Ode to the craftsman

As artist Grayson Perry creates a group show of his work and British Museum objects, he tells Sam Phillips about the ideas and interests that shaped the final selection.

Grayson Perry has made his name as an artist with works that have rethought and revitalised old craft conventions, in particular those of ceramics. But this autumn sees the Turner Prize-winner breathe new life into a more recent trend: the contemporary artist working in the context of a historical museum.

Perry has not made ‘a response’ to the British Museum’s collection or ‘an intervention’ in the Museum, as other contemporary artists have done; instead, the Essex-born artist has chosen the reverse, so that historic works from the collection respond to his art. He has selected about 200 objects for exhibition from across the Museum’s holdings, from a prehistoric tool to 20th-century ephemera, on the basis that they complement his ceramic pots, sculptures and textiles which he has decided to display.

The resulting exhibition, in Perry’s words, ‘is a portrait of my imagination and my personal predilections’. The context of the show is partly the collection, but also very much Perry: his aesthetic sensibilities, his ideas, interests and influences, his personal and professional journeys. The viewer assumes Grayson-tinted spectacles when entering the exhibition space, thereby renewing his or her own interest in the collection through Perry’s highly subjective perceptions.

“I like presenting myself as a sort of one-man civilisation,’ explains the 51-year-old artist with works across various sections of the exhibition. ‘It’s a way of looking at the world that is different from the way the British Museum or other popular institutions look at the world. It’s more of a personal view.’

There are 35 Perry’s pieces from throughout his career – some dating to his earliest exhibitions, many new and on view for the first time – are intermingled with BM works across various sections of the exhibition. Each section explores a key theme from the civilisation of Grayson Perry. The idiosyncratic nature of these themes is clear from the first room where we encounter ‘Alan’.

The Alan in question is Perry’s teddy bear, Alan Measles, a cuddly childhood friend whom Perry projected various fantasies, such as Alan the racing driver or Alan the Second World War hero. Later in life, Perry began to understand these fantasies in terms of psychoanalysis: his father left the family home when Perry was five years old and Alan adopted heroic male characteristics that in real life had gone missing. Rather than confusing the bear to the past, these revelations made Alan an even greater part of Perry’s visual imagination. ‘If I was going to present myself as a civilisation, I needed a religion, and Alan was the absolute undisputed candidate for that,’ Perry expands, ‘so I started making artworks that related to other cultures about him. I have made a little Shinto shrine for him, which is in the show. I’ve made Muslim sculptures, and there’s a big Alan sculpture in this exhibition that has a Maori feel to it. Alan is a test bed – he is a figure on whom I can apply all my thoughts about religion.’

One concept behind the exhibition is ‘Ten Days of Alan’, a personal spiritual journey to Germany that Perry took with the teddy bear in 2010 on a custom-made motorbike, the AM1. Germany was the enemy when Perry was a child, so his contemporary pilgrimage with Alan was a way
thing then it all goes a bit wrong, and one of the themes of the exhibition is a call to hold your beliefs lightly, and that we all have our rituals and religions and creeds that we follow.  

Objects have also been chosen for one principal reason: Perry liked the way they looked. 'I don’t like artworks that are just an illustration of an idea, so I always try to pick things to do with the image of that idea, and the way it evokes the emotions. In this case it’s the object that matters aesthetically, and if you’ve got something you like, then you can work out what the idea is, or do whatever with it, he continues. This might be frustrating to historians and logical people, and artists, and other people who want meaning – people who can’t see beyond the object because they are unsure about their intuition, because intuition is a much more tricky skill to develop.  

'One of the creeds that I am bringing to the Museum is the creed of contemporary art, in all its beliefs and rituals, like I am a kind of witch doctor of the contemporary art world. I have come out of the white cube temple and gone into the more muddy waters of the historical museum. With a contemporary art exhibition the aesthetic is the headline priority, and then perhaps the political and the commercial, whereas with the BM I should think it is historical, educational, then tourism… aesthetic might be fourth, or maybe it might be fifth behind cultural diplomacy.'  

The aesthetic punch of Perry’s own work is particularly powerful in the nine ceramic pots on view, which are incised with insightful illustrations about contemporary society and culture. In one pot, the deity Alan Measles comes face to face with our growing obsession with camera-phones: 'On one side of the pot Alan is inundated with people who want their photo taken with him, and on the other side he’s being ignored by people who are on the phone.' You are Here, created by Perry this year, imagines visitors to the show as pilgrims and speculates, in speech bubbles, why they might choose to come – one snidely says, 'I need to have my negative prejudices confirmed.' The museum-as-pilgrimage-place plotline is examined further in a 7 m wide tapestry work replete with quirky and colourful detail, where the British Museum is mapped in a disc in the centre, its interiors labelled as various versions of the afterlife.
And if the visitor’s journey through the exhibition is a pilgrimage, the sacred work they finally reach, in the last room, is Perry’s The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman, a funerary boat cast in iron but with the appearance of wood, with a nod to examples from medieval Scandinavia and ancient Egypt, as well as to the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Metal casts of objects from the collection – from a Roman dish to the Lewis Chessmen – adorn the side of the vessel, but there is one relic that takes centre stage on board: a prehistoric tool, 250,000 years old, that represents the foundation of human craftsmanship.

Here are laid to rest all those anonymous men and women who made the objects in the collection. Perry has named the exhibition after this final work to focus on the fact that there are so many other participants in this ‘group show’ whose name we will never know. ‘A lot of very good craftsmen are very bad artists, in the same way a lot of very good artists are very bad craftsmen,’ he concludes. ‘Craftsmanship is about learning a particular skill that can be handed down: it’s something that can be taught, apprenticed. That’s what separates craft from talent and creativity. I suppose what I wanted to acknowledge, slightly mischievously perhaps, is that great things come out of craftsmanship as well as creativity.’