

# Grayson Perry: An English Eccentric on the World Stage

BY JACKY KLEIN



Exterior view of *A House for Essex* in Wrabness, designed by GRAYSON PERRY and FAT ARCHITECTURE.  
Photo by Jack Hobhouse. Courtesy Living Architecture.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

2020 was an extraordinarily tough year, rife with anxiety, isolation, and suffering of various sorts—physical, emotional, financial, spiritual. For artists, it was in many ways uniquely challenging. With galleries closed, exhibitions and art fairs canceled, dealers focused on an urgent shift to the digital, and many commissions and residencies frozen, the future suddenly looked grim.

Working with these obstacles, and despite a number of aborted projects, one artist managed to plough on. Lucky to have a studio just a short walk from his home in northwest London, he went there most days—albeit with less of a deadline-driven focus. With a major launch in the United States canceled because of Covid-19, he pivoted the planned works—plus a handful of extra ones made during London's lockdown—into a fully booked solo show in the city. He learned a new performance skill—being kept closely under wraps until later this year, when all will be revealed in a spangly, high-octane stage show. And, he made one of the United Kingdom's most popular cultural TV series of 2020, reaching weekly audiences of over one million people—a salve to those struggling with mental health challenges during the early stages of the pandemic, and described by a reviewer as “one of the most joyous bits of lockdown TV.”<sup>1</sup>

The artist is the quirky, multi-talented, media-savvy Grayson Perry. It's perhaps little surprise that he was able to maneuver through what could have been a year of bitter disappointments, both professional and personal (his 60th birthday, after all, coincided with the first day of lockdown in London, and a party for friends was forcibly postponed). Perry had already had his fair share of letdowns and rejections before he shot to local art-world fame nearly two decades ago. A potter, printmaker, sculptor, and draftsman, he is also an outspoken transvestite, a political provocateur, an alternative fashion icon, and a cultural anthropologist extraordinaire. He is famed for unpicking everything from toxic masculinity and modern-day rites of passage to class, taste, and most recently, the culture wars, which he sees as dangerous for their “weaponization of strong feeling through social media.”<sup>2</sup>

Perry's rise to stardom was far from inevitable. Born in Chelmsford, Essex, in 1960, he studied not at the renowned Royal College of Art or Central Saint Martins in London, but at Portsmouth Polytechnic, now University of Portsmouth, two-and-a-half hours from the capital and at one remove from its burgeoning art scene. He came to maturity in the mid-1980s, a near-contemporary of the

Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Michael Landy, and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Perry's work shares their provocative attitudes and shock factor, but also reveals key differences that set him apart. He was, for example, always less interested in conceptualism than in a sort of craft maximalism, a *horror vacui* underpinned by his philosophy of, “When in doubt, bung it on!”<sup>3</sup> Where most contemporary art shuns the verbal or explicit in preference for open-endedness, abstraction, or even opacity, his work is typically figurative, packed with words and phrases that holler loudly of its immediate connections to daily life. He also showed himself early on to be a deep thinker on subjects ranging from aesthetics to the subconscious, taking pen to paper in startlingly pungent style in a regular column for *The Times* newspaper from 2005 to 2007. This is a penchant that continues to this day, most often via editorials for *The Guardian* and texts to accompany his exhibitions.

For many years, Perry worked largely under the radar, from a converted corner shop in a then unfashionable district of northeast London, unable to eke out a living from his work and relying on the support of his psychotherapist wife, Philippa, still the central figure in his life. The key breakthrough came in the late 1990s in a dusty basement storeroom in Amsterdam, where well-disposed Stedelijk Museum design curator Marjan Boot was rummaging when she turned up a pot by Perry, *The Names of Flowers* (1994). Much like

his other signature ceramics, it fuses a loosely classical form with pithy and incongruous content—in this case, Afghan war rug imagery and the names of contemporary conflict zones combined with open-stock flower transfers. After making a handful of other purchases of Perry's work, Boot invited the artist to drinks, and offered him the show that would lead to his nomination for the UK's Turner Prize: “Guerrilla Tactics,” which ran at the Stedelijk and then at London's Barbican Art Gallery in 2002. When Perry won the prestigious prize the following year, to most observers' great surprise—he

1 Anita Singh, “Grayson's Art Club: Britain Week, review,” *Telegraph*, June 1, 2020.

2 Grayson Perry in “Grayson Perry's Big American Road Trip,” Swan Films for Channel 4, episode 3, first broadcast on October 7, 2020.



