

Grayson Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years

Large Print Text

19 September – 30 January 2022

Introduction

Grayson Perry is one of the UK's leading artists. This exhibition focuses on his early work, from 1981 to 1994, when he employed different media and made his first works in clay. After a series of exhibitions in various small galleries, he had his first mainstream show in 1994, and secured his distinctive identity as 'the transvestite potter'.

Perry grew up in suburban Essex and sought refuge from a troubled childhood in an imaginary world ruled over by his teddy bear, Alan Measles. At Portsmouth Polytechnic and later, living in a London squat, he was part of a post-Punk group of artists, musicians and filmmakers, particularly the Neo-Naturists, a performance art collective connected to the New Romantic club scene.

Perry has described this early period as the 'pre-therapy years', a time when he explored his complex identity through his art, expressing an anger which would later be resolved through psychotherapy. His imagery could be deliberately shocking, sometimes combining Nazi symbols (appropriated by the British Punk scene), religious iconography and graphic sexual scenes. At the same time, his work satirised such social themes as class and gender and, especially, the conventions of the art world of which he was increasingly a part.

Exhibition organised by the Holburne Museum, Bath

[Wall case]

Kinky Sex

1983

Glazed ceramic

Collection Pauline Amos, courtesy England & Co gallery,
London

Made during evening classes, *Kinky Sex* is Perry's first standalone piece in clay. The plate references the 17th-century slipware dishes of Staffordshire potter Thomas Toft which Perry had seen at the V&A museum. Perry daringly subverts the image of Christ's crucifixion, by placing a coin over his genitals, which when melted in the kiln produces an abject form that covers the body.

Animal Love

1984

Glazed ceramic

James Birch Collection

Discovering Clay

Perry's first encounter with clay was at school, which he recalls as being a fetishistic experience. Following his Fine Art degree, he returned to pottery in 1983 when artist and friend Christine Binnie suggested he try an evening class. The imagery of his ceramics is consistent with that found in the layered illustrations and collages of his early sketchbooks. These reflect an angry, post-Punk attitude, combining sexual fantasy and gritty reality. The incorporation of such uncompromising and challenging imagery in clay set Perry apart as much as it shocked his evening class colleagues.

[Display case, left to right]

The Blue Guitar Sketchbook

1981–82

A4 Sketchbooks with collage and watercolour

Courtesy the artist

Poems for Sofas Sketchbook

1981–82

A4 Sketchbooks with collage and watercolour

Courtesy the artist

These early sketchbooks are described by Perry as, ‘a combination of diary, artwork and artefact’. On these pages he experiments with the vocabulary of his unconscious. The result is a collaged collision of political commentary, sexual fantasy and the urban landscape of Perry’s native Essex.

The Orange Sketchbook

1984–85

A4 Sketchbook

Courtesy the artist

Perry would continue to return to his early sketchbooks for inspiration. The drawings echo the layered style he also applied to his pots, with illustrations combined with collage to tell stories about identity, gender and taste.

[Centre plinth, left to right]

Saint Diana (Let Them Eat Shit)

1984

Mixed media

James Birch Collection

“I was at once fascinated and repulsed by the cult of Princess Diana that flowered in the years after her marriage to Prince Charles. This reliquary is crafted from detritus scavenged from round our squat and pottery sherds found mudlarking on the Thames foreshore. It is in the form of a miniature coronation chair. ... My miniature throne come commode houses a sacred turd. Perhaps inspired by Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (1961), I had tried to encase one of my own faeces in a block of resin, which ended in a smelly mess, so I made a fake one out of ceramic.”

Grayson Perry

The Crown of Penii

1982

Bronze, steel, leather, ceramic and found objects

James Birch Collection

“This work is based on a famous medieval relic, the Iron Crown in Monza Cathedral, near Milan. ... It combines ideas about maleness, religion and monarchy. It has lots of phallic imagery and many of the ingredients of my early work: a space shuttle, a Celtic cross, a kind of Willendorf Venus, an American car, a knife and a pistol. The first space shuttle mission had been launched in 1981 and I'd taken a great interest in it; we all thought it would blow itself into smithereens.”

Grayson Perry

Drawing on Clay

From the start, Perry was drawn to creating works quickly, and this often meant making plates. He

observed how he was able to use the form in a similar way to his early sketchbooks:

“I was put off making plates for a while because they seemed too easy, like a ceramic equivalent of drawing. But as my work has become more elaborate, my pots are taking months to do and many man-hours to put together. I have an idea for a pot and I’m then wedded to it for the next three months. A plate takes a matter of hours. I find that the speedy ones work the best.”

Grayson Perry

[Wall case, left to right]

Untitled

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

MY MIND IS MY MASTER MY BODY MY SLAVE
MY SOUL MY WHIP AND MY BONDS
SHE IS MY MIND

Traditional ceramic techniques such as slip trailing – where semi-liquid clay (slip) is applied to the firm clay surface to make decorative lines and shapes – are here combined in a way typical of Perry’s experimental works. They are overlaid with meanings, layered drawings and presented in a collage-like arrangement.

