



Dressing for Success

The cross-dressing,
craft-embracing British artist

Grayson Perry

has made a career of
subverting and flouting social
taboos in his work

BY ELIZABETH FULLERTON



FAME HAS ITS DRAWBACKS,

as the artist Grayson Perry has learned: since he won the Turner Prize in 2003, he can't wear the same dress in public twice. If he does, he says, "the main headline is 'Oh, you wore that last time.' That's very annoying."

Six feet tall with a shaggy blond bob, Perry causes a stir at art events wearing his Little Bo Peep dresses, bonnets, and Mary Jane shoes. He won the Turner Prize for his intricate pots whose elegant background designs, based on chinoiserie, Victoriana, or ancient Greek ceramics, lure the viewer up close, only to thrust in his face densely collaged pornographic images and graffiti expletives. This explosive clash between formal beauty and gritty content is central to Perry's

Elizabeth Fullerton is a London-based freelance writer and a former foreign correspondent for Reuters.

ABOVE *World Leaders Attend the Marriage of Alan Measles and Claire Perry, 2009. Alan Measles is Perry's teddy bear; Claire is his transvestite persona.*

OPPOSITE *Perry dressed to kill. At lower right, he shows off his newly-presented Royal Academician's medal.*



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: © GARYSON PERRY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VICTORIA MIRO GALLERY, LONDON (2)

work, which draws inspiration from reality television and consumer culture as well as folk art.

Titles such as *I saw this vase and thought it beautiful, then I looked at it* (1995) and *Pot Designed for a Wealthy Westerner with Good Taste* (1994) reflect Perry's wry, self-satirizing humor. Others, like *Moonlit Wankers* (2001) or *We've Found the Body of Your Child* (2000), evoke his teenage experiences or suggest social ills.

Critics have not always been kind to Perry. Adrian Searle, the *Guardian* critic, once dismissed him as "an interesting, complicated character" who "makes middling, minor art."

Jacky Klein, a former curator at the Hayward Gallery in London and author of a 2009 monograph on the artist, believes that the art world has misjudged Perry. She blames its snobbish attitude toward traditional craft media such as pottery and its mistaken conviction that his dressing up is a gimmick rather

than a compulsion rooted in childhood trauma. "The art world has a bit of catching up to do," Klein says. "The interest of the general public has always been enormous compared to almost any other artist in Britain at the moment, apart from maybe Hockney and previously Lucian Freud. He's on that kind of level of popular love and adoration for his work and for him as a person."

Perry's "The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman" exhibition at the British Museum earlier this year, which gave the artist unprecedented access to the museum's storage, may have turned the tide in his favor. His juxtaposition of artifacts from the museum's collection with his own richly detailed pots, sculptures, and

OPPOSITE Tim Rakewell becomes rich by selling his digital start-up company to Virgin in *The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal* (detail), 2012, from a set of six tapestries based on Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*.

RIGHT *Tomb Guardian*, 2011. Among Perry's sources of inspiration are folk art and chinoiserie.

tapestry work underscored the breadth of his practice. It also showed that behind the frilly frocks is a serious artist who casts himself as a modern-day William Hogarth, using his art as a vehicle for his darkly humorous and acerbic commentaries on society, religion, sexuality, and the contemporary art scene.

Indeed, Perry's show this summer at the London gallery Victoria Miro, "The Vanity of Small Differences," offered an updated version of Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1733) in six tapestries, each 13 by 6½ feet, illustrating the quirks and tacit rules of Britain's class system. "It's got two sets of narratives imposed on it: a religious iconography plus the narrative of the central character," explains Perry, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. "It's Tim Rakewell instead of Tom Rakewell" (his invented character playing the role of Hogarth's protagonist). "It's his rise through the classes, really."

The tapestries, which were woven on a computerized loom, are the result of a tour of England Perry made last year for a three-part television documentary on taste, for which he embedded himself in a working-class industrial town, a middle-

class housing estate, and an upper-class rural community. It was so successful that the channel offered him a two-year contract to act as an on-screen social anthropologist. "I've always enjoyed the mischievous danger of class because it is a little bit *de trop*—it's not the done thing to talk about it," says the artist, who has made a career of subverting convention and flouting social taboos in his art.

The first tableau presents a Nativity scene in which newborn Tim reaches for his mother's smart phone; the scene is



complete with an Adoration—not of magi but of tattooed cage fighters. The Expulsion from Paradise ensues as Tim attends university and is welcomed into his middle-class girlfriend's home. The story progresses through the Annunciation—his rise to riches as his computer company is sold for millions—and culminates in the Lamentation, with Tim dying in a highway crash against a backdrop of PCWorld, McDonald's, and Homebase signs.

"It's quite a depressing scenario, really," says Perry. "He had a midlife crisis, bought a flashy car, got himself a sexy new wife." But finally "the false restraint of his assumed middle-classness slipped away and he ended up in the gutter, literally." So is the



moral that people shouldn't aspire to transcend their class? Perry throws back his head and roars with laughter. "Maybe it is, maybe it is," he says.