GRAYSON PERRY, *The Names of Flowers*, 1994, glazed ceramic, 42 × 28 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.



GRAYSON PERRY, *Taste and Democracy*, 2004, glazed ceramic, 41 × 26 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.



GRAYSON PERRY, *Tomb Guardian*, 2011, glazed ceramic, 77 × 60 × 60 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.

was up against, among others, the much better known Chapman brothers—it was a watershed moment. He was by then 43 years old, only had minimal exposure, and was more than ready for the enormous career boost the prize heralded. As he commented later, “By the time I won the Turner Prize I was boasting that I had never been featured in an art magazine, calling it ‘climbing Everest without oxygen.’”<sup>14</sup>

To mark his win and the media attention it garnered, Perry made a celebratory work in 2004 titled *Taste and Democracy*. The vase is littered with quotations taken from reviews, media commentary, and the Turner Prize audience comments book at Tate Britain. Featuring a rural landscape as its backdrop, its glazed surface is pockmarked by speech bubbles—all of them phrases the artist had read or heard—announcing, for example, that “Pottery is the new video,” “It’s about time a transvestite won the Turner Prize,” and “Sincerity is the new shocking.” A wry but heartfelt piece, the work reflects joyfully on Perry’s move onto the art world stage and, no doubt because of the perennial fascination with his dressing up, into the public domain.

From then on, his exhibitions have grown exponentially in scale and ambition. His own biography has been featured more openly: his miserable childhood dominated by an emotionally manipulative mother and aggressive stepfather; the discovery of his transvestism and his interest in the world of S&M (he notes: “In life, as in art, I have been dusted with the perversion brush”<sup>15</sup>); his bouts of anger and depression; the therapy he underwent after the birth of his daughter (“like going to a good weepy movie every week, where I was the star”<sup>16</sup>); and his obsession with the only childhood relic he still possesses, a battered but beloved teddy bear called Alan Measles (“my surrogate father, the leader of my imaginary world, a benign dictator, and an invulnerable war hero all rolled into one” ).

All of this (bar the therapy, which he began in 1998) had been there from the start, as a 2020 show of Perry’s early ceramics and photographs at the Holburne Museum in Bath vividly captured—but it was now writ large. In a major exhibition at London’s British Museum in 2011, “The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman,” in which Perry created new works in response to objects he selected from the museum’s vast global collections, he raised to new heights the notion of an imagined civilization built around the cult of Alan Measles. The bear appeared variously as a Japanese warrior-god, a stern pope, a fiery Greek god, and an enraged tomb guardian, in a plethora of works that also showed the level of technical accomplishment he had now reached. His ceramics were becoming more complex, multi-layered, and at times grand in scale, while the tapestries (designed using Photoshop and then woven on a mechanical loom in Belgium) were eye-popping and immersive. Since 2009, these have been among the most vivid outlets for his imagination; one tapestry series, for

example, *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012), which has been touring venues across the UK and Europe for nearly a decade, tells a whimsical tale of social climbing inspired by William Hogarth’s mid-18th-century print series, *A Rake’s Progress*.

The British Museum exhibition is still, for Perry, a career highlight. “It was the culmination of a long thread and it still resonates for me,” he says. “It was so long in the preparation—two years



Exterior view of *A House for Essex* in Wrabness, designed by **GRAYSON PERRY** and **FAT ARCHITECTURE**. Photo by Jack Hobhouse. Courtesy Living Architecture.