Untitled

1985

Glazed ceramic

Collection of sculptor Andrew Logan

[Centre plinth]

Patterns of Violent Behaviour

1985

Glazed ceramic

Ralph Segreti

This vase seems to depict various acts of violence conducted by a range of men. King Charles I with his penis exposed, slaughters a deer, whilst a terrorist murders a defenceless woman. An African tribesman is surrounded by elephant tusks, and an androgynous figure clutches a copy of performance artist Laurie Anderson's mainstream pop hit *O Superman* (1981), which references military technology and power.

[Centre plinth]

Biker Pot

1992

Glazed ceramic

Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

An abiding theme of Perry's work is the complexity of masculine identity. It is a subject for which he is especially well-positioned as a transvestite and a motorcyclist, two apparently contrasting forms of manhood. Here a priapic angel is juxtaposed with a route map, perhaps for an actual journey, including such beauty spots as Matlock in Derbyshire, Box Hill in Surrey and, notably, High Beech,

the site of a major biker gathering point, The Original Tea Hut, in Essex's Epping Forest.

Early Works

Perry's earliest works in clay were playful, experimental, and often unrefined. Yet they reflect a conscious engagement with British ceramic traditions including Toby jugs and slipware, a decorating technique where pottery is coated in a semi-liquid clay, or slip. As storytelling became a more prominent component of his work, Perry increasingly worked with plates and vases, which offered more scope as surfaces on which to convey a message. In these works, references to ceramic traditions become a means to express personal experience.

Perry shows an almost reverential joy in making. In contrast to his exuberant public persona as Claire, he describes himself in the studio as the 'Hobbit', working for 'tens of hours over the course of a fortnight' painstakingly creating an elaborate finish, only for that surface to be used as the 'mere background on which the headline imagery of the work will be overlaid – imagery expressing Perry's other self, the 'Punk' master of 'mockery and mischief-making'.

[Large display case, top row, from left to right]

Handsome Prince the Good Dog

1985

Glazed ceramic

Sam Fogg

Text:

MORTALITY – COSMIC GUARDIAN – LOVE – FAITH –
SECRET KNOWING – ARTIST REINCARNATE

“Soon after we moved into our squat in Camden my girlfriend Jennifer bought a puppy. He grew into a red-haired collie who we loved dearly. We project all sorts of things onto our pets. I’m not sure how satirical this plate is; there was a lot of mystical nonsense floating about the squat in a haze of illicit smoke. *Prince* turned out to be an urban rogue. Jennifer moved to the country where he savaged some sheep and he had to move back to London with her sister.”

Grayson Perry

April Ashley in Full Sail

1984

Glazed ceramic

Michael Kerr Esq

After living as a transvestite, in 1960 April Ashley became the first person in the UK to undergo gender reassignment surgery. Perry has recalled reading about her in 1975: ‘I knew now that transvestism was a phenomenon that existed,’ a revelation that was critical to the realisation of his own transvestism. ‘On 5 November 1975, which I now call Claire’s birthday, I put on the full rig and stepped out of the front door.’ Here, Ashley’s profile, with 1960s flicked out hair, is overlaid with sgraffito decoration of a ship at sea, reflecting her naval career and, perhaps, Claire’s launch into the world.

For a Crazy Champion

1984

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

FOR A CRAZY CHAMPION WHO FOR HIS NAMELESS
KINGDOM ROSE AND FACED ACROSS THE AMYL
NITRITE SODDEN CHEST A FOE HAIRLESS AND THE
COLOUR OF MOONLIT SHIT

Ear Dish

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Eye Plate

1984

Glazed ceramic

Collection Adrian Dannatt, New York

Text:

GARBED AS THE HOLY INFANT BUT WITH A FOX'S
HEAD I BLINDLY CRAWLED TOWARD (...) TOOK ME
BY THE THROAT BUT IT WAS SHE WHO CHOKED

[Large display case, bottom row, left to right]

**The New Beauty Beyond Irony Beyond Cynicism
Beyond Perversion and All the Knowledge of Age**

1987

Glazed ceramic

James Birch Collection

Untitled (True Blue)

1987

Glazed ceramic

Collection of Sally Burgess (formerly Clerkenwell Fine Art)

A traditional ceramic form, the Toby jug has often been used to satirise political figures. Perry appropriated the form, it seems, to address ironically what many saw as the prevalent values when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister: 'Made in England', 'Hurrah! I Say Money is Sexy. Poverty is Most Ugly!', and 'True Blue Tory'.

The Devil Plate

1984

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

THE HORNED LORD'S CREATIVE DEVILS WILL FLY
FROM MY PRICK AND THE CLOUDS OF BLACK
ANGELS WILL PUFF FROM MY ARSE TO MAKE SICK
LOVE TO I

The combination of references to sex and the occult are typical of Perry's witty text and equally humorous imagery. His use of visual puns is well illustrated by his play on the ambiguity of the word 'prick', with a sgraffito penis incised into the clay over an image of a syringe.

Untitled

1984

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

IN MY SAFE SUBURBAN HOME WOMEN PUNISH AND
HUMILIATE ME FOR NO REASON BUT THE WRONGS
OF THEIR LOVERS AND MY ETERNAL PLEASURE IN
BEING NO ONE
BUT THEY CANNOT LOVE A MAN DEGRADED SO I
CRY

One of Perry's favourite techniques is sprigwork – the attaching of decorative elements cast from moulds to the surface of a pot or plate. Here, a rose with a crying bust at the centre is surrounded by an array of such applied moulds including the bust of Richard III (whose symbol was the white rose of Lancaster) and a key and chains of bondage, which refer to the imprinted text's reference to sexual humiliation.