BORN IN 1960 into a working-class family in Chelmsford, in the county of Essex, Perry is himself a prime example of class mobility. The artist, who was elected an academician of the Royal Academy of Arts in 2011, lives in a grand Georgian house in north London with his psychotherapist wife, Philippa. A framed photo of the couple and their daughter, Florence, who is studying chemistry at university, hangs near Perry's desk.

His childhood history is one of dysfunction and multiple rejections. His mother had an affair with the milkman, who later became his bullying stepfather. Perry is estranged from both. His father moved out and started another family, losing touch with Perry and his sister.

Amid this emotional turmoil, Perry discovered that he experienced a sexual thrill from dressing up in women's clothes. At age 15, he would totter around the neighborhood in his mother's outfits, desperately hoping not to be found out. His

transvestite persona, Claire, appears in much of his work, although he no longer uses the name.

Perry began experimenting with the little-girl look later, after he had relinquished the transvestite convention of striving to pass as a woman. "Of course you immediately go for the absolutely most forbidden, most unmale things, which are frilly and girly and pink and cute, because that's the crack, if you like, of cross-dressing," he says.

Another result of Perry's conflicted family environment was his retreat into an imaginary world. His teddy bear, whom he named Alan Measles, assumed the role of father, hero, and even god, as Perry invented elaborate wartime escapades for them both. Alan Measles featured prominently in the British Museum show, which included a Shinto-style shrine to him.

"Teddy is a vehicle for the projection of one's human feelings in the same way god is," says Perry, who loves religious art but describes himself as a Christian atheist. "That has become a central plank of my practice, to make religious art that doesn't have god in it."

The exhibition, comprising 200 artifacts selected by Perry



trations depict an elaborate fantasy world of children battling adults, was a major influence. In his youth, Perry was part of a bohemian group called the Neo-Naturists, who performed nude cabarets wearing body paint.

Nowadays his transvestism has been accepted into the mainstream. "It's part of my brand, if you like. I've become much more self-conscious about it as a marketing identity," he says with a sardonic grin. Perry's rebellion now mainly consists of poking gentle fun at the meaning-obsessed contemporary art world, which he views as pretentious and elitist. "There's some quite old-fashioned thing at the core of contemporary art that likes to think it's this rarefied, difficult, cutting-edge thing, and I suppose there's this big part of me that wants to kind of deflate that balloon," he says.

LEFT Tim Rakewell reaches for his mother's smart phone in *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters*, 2012.

Years of therapy have made Perry articulate and self-aware; he rejects the cliché of the tortured artist, although debris from his past is constantly cropping up in his work. "I find it very hard to keep autobiography out of my work," he admits. The Afghan war rug adorned with images of weapons and tanks in his book-lined study appears in several works. A kitsch ceramic model airplane on the wall pays tribute to his childhood fascination with jets. His motorbike leathers hang on a wall alongside a beaded satin evening gown stitched with an enormous ejaculating penis.

Perry lists as his hobbies mountain biking, motorbikes (he has three), and dresses, although he has little time for glamming up these days. "It's been gradually corralled into my social life," he says. "I'm 53 and my libido is shrinking. At basement level it's a sexually motivated thing."

Perry's confidence and ambition are growing as he ages (he's actually 52). He has had solo shows around England and Europe, in Japan, and at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, but his career has been constrained by the time-consuming, laborious nature of his ceramic work—each pot takes three months to handcraft—as well as by the small physical scale of the pots. However, following the extremely successful British Museum exhibition, international institutions are suddenly clamoring at the door, according to his gallerist Victoria Miro. His pots now sell for £60,000 to £100,000 (\$95,000 to \$155,000) and his tapestries range from £55,000 to £100,000 (\$85,000 to \$155,000).

Perry's projects are becoming grander in scope as he diversifies into tapestry, sculpture, and even architecture—plans for a nondenominational temple are in the pipeline. At the same time, his raw need to shock is shifting toward an interest in pure esthetic appeal.

"I'm aiming for uncontroversial beauty by the time I die," he says. "I think a lot of artists in their heart of hearts would like to make beautiful things, but it's seen as such a gauche ambition that a lot of artists in their clever, hipster irony would never admit to it."

"Maybe I'm just talking about myself here," he adds with a slow, deliberate chuckle. ■

and 30 of his own artworks, took the visitor on a pilgrimage through global cultures and the artist's imaginative universe, blurring the boundaries between new and old. For instance, he hung his tapestry *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011) next to a Tibetan thangka painting depicting the Wheel of Life, and he paired an ancient Ghanaian ceremonial headdress with a deliberately aged helmet he had made himself.

"It would be very difficult to think of any other contemporary artist who could do what Grayson has just done," says Philip Attwood, the museum's lead curator for the show. "Because he's such a maker, because his works reference so many of the works in the British Museum, he's a marvelous match for the British Museum."

For Perry, the exhibition was the realization of a career-long ambition, the seed of which he traces back to his degree show at Portsmouth Polytechnic. "The idea that I was a one-man culture was the starting of it. I mean it's a portrait of me in many ways, reflected in world culture," he says.

While his work often treats universal themes, Perry has always identified with the role of outsider, eschewing trends in art. The American outsider artist Henry Darger, whose illus-