Interior view of *A House for Essex* in Wrabness, designed by **GRAYSON PERRY** and **FAT ARCHITECTURE**. Photo by Jack Hobhouse. Courtesy Living Architecture.

3 Sarah Howell, "Sex pots," *World of Interiors*, July 1993, p. 101.

4 Chris Stephens and Catrin Jones (ed.), *Grayson Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years*, Thames & Hudson, 2020, p. 63.

5 Jacky Klein, *Grayson Perry*, Thames & Hudson, 3rd edition, 2020, p. 129.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

8 The artist in conversation with the author, August 4, 2020.

9 From Arts Council Collection website: <https://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/exhibition/2008-unpopular-culture>

10 The artist in conversation with the author, August 4, 2020.

11 From Victoria Miro gallery website: <https://online.victoria-miro.com/>

or more; it came about at my instigation; and it was a success! I think it sealed my seriousness as an artist: a lot of people were still doubtful about me, but when they saw that show, they changed their view."<sup>8</sup> Another high point was *A House for Essex*, the tile-decked gingerbread phantasm he designed in 2015 with architect Charles Holland as an upmarket holiday rental cottage. Rising from the flat Essex plains at the edge of River Stour, it was built around the story of a mythical character Perry created, Julie Cope, and is as much a paean to his own memories, identity, and life experiences as it is to his fictitious modern-day saint.

Perry is now a household name in the UK, where he is arguably the most popular domestic artist since Lucian Freud and David Hockney, his name as recognizable to cab drivers as it is to the culturati. In recent years he has scooped up an impressive array of accolades: elected a Royal Academician in 2011; made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to contemporary art in 2013; appointed a Trustee of the British Museum in 2015; and awarded the Dutch Erasmus Prize in 2020. Along the way he has also become known as an ingenious and sensitive curator. In 2008, for example, he selected works from the UK's Arts Council Collection in the touring exhibition "Unpopular Culture," honing in on modern British figurative artworks—by, among others, Lynn Chadwick, Frank Auerbach, and Jack Smith—that, as he explained, "conjure a nostalgic picture of a post-war, pre-Thatcherite Britain, more reflective, more civic and more humane."<sup>9</sup> One of the pieces he made in response was *Queen's Bitter* (2007), a commemorative drinking flask eulogizing working-class culture, with folky patriotic imagery of Union Jacks, pearly Kings and Queens (traditional street traders in London who decorated their clothes with pearl buttons), and photo transfers of Perry himself wearing headscarves, the dying emblem—in England, at least—of polite fashion. "Even someone who seems as flamboyant as me has always been infected by a kind of English overcast outlook and palette,"<sup>10</sup> he recently commented.

If all this sounds terribly British, in many ways it is. Perry's subject matter, his engagement with craft traditions including early English slipware, the centrality of Essex to his creative DNA, and his avowedly mordant tone—with its nods to the satirical printmakers of the 18th and 19th centuries

such as Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray—all mark him out as a peculiarly British artistic phenomenon. Busting taboos, and with a taste for erotica and the grotesque, he could almost be a latter-day Aubrey Beardsley. Dressing up in anything he pleases, whether babydoll outfits or fetish gear, he seems the very archetype of the English eccentric.

In recent times, however, he has gained greater prominence on the international stage and has turned his incisive humor outwards. While long admired in Japan, his work has in the past few years been exhibited in France, Finland, Denmark, Albania, Turkey, and Australia, where in 2015 he staged his largest retrospective to date, "My Pretty Little Art Career," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney. His latest body of work—exhibited in "The MOST Specialest Relationship" at Victoria Miro gallery in London last September to October—focused on the US, inspired by his summer 2019 journey there for a TV series, *Grayson Perry's Big American Road Trip*. Traveling on a garishly decorated motorbike he designed, and decked out in psychedelic custom leathers featuring flames, stars, lightning bolts, and a demonic Alan Measles with CND-logo eyes, he explored "some of the fault lines in the US around class, race, identity, and economic opportunity." One work, a red, white, and blue print nearly two-and-a-half meters wide, *The American Dream* (2020), calls out the power of

social media to stoke the flames of conflict in the culture wars. "The godlike figure at the top," he says, "is Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook . . . the best known face of social media power . . . All the ships, planes and other combatants are labelled with the issues that swirl around this artificially polarised struggle."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, as much as Perry's inspiration has been found in English arts and crafts, he also explores other cultural traditions. These have ranged from Sumatran batiks and Ghanaian militia