Now in Our Green and Pleasant Land (Ye Dear Olde Bugger)

1984

Glazed ceramic

The Thimblestitch and Bramble Collection

Text:

NOW IN OUR GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND WE ARE
FOREVER IN A GUILLOTINE WITH THE RED AND
SHINING BLADE OF OUR MORTALITY HELD ABOVE
ONLY BY A THREAD OF PERVERSE CIVILIZATION

Perry's works can be subversive in both form and meaning. Most have incised marks or stamps, a nod perhaps to both traditional industrial manufacturers and studio potters like Bernard Leach. Here, a 'W' with an anchor creates a self-deprecating visual pun. Around the dish Perry's marks are interspersed with such stamped symbols as swastikas, chains, keys and anchors. At the same time, the title invokes a traditional idea of idealised rural Englishness associated with William Blake's *Jerusalem* (1804) and a less overt tradition suggested by the casual reference to homosexuality in a faux-antique style.

[Centre plinth]

Armageddon Feels so Very Re-assuring

1988

Glazed ceramic

Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

The decoration of this small vase combines two different aspects of 1980s British culture. The symbol for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament reflects the renewed anxiety about nuclear weapons that dominated the early years of the decade. The decorative foliage might allude to the movement's famous protest at the U.S. Air Force base of Greenham Common in rural Berkshire.

Conversely, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion and the bomb itself are neutralised by a playful addition that recalls the smiley face associated with the Ecstasy-driven Acid House movement that kicked off in 1987.

[LEFT SIDE WALL]

Claire

'I think of my dressing up as the heraldry of my subconscious.'

Cross-dressing has been part of Grayson Perry's life since childhood and his early works reflect a journey of discovery and exploration of his transvestism. Early photos of Claire show her to be a stylish, of-the-moment woman, which Perry describes as an attempt at 'a middle-aged look' that combines aspects of Diana, Princess of Wales, Margaret Thatcher, and a typical office girl. Impeccable newsreaders, with their helmet-hair, were his 'fantasy goal'.

[Display case, left to right]

Untitled

1988

Glazed terracotta

Private collection, Devon

“Class and taste are such deep unconscious processes that they often play a part in our sexual fantasies, adding emotional resonance to imagined scenarios. On this plate a transvestite dressed in dated but sexually provocative clothes is out pulling an old lady’s shopping trolley to add further delicious humiliation. The kitsch stock imagery that surrounds her hints at working-class interiors of my parents’ generation. The border, made from sprig moulds of bark, is very redolent of faeces, which was probably intentional.”

Grayson Perry

Claire as a Soldier

1987

Glazed ceramic

Mo Tomaney

Here, an image of Claire is combined with a version of a famous painting by Theodore Gericault, *An Officer of the Imperial Guard* (1812). This traditional idea of masculinity is juxtaposed with contemporary signifiers of female power, including shoulder pads and a defiant outward glare.

Self Portrait Cracked and Warped

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

“AN AMATEURISH HERO IN THE TRUE BRIT SCHOOL OF PEEVED BIGOTRY CATERS FOR THE RENT BOY IN ALL OF US.”

“MAKES PRETENTIOUSNESS A VIRTUE AND MAKES POTS FOR TRENDIES WHO HATE CERAMICS. TURNS SELF-AWARENESS INTO A DIRTY WORD AND BREAK THE TABOO OF BEING ORIGINAL.”

“IN HIS HAND, IRONY AND CYNICISM BECOME AS HACKNEYED AS THE EXPRESSIVE BRUSHSTROKE, COMPROMISE AND CONTRADICTION ABOUND, A TRUE EIGHTIES ARTIST.”

“CALLOUS USE OF POLITICAL, SEXUAL AND MORAL ISSUES AS SURFACE DECORATION.”

This plate includes a self-portrait with a self-mocking text.

“I remember being very pleased with this work when I made it even though it had gone disastrously ‘wrong’. The split and subsequent warping are genuine, in that I did not contrive for them to happen; it was just poor handling of the piece while it was drying. The fault of course adds greatly to the idea, as if the gods of the kiln had passed judgment on me and my work. The portrait image being upside down is a reference to the work of the hot painter of the ‘expressive brushstroke’ at the time: Georg Baselitz.”

Grayson Perry

[Centre plinth, left to right]

A Small Investment in British Perversion

1988

Glazed ceramic

Wayne Warren

Four Seasons

1988

Glazed ceramic

Private collection, purchased from the Birch Conran Gallery

Text:

TRANSVESTITE SHAMAN

SUMMER – AUTUMN – WINTER – SPRING

Most of Perry's pots use the painstaking technique of coiling, where the form is built up using rolls of clay to create the desired silhouette. Here, however, Perry uses slab building to produce a four-sided pot. The four seasons seem to equate to four different identities, and the clothing of two of the figures makes effective use of ready-made transfer prints.

