so exciting.’”

The maleness of the piece is familiar to EDDIE. “I play football regularly,” he says. “I think: ‘We’re here in the shower after a five-a-side match, a bunch of lads having banter, but it really looks a lot like in the toilets of Anal House Meltdown [the club-night EDDIE runs in London with his friends, artists PREM SAHIB and GEORGE HENRY LONGLY] or someone’s bedroom, at 3am. Those spaces where

rectangular space demarcated by tape on the floor. A group of dancers wearing white Lycra body suits enters the rectangle and, to a soundtrack provided by British electronic musician DARREN CUNNINGHAM aka ACTRESS, perform a sequence of balletic, athletic, aggressive and suggestive movements. It is intense, a power play between male and female, and between individuals themselves.

Three hours later, in a derelict church with a faded trompe l’oeil fresco high on the wall behind the old altar, the dance is performed again, except this time the dancers wear black body suits, and EDDIE’s long-term collaborator GWILYM GOLD improvises solemn sounds on his synthesiser, which is like a futuristic church organ. EDDIE stands near the pulpit. The dancers’ movements are exactly the same, yet the performance feels totally different.

After the show has finished, once most of the crowd have headed out, EDDIE appears with a RUBIK’S CUBE in his hand. Can he do it? “Yes,” he says. His fastest time is 1 minute, 50 seconds. He starts to turn the



sections of the cube, and I look at the time on my phone. It reads 6.50pm. He concentrates on the white face first, and though it seems like nothing is making any sense, he finishes the puzzle. The time is 6.52pm.

Towards dusk a bus delivers us to one of the sulphurous volcanic fields in the vicinity of Naples. We walk across a plain of pumice to a fenced-off square. The stench of sulphur is overwhelming. By two steaming rock piles in a corner is a billboard that promises: “Happy sex thanks to Volcano Solfatara,” offering a translation of a newspaper article extolling the area’s high fertility rate: “Those gases are really precious.” The dance again: for this version there is no music but a reading by the poet HOLLY PESTER, accompanied by the constant hiss of volcanic steam. Something about the stark, steaming terrain makes the impression of choreography disappear. It’s the same moves as before, in the same order, but now it’s as if they’re free agents simply choosing to move in this way. Afterwards, we all get food at a restaurant overlooking the sea, the moon large and red. Gone midnight, on the bus to the hotel, EDDIE falls asleep on the back seat.

On Saturday afternoon, we board the ferry from Naples to Stromboli. It’s a five-hour voyage, during which EDDIE’s ‘Fox’ will be performed. The premise of ‘Fox’ is simple. Somebody wears a fox suit. After 45 minutes or so, another performer approaches them, unzips the back of the suit, and climbs in. They then have to swap clothes inside the suit, this new entrant emerging as the fox, the previous fox-inhabitant now wearing their successor’s clothes.

Try doing that at sea. The spectacle takes place at the back of the ferry, in front of the bar, which is open to regular passengers. As the first pairing attempt the swap, a late-middle-aged couple approaches. They are utterly bemused. EDDIE is thrilled: “I’ve never seen it with regular people around before.” He created ‘Fox’ in 2005, while at the Slade, and it was a crucial turning point in his time there: his tutors had felt the whole class had been underperforming, so they were challenged to create a new work in a week. EDDIE had explained it to me the day before: “It occurred to me a few years ago that this piece has everything that happens in my work now, but in this raw, unconsidered way. Stuff to do with relationships, both romantic and sexual, and how they relate to relationships more broadly: societal, cultural, political. There’s a thing with bodies

going on; you see body parts. There’s a sinister sexual predatory-ness, combined with comedic absurdity. This work really is key, the evolutionary epicentre that everything else came from.”

