

THE CRAFTY TRANSFORMER

Ahead of a career retrospective, British national treasure and iconoclast Grayson Perry – the transvestite and Turner Prize-winner, husband and father, and wearer of many hats and platform shoes – gives *The Peak* an exclusive audience.

STORY CHRISTY CHOI

Grayson Perry is a snob, or so he says. “I just hate the kind of things that are popular,” he explains, citing street art and the types of things that come up when one Googles the word ‘art’. “It’s just my natural reaction. I’ve just grown up ... and I’m probably clinging on to the idea that I’m some sort of character with creative uniqueness. But it’s probably a myth.”

It’s this knack for self-reflection, self-mockery and candidness – if not brutal honesty – that probably gives Perry’s works their lacerating edge. He’s made a career out of highlighting life’s ironies and complexities, its warts and beauty spots – all with a touch of wry humour. His titles say it all: *A Weed is Just a Plant in the Wrong Place*. *Moonlit Wankers*. *Sex, Drugs and Earthenware*.

The 54-year-old artist, curator, writer and TV presenter – who began secretly dressing up as a girl when he was 10 years old – is a master of subversion in how we view class and identity. Whether it’s

through his transvestite persona Claire (a self-professed cross between Camilla Parker Bowles and Katie Boyle), Alan Measles (his teddy bear that became a surrogate father figure and coping mechanism for a less-than-happy childhood) or his 2012 Bafta-winning TV series *All in the Best Possible Taste* (which analysed how “taste” is defined by Britain’s different social classes), Perry’s actions and his prodigious output invite people to take a closer look at what we hold dear and true, about what he calls “the softer, more fluid sense of self”. In a recent piece he wrote for *The Sunday Times*, he explained: “Our identity is a narrative we tell ourselves – a story that is constantly being edited, influenced.”

“He’s dealing with issues that really touch people, but in a quieter, objective, non-judgmental kind of way,” says Glenn Scott Wright, co-director of the London-based gallery Victoria Miro, which brings Perry’s work to Art Basel Hong Kong this month.

ANONYMITY AND CELEBRITY

Take, for example, Perry’s 2011 exhibition at the British Museum, cheekily titled *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. The artist hid his contemporary works among the centuries-old artefacts at the museum, leading visitors on a hunt to distinguish between authentic and imagined history.

“It was difficult to tell,” recalls Rachel Kent, chief curator of Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, which will mount a Perry retrospective – his first large-scale exhibition in the Asia-Pacific region in a decade – from December 2015 to May 2016, in a show of ceramics, sculptures, tapestries, prints, drawings and photography that promises to provoke and place Perry firmly in the pantheon of contemporary art.

That British Museum show begged the question: If we can’t distinguish what’s modern from old, who assigns these objects a certain value? And what is value, anyway? In a typical display of his post-modern, self-deprecating self-awareness,

OPPOSITE
Grayson Perry and his other “self”, Claire. Perry (below) in a dress designed for him by Han Kim and shoes by Natacha Marro. Most of Claire’s outfits are designed by Perry’s students at Central Saint Martins college in London.



“AN ARTIST AT AN ART FAIR IS LIKE A CHILD WATCHING ITS PARENTS HAVE SEX. IT’S NOT ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE... I’M NOT A JET-SETTING ARTIST”

— Grayson Perry



Grayson Perry's *Comfort Blanket* tapestry (above), measuring 8x3 metres, will be shown at the Victoria Miro gallery booth at Art Basel Hong Kong 2015.

Perry says of the exhibition: “The craftsman’s anonymity I find especially resonant in an age of the celebrity artist.”

It’s a nod to the social underdog, and Perry does the same for what many consider to be archaic folk crafts. With self-knowing irony, he has given knitting, folksy sculpture, pottery and tapestry-making a radical twist by introducing themes that many would consider taboo. Stories of sexual and gender “deviance”, abuse, child abduction, sadomasochism and parental neglect all unfold in free-form

storytelling with no beginning and no end, alive with words and expressions drawn from the conscious and the subconscious, typically set amid the iconography of his boyhood Essex countryside.

THE SOCIAL AND THE PERSONAL

Wright Scott says that, early in Perry’s artistic career – long after he had abandoned his dream of becoming an army officer, and after experimenting with performance art and film in the 1980s – Perry recast the pot as a 360-degree

canvas for reflection on critical social issues, a radical strategy that helped win him the Turner Prize in 2003. It has been commercially rewarding as well, with his pots currently selling for about £120,000 (HK\$1.44 million) a pop – a far cry from his first £50 sale when he was in his 20s.