[Centre Plinth]

Secret Woman

1987

Glazed ceramic

James Birch Collection

Text:

AT THE SECRET CENTRE OF MY EXISTENCE IS A SPECIAL WOMAN. I MAY NEVER KNOW HER NAME OR EVER SMELL HER PERFUME WHERE SHE HAS BEEN, BUT THE FACT SHE LIVES I WILL CELEBRATE FOREVER.

“This pot was about my acknowledgment of Claire as a central plank of my creative drive. I was already starting to build up a narrative of her, a sort

of internal iconography. Here, there's an angel figure with a hard-on and Claire, wearing a dress from the office, appears with a halo, patting the angel on the shoulder. It's like the spirit of my femininity descending to earth and blessing me with inspiration. There's also an elfin-looking boy in a suit, perhaps as a more integrated idea of the male and female."

Grayson Perry

LEFT SIDE WALL

[Wall plinth]

Untitled

1990

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

[Wall plinth]

Untitled

1985

Wood

Private collection, in memory of Lionel Evans

As well as pots, Perry created several shed-like sculptures, one called *Baba Yaga's Hut* (1983), a reference to a witch-like figure in Russian folklore. This shed of found wood and rusted metal became a shrine for two vases and a bible. For Perry, the link between tools, making and masculinity was later crystallised in psychotherapy.

RIGHT SIDE WALL

[Wall case]

Untitled

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

WITHIN ME IS THE GLOWING CONSTANT SECRET
POWER THE ORIGINAL UNITY AND THE ULTIMATE
CHAOS OF THE SEXLESS SHAMAN OF THE WINTER
ROSE

This plate appears in Perry's film *The Poor Girl* (1985). Its imagery, combining the head of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns, a girl posing as if crucified and a Maypole, echoes the film's themes of a cult of women consumers and mystical symbolism. Perry's playing with symbols even extends to his mark where the initial P of his name becomes the Chi Rho, an early symbol for Christ.

RIGHT SIDE WALL

[AV monitor]

In the early to mid-80s, Perry's primary medium was film. His social circle included such artist filmmakers as John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans. Taking the influence of Derek Jarman, Perry used Super-8 film, which was usually associated with home movies.

These films continued Perry's exploration of gender, fantasies and the mundane. In *Bungalow Depression*,

Perry as Claire acts out a day in the life of a Women's Institute member. *The Green Witch and Merry Diana* echoes many of the concerns of the Neo-Naturists, combining a semi-rural Englishness, new-romantic nostalgia and such suburban places as the frozen food section of a supermarket.

In *The Poor Girl*, a girl summons up a brutal murderer in her imagination, while a group of women dedicated to a cult of consumerism move around London wearing Margaret Thatcher badges and carrying boards full of mystical symbols. By this time, Perry's films were funded by the sales of his ceramics. Seeing how much time was spent fundraising, he abandoned film for pottery, so this was his last film.

Bungalow Depression

1981

Standard-8 film transferred to DVD

3 mins, 21 seconds

Courtesy the artist

The Green Witch and Merry Diana

1984

Super-8 film transferred to DVD

19 mins, 52 seconds

Courtesy the artist

The Poor Girl

1985

Super-8 film transferred to DVD

47 mins, 13 seconds

Courtesy the artist

RIGHT SIDE WALL

Kitsch Subversion

Perry made a series of thirty of these ‘commemorative plates’ using the same mould but applying different details or treating the clay in varying ways. Such relief plates reminded him of his grandmother’s house and he enjoyed their kitsch associations. In developing the relief, he sought to make them ‘spooky’. The underlying image is what he saw as a typical Essex landscape. The subversive act of inserting a scene of dereliction into what should be idealised is a common theme in Perry’s art of this period.

[Display case, left to right]

The Terrible Unnatural Forms of Immature Nature

1985

Glazed ceramic

Gill Denmark

“This press-moulded plate is number eight in a series of about thirty, all made from the same mould. I was fascinated by ‘collectors plates’: kitsch commemorative wares made in huge ‘limited’ editions and sold through full-page advertisements in the back of women’s magazines and tabloid newspapers. The bas-relief depicts an abandoned house, a rusting tractor, a grave, a pollarded tree and a Nissen hut; in short, a typical Essex country scene. To tell you the truth, I am mystified as to what I meant by the text and how it relates to the Nazi insignia. Perhaps it was a dark premonition of Brexit!”

Grayson Perry

Commemorative Plate No. 17

1985
Glazed ceramic
Private collection

Oh God She is My Mother

1985
Glazed ceramic
Private collection

[Centre plinth]

**Perversion/Apathy/Arrogance/Selfishness/Ego/
Hypocrisy**

1987
Glazed ceramic
Private collection

RIGHT SIDE WALL

Funerary Urns

While the majority of Perry's early ceramics were either plates or vases, he has dealt with many other traditional forms. Here we see a series of funerary urns for which he used the matt jasperware surface of traditional Wedgewood pottery.

[Display case, left to right]

Trophy for the Victor

1987
Glazed ceramic

Private collection, purchased from the Birch Conran Gallery

Text:

A TROPHY FOR THE VICTOR WHO DID NOT
COMPETE IN THE GOOD SPIRIT OF
SPORTSMANSHIP BUT FOR HONEST MONETARY
GAIN

Reflecting an early interest in the notion of success, this piece states “to succeed in one’s own goals is nothing. To win and to be champion in the envious eyes of one’s peers is all.” Perry was an avid cyclist and made several pieces to be used as actual trophies in cycling competitions.