Detail of GRAYSON PERRY's *Queen's Bitter*, 2007, glazed ceramic, 57 × 44 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Victoria Miro, London; and Burger Collection, Hong Kong.



Portrait of GRAYSON PERRY. Photo by Richard Ansett/Channel 4. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.



GRAYSON PERRY, *The American Dream*, 2020, color etching, 109.6×239.8 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.

flags to Russian stave churches and Lithuanian post shrines. Japan's craft traditions have been a consistent source of wonder for him, whether Edo-period ceramics, Japanese kimonos (on which he based his own set of artist's robes in 2004), Shinto shrines, or the Kutani ware that inspired a plate made for his 2007 exhibition at Kanazawa's 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art. He has, likewise, based his creations on historic Korean and Chinese ceramics (always featuring his trademark discordant subject matter), and more recently, has referenced Islamic designs. The lidded vase *Warhead* (2020) from his 2020 show at Victoria Miro, for example, features a diagrammatic network of 18th-century slave ships and the warped, floating face of former US president Donald Trump, its form directly transcribed from an ancient Persian ceramic.

While many of Perry's references have been culturally specific, his themes often address more universal concerns: war; religion; the mysterious workings of the mind; our innate need for myths and gods. Even his transvestism suddenly seems timely in terms of wider LGBTQ+ debates around sexual identity and gender fluidity. One of his most recent preoccupations—surely something of broad relevance today, in a world enflamed by extremism—has been around the idea of compromise and the happy medium. "'Middle ground' has become a kind of dirty word," he says. "It is no man's land in the culture war and I find that fascinating, because one thing that I've learned from the nature of being human is that middle ground is kind of sanity."<sup>12</sup> In an era of dangerous polarization and bitter divisions, the voice of one savvy, teasing, middle-of-the-road maverick may be just what the world needs.

#### Grayson Perry

London-based Grayson Perry was born in Chelmsford in 1960. He has exhibited widely internationally, including at London's British Museum, National Portrait Gallery, and Serpentine Galleries; Monnaie de Paris; Kiasma, Helsinki; AROs Aarhus Art Museum; Bonnefontenmuseum, Maastricht; Grand Duke Jean Museum of Modern Art, Luxembourg; Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; and Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney. He has also curated several major exhibitions, including in 2018 the critically acclaimed "250th Summer Exhibition" at London's Royal Academy of Arts. He delivered the Reith Lectures, BBC Radio 4's annual flagship talk series, in 2013, and has won numerous broadcasting awards. He won the Turner Prize in 2003, was made a CBE in 2013, and won the Erasmus Prize in 2020.

#### Jacky Klein

Jacky Klein is an art historian, publisher, and broadcaster. She was a curator at London's Tate, Barbican, Courtauld, and Hayward galleries before moving into art publishing as commissioning editor at Thames & Hudson and Phaidon, executive editor at Tate, and director at HENI Publishing. Author of the definitive monograph on *Grayson Perry* (3rd edition published in 2020), she has also co-authored publications including *What is Contemporary Art? A Children's Guide* (2012), *Body of Art* (2015), and *Alfred Cohen: An American Artist in Europe* (2020). She has presented and contributed to a range of television and radio programs for the BBC, Channel 5, Travel Channel, Bloomberg TV, and Christie's. A Trustee of the UK Association for Art History, she is currently associate lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

12 "Grayson Perry's Big American Road Trip," Swan Films for Channel 4, episode 3, first broadcast on October 7, 2020.



GRAYSON PERRY, *Warhead*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 66×28×28 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.