“It’s a fusion of social commentary and personal story,” says Kent, who has had a good look at the entire body of Perry’s work in preparation for the show in Sydney. According to her, Perry’s earlier work deals more with his personal

COURTESY VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON

identity, the gradual awareness of his interest in transvestism, the separation of his working-class parents (a “weak and narrow-minded” father and a mentally ill but overly ambitious mother) and growing up under the boot of a violent stepfather. “There’s this sense of being a cuckoo within the nest – the wrong child,” Kent says.

It’s a murky life that has proven to be a mother lode for his art, controlled and tamed in large part through extensive psychotherapy – though not with his psychotherapist wife, Philippa.

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— Rachel Kent, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

(The couple have a 22-year-old daughter, Florence, who works for BuzzFeed.)

Though *The Peak* was encouraged to focus more on Perry’s recent work, one must acknowledge the elephant in the room and let the artist himself talk about the genesis of Claire. “People think that because I like wearing a frock it is symptomatic of an identity ‘issue’ I might have,” he recently wrote in *The Sunday Times*. “The phrase ‘alter-ego’ is often used when describing me in a dress, as if I might need to act

out some identity that is not really me. The whole thing got confusing because I sometimes refer to myself in a dress as Claire, a name I used in the past to retain anonymity, something I was encouraged to do by a transvestite support group. In my anxious youth, it may have felt like an alternative identity, but nowadays dressing up is most definitely part of who I am. I am not pretending to be female, or even some other character, I am 'me': a man in a dress."

Still, Perry acknowledges that he might "use the 'lovable character' identity to smuggle sharper, less comfortable truths into my work and discourse – another very English trait", with the other being his distrust of intellectuals.

BLANKET OF DIVERSITY

In more recent years, Perry has taken the magnifying glass to social identity, as seen in works such as his 15-metre *The Walthamstow Tapestry* from 2009, which chronicles our relationship with brand names from birth to death, and which has been acquired by the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou after it was shown by the Victoria Miro at Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2014.

"Social issues are what drives my work increasingly," Perry tells *The Peak*, in the very international and slightly posh accent of his

Islington tribe. Head to Art Basel in Hong Kong this month and you're likely to see evidence of Perry's new focus at the Victoria Miro gallery booth. "It's eight metres by three, so it's a large colourful object. You won't miss it when you see it," says Perry of *Comfort Blanket*.

In this tapestry, made with the help of machines from iPads to computer-controlled looms, the face of Queen Elizabeth II dominates, as does the pound sign. But look closer and you'll see Marmite, Cliff Richard, curry, fish and chips, mongrels, moaners, rain, liberty, fair play, rule of law – all contained in what looks like a giant £10 banknote knitted by your gran. It's a national-identity blanket that you could literally wrap yourself in.

Perry says *Comfort Blanket* is a literal manifestation of the "security blanket" that Britain was to a friend's mother after she and her family fled Hungary during the Russian invasion in the 1950s. It's the country's rule of law and stability that drew refugees and asylum-seekers to Britain, and which still looms large in the core of what makes the UK what it is, says Perry. "It's something I wanted to convey: Yes, we have the pound and our economy is very important, but really, the real value of anywhere, of any society, is not monetary," he says. "[The right-wing UK Independence Party] appeals to curmudgeonly old