I am the Myth Maker

1989

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

I AM THE MYTH MAKER WITHOUT ME, YOU HAVE NO
MEANING SO PAY THE MYTH MAKER, OR AS A
PEOPLE DIE

“I made a lot of these unglazed blue-grey funereal urns decorated with papercut stencils and sprig mouldings. The exhortation to ‘pay the myth maker’ speaks of how obsessed I was with earning money. Yet ironically I stopped making pots in this style, despite them being a guaranteed seller, because I got bored of making them. I like the motto on this one. It has the arrogance of youth but it is also true. Artists are the myth makers. The arts create templates that help people find meaning in their lives.”

Grayson Perry

Paul Conran – Art Lover

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

This 'funeral urn' is covered with *memento mori* or reminders of death: the skeleton, coffin and hourglass. The simple outline and grand scale gives the vase a sculptural presence. This was made for one of Perry's early dealers, Paul Conran.

Return Me to Essex from Where I Come

1987

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

One of several urns which memorialise the artist's own imagined death, this vase has decorative moulds from Masonic regalia and inscriptions: 'Here are the ashes of the artist Grayson Perry. He lived in obscurity and laughed himself to death. 1960–1987' and 'All I could show was myself'. These reference the self-mythologising that Perry both indulges in and lampoons, and the attachment to his upbringing in Essex.

RIGHT SIDE WALL

Pagan Mythologies

Perry's early work often includes references to mythology and paganism. Such imagery and conscious echoes of shamanism had similarly been part of the Neo-Naturists' activities and echoed a wider revival of interest in traditions of magick and the occult. In Perry's hands one is never certain

whether the theme is celebrated or gently ridiculed for its archaic earnestness.

[Wall case, top row, left to right]

Two-Handled Porringer with Demonic Skulls

1987

Glazed ceramic

Castlegate House Gallery

Skull

1989

Glazed ceramic

Dr Jill Westwood

I Hate Poetry

1987

Glazed ceramic

Dr Jill Westwood

Goblet

1987

Raku ceramic

James Gould Ltd, on behalf of a Private Collection

No God Shall Tame Me, I Am War

1985

Glazed ceramic

Hugh Warren

A beast with a pointed human face and phallic horns crouches over a bed of skulls. Perry has noted the significance of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's teeming landscapes and Hieronymus Bosch's tortured visions of hell. The applied decoration alludes to a masonic-like

language of secrecy, and the untamed beast with its prominent phallus references a singularly destructive type of masculinity.

[Wall case, bottom row, left to right]

Grotesque Devil Head

1988

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Untitled (Perfume Bottle)

1985

Glazed earthenware, poppy seed pods and bronze

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, purchased with the support of the Art Fund, 2015

The loose, gestural application of the decoration on this bottle recalls the body paint worn by Perry and the other Neo-Naturists during their performances.

Grotesque Devil Head

1988

Glazed ceramic

Collection Waldemar Januszczak

[Centre plinth]

Meaningless Symbols

1993

Glazed ceramic

Mark and Debra Eden

“There is a tension in making a piece of contemporary ceramics in a medium that has such

a strong history of decorativeness. ... Making decorative art ... is a noble and profound thing to do. But if you had asked me about the term 'decorative' when I made this pot, I would have found it a loaded word and seen it as derogatory. My title was defensive: I was getting in there first with the idea that everything is meaningless, and that it's all just a melange of style and no substance. What I'm coming to realise as I age is that profundity comes about by letting go, by not worrying about being meaningful."

Grayson Perry

END WALL

[Display case, left to right]

Untitled

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

PURITY IN COMPROMISE

I IS THE KEY TO VIRTUE BEYOND PERVERSION

The distinctive colours on this plate reflect the blue, manganese (or purple) colours of 17th-century Delftware pottery made in port cities like Bristol, London and Liverpool. On closer inspection, the layered meanings become more obviously modern: a large hand-painted blade, enigmatic inscriptions such as 'purity in compromise', and moulded details taken from Masonic regalia.

“I was fascinated at the time, as I still am, by the Masons, shamanism and the occult. I always liked the mystery of secret societies... Timothy Prus gave me a load of masonic regalia – aprons, medals and heavy brass badges – which I made into sprig moulds.”

Grayson Perry

Essex Landscape Plus Stocks

1985

Glazed ceramic

James Birch Collection

The Keeper of the Bed

1985

Glazed ceramic

Jo Comino

Text:

DRIVEN BY NO DESIRES SWEPT CLEAN OF
CRIPPLING PASSIONS OF WHOLE MEN THE KEEPER
OF THE BED WANDERS IN A TERRIBLE PURE WORLD
+ LOVE IS THE LAW

Casts of scissors appear in a number of Perry's works of this time. They perhaps allude to fantasies of castration, as appears to be one of the concerns in this image. A naked male body, floating or perhaps tied down, appears to have lost its genitalia. Meanwhile, a woman looks on from the window of a shop, over which hangs a sign made up of a large knife and a dismembered penis and scrotum. The intensity of the imagery is offset by the artist's accomplished use of sgraffito design scratched into the wet surface when the piece was dipped in glaze.