The first pairing manage the swap mostly while standing on two feet. “They’re very controlled,” says EDDIE. “Usually they spill around on the floor.” The next performer to attempt the swap is PREM SAHIB. FRANCESCA DEL SORBO removes herself, but PREM ends up with the head of the costume twisted and can’t see. He reaches out a hand, and ‘Artforum’ correspondent LINDA YABLONKSY takes it to steady him.

PREM sits down but by now word has got out to the rest of the passengers that there’s a fox on the boat. Children gather round him, and one blond boy, just a little older than a toddler, takes particular interest. He wants to feed the fox. The bar has limited food, with TUC biscuits being a mainstay. The boy pushes a TUC biscuit into the fox’s mouth. Then another. And another. PREM is force-fed five TUC biscuits, maybe more. I lose count. “He’s a feeder,” says PREM’s partner, XAVI. The boy starts pulling violently on the fox’s nose. A girl of around the same age comes close. The boy hits her hard on the head.

So it continues. The performance of ‘Fox’ is hilarious, a major moment and, on a long journey, fantastically diverting. Maybe every ferry company and airline should commission it for all journeys of longer than three hours.

At around 7.30pm, passengers on the ferry start to cram around the windows on the ferry’s right side. The view is mostly of the Mediterranean, but when I peer hard to the left, I see the volcano. It looms increasingly large, a triangle with smoke at its summit. There’s a rumour that Stromboli was J.R.R. TOLKIEN’s inspiration for Mount Doom in ‘Lord of the Rings’. It feels strange to be heading towards the site of such primal terror.

Once we have landed, EDDIE takes part in a performance on the dock. A female dancer performs movements on a loop, while EDDIE stands holding a microphone. Four times, at certain points, he says statements such as “If I kill myself, will you miss me forever?” Her response is to hug him, then slap him in the face. I find it visceral, uncomfortable and powerful. Afterwards, Eddie says it is the work that he feels reveals himself the most. As he says it, he gestures like his stomach is being split and opened up.

There are no street lights on Stromboli, and no cars. The crowd take golf-buggies through the thin streets, then use the torches on their iPhones to pick their way up the steps to Discoteca Megà, an outdoor nightclub on the side of the volcano that quickly runs out of tequila.

On the club’s circular dance floor, the dancers appear, this time naked and in gold body paint. As they step out, there is an immediate charge. Strangely, even though their bodies are revealed, their gender feels less present. They’re just humans. The movements we saw in Naples begin once again, this time centred round a spoken-word act by artists EVAN IFEKOYA and VICTORIA SIN, both of whom are non-binary and choose to be addressed by the pronoun “they.” It is overwhelming, like the performance is happening out of time.

The music at Discoteca Megà stops at 5am, and we head down to the beach. The dancers appear again for a final time on the black pebbles. This time they are completely naked. The only soundtrack is the sea, and two drunks who have gone swimming.

The dancers run into the water. Others follow, stripping down to their underwear. I take off my clothes and wade in. The water is surprisingly warm, like a bath half an hour after it’s drawn. I swim out far, then head back towards shore. I come across EDDIE. He waves with both hands.

Journalist CHARLIE PORTER is the menswear critic for the ‘Financial Times’ and one of the masterminds behind London’s dance party Chapter 10. DANIEL RIERA is a photographer based in Barcelona, Spain, who, judging from his Instagram account, is never not travelling.

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In downtown Naples, a spirited football match between the blue socks and the white socks in a performance of EDDIE’s ‘Touch’.





Stromboli is a highly active volcano. With fluctuating levels of ferocity, it's been engaged in a single, continuous eruption since 1932.



Dawn light illuminates the fifth and final variation of EDDIE's 'To Corpse'.





Another variation of 'To Corpse' takes place on a sulphuric dance floor outside Naples.



Strombolian eruptions are relatively mild, for a volcano, and usually rank around two to three on the Volcanic Explosivity Index.





EDDIE's 'Fox' performance braves the high seas aboard the ferry to Stromboli. Using the loo is tricky while it's your turn to be the fox.