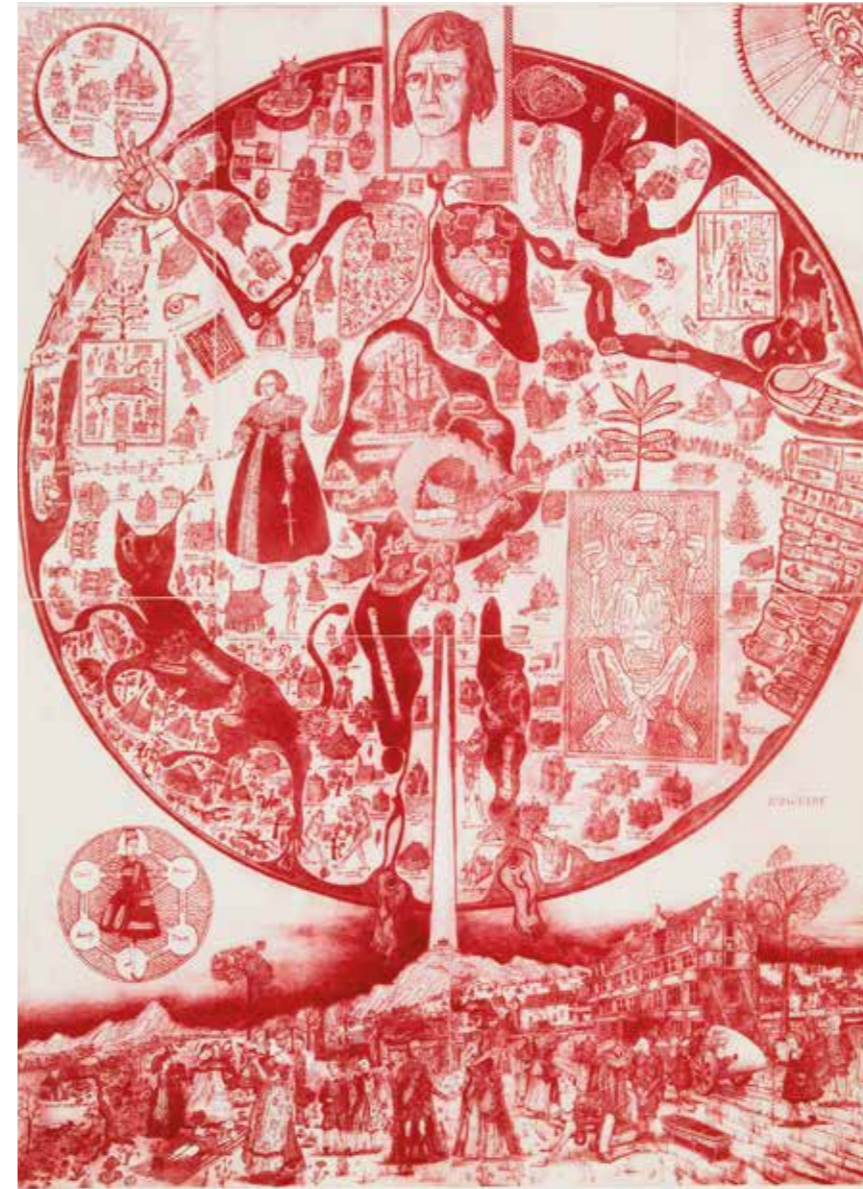
"HE'S DEALING WITH ISSUES THAT REALLY TOUCH PEOPLE, BUT IN A QUIETER, OBJECTIVE, NON-JUDGMENTAL KIND OF WAY"

— Glenn Scott Wright, Victoria Miro

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT *Mum and Dad* (1994) and *Precious Boys 1* (2004), glazed ceramic, and *Map of Nowhere (red)* from 2008, colour etching from five plates, edition of 15 plus AP, all by Grayson Perry



COURTESY VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON



men. A big part of British identity is curmudgeonly old men who love to blame something, so they seek an easy target. But the economics and all that don't add up. This country would be in the shit if it wasn't for all the immigrants doing all the jobs that a lot of people don't want to do and can't do."

Perry, who also teaches at Central Saint Martins in London, won't be attending Art Basel in Hong Kong this year. "An artist at an art fair is like a child watching its parents have sex. It's not entirely appropriate," he jokes. "I'm not a jet-setting artist."

Actually, Perry has to stay in London to finish a three-year collaboration with architect Charles Holland – a house in Essex commissioned by philosopher Alain de Botton's company, Living Architecture, which builds holiday homes designed by leading architects. The house, Perry explains, will be a shrine to an imaginary Essex woman, whose narrative represents the social history of the English county of the past 60 years. "It's entirely tiled on the outside. It looks like something Pixar would have dumped in the landscape." 🙏

GRAYSON PERRY SPEAKS

ART IN THE INTERNET AGE

"Artists now have in their pockets access to every idea and every image ever made. They're confused by the choice and don't have their own culture anymore. If there's one phrase that fills my heart with dread, it's global culture. It's an awful, meaningless phrase. It just reminds me of airports, which are like the ugliest places in the world. We want to reassert different cultures in the face of the great toad that is the internet that squats on everything. I mean, thank god I'm in the art business, not the music business or photography or journalism, which have all been 'revolutionised' – that is, impoverished – by the internet."

IDENTITY POLITICS

"One thing people have to realise is that anything social and emotional like identity, it changes very, very slowly. They recently did a study on social mobility. They tracked unusual surnames... and they found that even in China, the surnames that were part of the ruling elite in ancient China are still over-represented in post-revolution China. Even though the ancient elite was suppressed, those names still persist disproportionately among the ruling elite. We're socially conditioned – you imbibe the confidence and the ability to succeed. It's something that goes through the generation. It's a huge advantage."

WHAT MAKES GOOD ART

"What makes something good anymore? If the right people agree that it's good, then it's good. All those people you see at art fairs – curators, dealers, artists, teachers, collectors and art critics. There's no science involved. It's just a collection of subjective opinions by experienced people... I dislike street art. It's like blasting music from your car with the windows rolled down. It might be my favourite song, but I don't need to hear it right here, right now. There's something really aggressive about it I don't like."