END WALL

Forever Essex

The world of Perry's youth, particularly the locations of his childhood in Essex, is closely tied to his identity. This connection is reflected through maps of significant places for the artist, and motifs that he associated with the county, including petrol stations and electricity pylons. Essex has come to stand for a certain kind of suburban working class, typified by the stereotype of the Essex Girl which developed during the 1980s. It is, perhaps, with pride and irony that Perry offers Essex as a counter to the picturesque image of the English landscape.

[Display case, left to right]

The Union of Essexmen

1988

Glazed ceramic

Offer Waterman

Text:

THE UNION OF ESSEXMEN THOSE WHO HAVE
CHOSEN THE MIDDLE WAY

Map of Essex

1990

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

“Looking at my early work, I am amazed how many of the themes that were to become important in my career were present in these youthful ceramics.

This plate must be one of the first map pieces I made, a form that I have used often in the last fifteen years or so. The stamped place names mainly refer to locations significant in my life. 'High Beach' (*sic*) is the site of the bikers' tea hut in Epping Forest where I spent an awful lot of time in the 1990s. The painting of the suburban house is where I grew up in Bicknacre and the building above 'Colchester' is St Peter-on-the-Wall, one of Britain's oldest churches and an inspiration for the *House for Essex* (2015) I designed with Charles Holland."

Grayson Perry

Essex Plate

1985

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

LA LA LA LA HARMONY PEACE AND LOVE
THE NON MAGICK OF MEN WILL KILL US ALL

LEFT SIDE WALL

[Low plinth]

Whore of Essex, I love Thee

1986

Glazed ceramic

Fry Art Gallery

"This dish has features that are both common and rare in my early work. It features typical motifs of my work at the time: the imaginary woman, the playful

abstract bits, the bleak Essex landscape and the military jet coming in to land. What is unusual is the form, a round dish on three legs, and the fact that it has been raku fired. The red-hot piece was picked out of the kiln with tongs and then placed in sawdust, which ignited causing the cracks and unglazed parts of the piece to absorb the metallic black carbon. Usually my early raku pieces are much simpler than this as there is always a high chance of the piece failing due to heat shock or the wrong sort of chance effects.”

Grayson Perry

RIGHT SIDE WALL

Text and Narrative

Text is an essential component in Perry’s art. He is a master of the pithy phrase and has made works where extended pieces of writing create narratives that explore such themes as class, identity and belonging. In more recent work he has followed the painter William Hogarth in developing episodic stories around such imagined figures as ‘Essex everywoman’ Julie Cope and Tim Rakewell, the anti-hero of his series of tapestries entitled *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012).

[Plinth]

Sales Pitch

1987

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

COME ON, THIS ONE IT'S THE ONE JUST RIGHT FOR YOU. IT SUITS YOU, COMPLEMENTS YOUR CHEQUE BOOK. NOW, NOW, NONE OF THAT, "OH, BUT THE ONE I WANT HAS BEEN BOUGHT ALREADY." NONSENSE. LOOK IT'S CLASSIC GRAYSON PERRY, I'LL PUT IT THIS WAY, THE MORE YOU BUTY THE MORE SUCCESSFUL I BECOME IN ECONOMIC TERMS, GALLERIES PROMOTE MY WORK, MY REPUTATIONGROWS, MY PRICES RISE SO DOES YOUR MEASLY INVESTMENT. NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU SAY THAT YOU LIKE THIS NOTHING POSITIVE WILL HAPPEN EXCEPT IN KNEE-JERK REACTION TO CASH. IT MAKES SENSE. THESE WORD PLATES ARE VERY POPULAR AND I DON'T MAKE THAT MANY. IT'S A LOT OF WORK, YOU KNOW, ON AN HOURLY BASIS IT PROBABY WORKS OUT MUCH LESS THAN YOU EARN. MY SUCCESS IS GUARANTEED, IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME, HAVE NOT HAD A BAD REVIEW, TRUE POTTERY IS NOT THE MOST GLAMOUROUS MEDIA THROUGH WHICH TO BECOME A SUPERSTAR, BUT THAT'S THE BEAUTIFUL IRONY OF IT, AND SO BRITISH. YOU AND ME BOTH, WE'RE CRUSADERS IF YOU LIKE, HELPING THIS ANCIENT ART SHRUG OFF THE TWEE WOVEN CLICHÉ, EARNED BY A GENERATION OF FAILED ARTIST HIPPIES, PEEVED BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THEIR DOWN TO EARTH SKILLS MADE UP FOR LACK OF IMAGINATION AND STYLE. WITH YOUR HELP I CAN TAKE POTTERY INTO THE ARENA OF COMMENT AND IDEAS, DARE I SAY IT, FINE ART. IT ALL SOUNDS VERY PRETENTIOUS BUT THINK OF THE MONEY. LET "FACE" IT ART THESE DAYS IS JUST ABOUT TRENDS WITHIN A TREND, THAT IS, POST MODERNISM. RETURNING TO VULGAR TRADE, IF YOU LIKE WHAT YOU SEE THE COMPLIMENTS ARE ONLY ACCEPTED WHEN ACCOMPANIED BY A

CHEQUE CARD. COME ON LOVELY, IT'S ONE
HUNDRED PERCENT SOLID CERAMIC. IT'LL LAST
ONE MILLION YEARS, OR HOW ABOUT A VASE?

