Magnificent man’s flying machines

VISUAL ART:
Panamarenko’s surreal and melancholy machines delight
Richard Cork

Taking forward as he grips the handle, a sombre, life-sized man with long, struggling hair dreams of taking off. The large propeller attached to his backpack power system might soon start spinning, and an enormous parachute curves high above him. Flight seems imminent, yet nothing stirs. The whole gigantic contraption seems held in a state of suspense, longing for aeronautic freedom while remaining motionless and earthbound.

Panamarenko, who identifies himself as the would-be pilot, has spent his entire career in just such a state of yearning. It runs like an unspoken sigh throughout his retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, and gives everything he makes a peculiar poignancy. Now 60, he is still based in his home city. And he shares a house with a dog, two cats and 20 birds. He dislikes travel, preferring the solitude of Panamarenko and his fantasies of flying in his own inventions. They are, for him, an alternative reality, an escape from the mundane.

The Hayward looks at Panamarenko’s work, his visual art, his surreal and melancholy machines. These are objects that challenge our perception of reality, of what is possible. The artist’s work is a testament to his passion for flight, for the freedom that comes with it. Despite the contraptions that seem to defy logic, the artist’s work is imbued with a sense of hope and possibility.

Clockwise from above left: Archeopterix III (1990), V1 Barrada Jet (1991), K3 Jungle Flyer (1992-93): the impotence of Panamarenko’s painstaking contraptions overrides any functional prowess they may have.

Lorenzo da Vinci was the first to explore the possibility of man taking to the skies, and Panamarenko is often compared to him, especially as the two artists share a passion for inventing things.

But the links between them can easily be exaggerated. The older Panamarenko has grown, the more his work has been influenced by the work of the earlier Italian artist, but the artist’s work is imbued with a sense of hope and possibility.

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Panamarenko is at the Hayward Gallery (0171-500 0120) until April 2.