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**JONATHAN JONES**  
**ON ART**  
**BLOG**



## Why St Pancras's Clouds sculptures are on the right track

Lucy and Jorge Orta's playful new nebula float high above the concourse – putting the rest of the station's art in the shade



Blue-sky thinking ... Clouds: Meteoros by Lucy and Jorge Orta hangs above St Pancras station, London. Photograph: Stuart C Wilson/Getty Images for HS1 Ltd

Lucy and Jorge Orta's new sculpture *Clouds: Meteoros* at St Pancras station is fun. Lift up your eyes – it floats high above the concourses of the reborn Victorian railway station, a baroque vision of the heavens hung under the modern glass roof that has brought this gothic structure back to life. Two puffy clouds carry playfully posing people aloft.

Nice, but what a shame the Ortas' imagination has to compete for attention with the daft, ugly colossus *The Lovers* that stands very near it in the same station – and a popular but banal statue of John Betjeman that is also within sight. St Pancras is a rogue's gallery of bad public art. The fact that the Ortas' commission is a step upward just adds to the sense of shoddy artistic values littering this magnificent public space with well-meaning inanities.

What's more, there is a continuity between the Ortas' work and the unpleasant permanent sculptures that haunt this building. While she places her statues on a cloud, she is nevertheless showing us meticulous images of the human figure.

The ideology that guides art commissions for St Pancras looks clearer than ever: its guiding lights, who fought against philistine modernists to save this 19th-century architectural masterpiece from decay and destruction, have no truck with trendy "modern art". They prefer their sculpture traditional and figurative – stuff that Queen Victoria might recognise as art.

The Ortas' cloud people are a compromise – a bit surreal, but nevertheless firmly rooted in a figurative tradition of sculpture that might have pleased the station's original creators.

And yet, surely, a bold marriage of new and old is what has saved St Pancras: 21st-century engineering dances with Victorian design beautifully here. What makes the station's art supremos shy away from a similar artistic liaison? It is just not true that all today's modern art despises or profanes the past. Are Rachel Whiteread's loving casts of architectural details contemptuous of history?

I don't think people who commission public art are in a position to impose an aesthetic ideology. They should be looking for quality, pure and simple, and the fact is that quality in British art in the 21st century often means abstraction, installation or video. There's no reason at all to exclude that from St Pancras – it can only add to the excitement.

Posted by

[Jonathan Jones](#)

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