"Right from my very earliest ceramics I used words
a lot. I found it easier to be funny with words but I
enjoyed the look of text as well. This plate is a kind
of minimalist joke, an artwork trying to sell itself.
Looking back thirty years it all still rings true. I was a
cocky bastard. I love the tone of desperation that
creeps in towards the end; I really needed the cash
to buy my next motorbike. In the centre are two of
my pre-1992 potter's marks, '100% Art' and 'Made
in UK'."

Grayson Perry

[Plinth]

Untitled

1987

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Text:

HOLD THIS POT CLOSE, FOR ITS ANCIENT HEART OF
CLAY IS INVESTED WITH THE LOVE OF THE ESSEX
MEN, IN THIS AGE WHERE CHILDREN BLESSED WITH
SECOND SLOWLY STRANGLE AS THEY GROW,
CHOKE ON WEDDING RINGS AND SUFFOCATE IN
FAMILY CARS, ACROSS THE COUNTY ESSEXMEN
AWAKE ON EMPTY TRAINS, IN SUMMER LANES, THIS
POT IS THEIR SPOKESMAN, A HUMBLE HARBINGER
DUG FROM THE EARTH, LIKE THEIR DREAM IT IS
FRAGILE YET ENDURES THE FIRES OF ITS
CONCEPTION AND THE CORROSION OF AGES, THEY
THAT CALL THEMSELVES THE ESSEXMEN HAVE

CHOSEN POTS TO SPEAK FOR THEM ABOUT OUR FUTURE. THEY FEEL THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD DYING, THE MORE WE KNOW, THE LESS WE BELIEVE, THE MORE WE ARE SHOWN THE LESS WE IMAGINE, ONLY IMAGINATION CAN SAVE US.

‘Dear All, the strangest thing happened last night, I was in Soho, “so what” you might well say. This well groomed woman came up to me and asked if I wanted to witness a spectacle. Well I couldn’t say no, and the next thing we were roaring off into the countryside aboard a scarily fast motorbike! We He that is this woman who turns out to be a fella! Is one of this bunch called the Essexmen. They meet in the backroom of this of this old pub stuck out on its own right in the middle of the Essex marshes. There was at [least] twenty of them all dressed as ladies in this room all wood paneled and candlelit and there’s these old pots everywhere dating back centuries. This was their big annual though in more ways than one! It’s a tradition dating back to the 1600’s. It’s a race they call it a chase though, it used to be on horseback now it’s super fast motorcycles. They charge across the country down dark country lanes to this church about thirty miles away. The first one to get there and ring the bell is their leader, they call his Grace for the coming year. X G’

This pot tells a story of two chapters: on one side is a pronouncement about Essex, imagination and art, in stamped lettering; on the other is a handwritten tale of somebody’s first experience in a transvestite motorbikers’ group. This could be one of Perry’s own memories and conveys the excitement of finding a tribe.

[

Subverting Traditions

Perry's work has a complicated relationship with the ceramics of the past. His engagement with traditional forms is both reverential and ironically subversive in the way he introduces unexpected themes and images. Similarly, his use of coiling to build up the form of the vase is in defiance of the industry's preference for moulds and the artisanal potter's use of throwing.

[First row of plinths, from left to right]

Untitled

1990

Glazed ceramic

Private collection

Cocktail Party

1989

Glazed ceramic

Courtesy the artist

Perry takes a swipe at the trendiness of the art scene while also capturing human experience: angular women who don't appear to enjoy themselves stand in a frieze-like row, awkwardly eating or listening. Perry's interest in the relationship between fashion and identity are reflected in the women's clothes. A Laura Ashley-style dress is juxtaposed with a slick Chanel suit, while another woman wears a variation on Madonna's famous Jean-Paul Gaultier bustier.

Cunt Power

1987

Glazed ceramic

Dr Jill Westwood

[Second row of plinths, from left to right]

A Design which Implies Significance

1992

Glazed ceramic

Courtesy the artist

“This vase has a surreal, rather incoherent jumble of images on it: a Hogarthian print of street-sellers; Claire in her Sloane Ranger clothes wielding a dagger; the christening photo of Prince Harry with the Queen and Princess Diana; and an upside-down floating transvestite who’s been castrated. ... The title was me suggesting that it all had some greater meaning. I used to have a conflicted attitude to craftsmanship and decoration. Nowadays, I’m much more unapologetic about it but then I still felt I had to cover my back, to be sure I was seen as a conceptual artist and not as a craftsman.”

Grayson Perry

Childhood Trauma Manifesting Itself in Later Life

1992

Glazed ceramic

Collection of Mark D.D. Wilson

“My daughter, Flo, was born about the time I made this vase so I was thinking a lot about being a parent. I had a lot of fear about passing the psychological legacy of my own upbringing on to

her. This is still six years before I started having psychotherapy but there were many discussions with my wife about not acting out any childhood demons around our newborn. As parents we often find our children trigger emotional memories of our own experience of being the same age.”

Grayson Perry

Untitled

1988

Glazed ceramic

Renato Pesci

This pot uses dramatically contrasting styles to suggest the possibility of dual identities, with a short narrative to conjure up a place and time:

‘I had a friend who was once too poor to eat for a fortnight. She traipsed through the mud all winter in her white stiletto heeled shoes. She was naturally beautiful and slim. Some days we would smile and crash a party and drink champagne, on others we would search the house for change to buy a bag of chips. Things were different then.’

Grayson Perry

[Third row of plinths, left to right]

I am Angry like the Wind

1990

Glazed ceramic

Dr Jill Westwood

Text:

I AM ANGRY LIKE THE WIND, AT EVERYTHING AND NOTHING. WHY AM I DRIVEN TO SPILL MY SOUL FOR YOU WHEN I HATE YOU ALL? I COULD CALL DOWN ARMAGEDDON AS EASILY AS PLUCK THE PETALS FROM A FLOWER. WHY? BECAUSE I AM A SNOB, I LOVE MY VISION OF THE WORLD, I LOVE MY LIFE, AND BECAUSE I LOVE MYSELF.

Challenge and contradiction are key to this work. A dominant hermaphrodite is pleased by a submissive male while another man appears to have castrated himself. At the same time, the text seems to represent the voice of an angry and disdainful god-like figure.

Fashion Accessory

1994

Glazed ceramic

Lent by Mr and Mrs Matthew Bardsley

Beneath Every Stone is Life

1988

Glazed ceramic

Ruth Ravenscroft and Mark Smith

Text:

BENEATH EVERY STONE THERE IS LIFE, AND UNDER EVERY BLOOM LIES DEATH. TO FIND BEAUTY IN ALL THINGS IS MY MISSION MOST DEAR. CALL THAT BEAUTY GOD OR CALL IT ONESELF TO DISCOVER SUCH A JOY IS TO FIND TRUE LOVE

Perry presents a typical combination of humorous and graphically sexualised womanhood. The contrast of

assertive femininity and a submissive, or humiliated, male is a recurring theme. Here, a woman aggressively reveals a snarling wolf's head emerging from her genitalia while a man, complete with erection, runs around in baby clothes watched by someone who is about to inject himself. More recently, since he underwent psychotherapy, Perry has softened his approach, though the fascination with femininity is still a major theme.

RIGHT SIDE WALL

[Wall plinth]

Phallic Woman

1993

Glazed ceramic

Siobhan Loughran

This pot was a rare return to the grand vase form that interested Perry in the late 1980s. It is in line with his later style of coloured glazes combined with transfer-printed vignettes and line drawings, as well as the use of rich lustre glazes to add grandeur. Perry uses provocative sexualised imagery and subversion of gender stereotypes: the mark 'T.V.' (perhaps for transvestite) alongside a vignette of famously celibate Elizabeth I.

[Wall plinth]

My Gods

1994

Glazed ceramic

Tate: Purchased with assistance from Rob Taylor and Michael Kallenbach 2002

“When you’re a child, your gods are whoever you’re told they should be. I was looking back to my past and inventing my own gods. I’ve included a rather wrathful female god and a guy in decorative chinoiserie leathers. An innocent child worships gods that have aspects of its parents in them: there’s a sort of projection of parent onto god. Some people have a very screwed up idea of god: if you have a vengeful parent you probably have a vengeful god. The corkscrew on the pot is a fairly innocuous object, but in this context we can project onto it the image of a crucifix and also the hint at parental alcoholism.”

Grayson Perry

Glamorous Clay

In 1993 or 1994, Perry moved to the Anthony d’Offay Gallery near Bond Street, the heart of London’s mainstream commercial art world. His pots took on a new richness and glamour, not least through the use of gold lustre glazes. They elevate the universal material of clay into the realm of luxury and display. This tension is often directly addressed in the work.

[Wall plinth]

Newsreader

1990

Glazed ceramic

Private collection, Devon

“This is one of a pair of large dishes featuring portraits of female television newsreaders who at the time represented an aspirational form of femininity for me:

superbly groomed, mature, in command. As a transvestite I was constantly seeking out female role models to emulate. I was still very much in my wanting-to-pass-as-a-real-woman phase of cross-dressing. I drew the portraits from memory but I was thinking of Jan Leeming and, in this case, Sue Lawley.”

Grayson Perry

[In frame on wall]

Portrait of Matthew Bardsley

1993

Glazed ceramic

Lent by Mr and Mrs Matthew Bardsley

Grayson Perry's take on a portrait commission combines sketches and handwritten commentary to play on the traditions of painting: the sitter is surrounded by the tools of his trade. Here, the screenwriter is depicted in his office environment, while Perry's trademark wit comes through in the background: there are drawers of 'morals' and 'clichés', and Perry's own graphic novel, *Cycle of Violence* (1992) is among the books on the shelves.

[Wall plinth]

Artefact for People who have no Identity

1994

Glazed ceramic

Private collection, Devon

“The street scene in the background is reminiscent of Dyers Hall Road, Leytonstone, where my studio was in 1987–93. A man out wearing a girlish frock

has caught the eye of another man who is using a shopping trolley to move house. Every detail of this artwork – the corrugated iron fence, the graffiti, the toolbox and the baby buggy – screams at me today what my life felt like then. The title, though, could have been coined in 2019.”

Grayson Perry

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