

# REVIEWS

DESIGNS OF THE YEAR | TIM STEAD | THINGS WE DO IN BED | CHARLOTTE HODES | HIDDEN AGENDA



## Fashion that fascinates and frustrates

**Dries Van Noten: Inspirations**

*Les arts décoratifs (Musée de la mode et du textile)*, 75001 Paris  
1 March - 31 August 2014  
Catalogue: £55

Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

The status of *couture* has always proved contentious. Is it art? Is it craft? Or simply

superficial ephemera aimed at a rich clientele? Buried in these questions is an equally knotty one: how profound is the couturier's bond with his so-called 'inspirations'? From the Victoria & Albert's worshipful *Vivienne Westwood* (see *Crafts* No.189 July/August 2004) to an epic show such as *Yves Saint Laurent* (see *Crafts* No.224 May/June 2010), this is a question central to every designer retrospective.

Big modern shows often confront it with juxtapositions. Picturing various influences with their putative offspring can result in stunning scenography – all the more if one can actually show original garments. Also, it provides the shock of the new backed up by acknowledged talent. Deeper connections, however, are harder to articulate. It's easy to describe

Installation view of *Dries Van Noten: Inspirations*

your show as a 'cabinet of curiosities' but just as easy to end up at the Twitter and Pinterest level – with an experience that's limited to ooh-ing and ah-ing.

*Dries Van Noten: Inspirations* really goes for broke. It crams 400 items into two levels of winding, dimly lit space. This results in a dizzy and sometimes overloaded bombardment where one can actually watch mesmerised visitors walk into walls. Arranged by theme, the show is both frustrating and fascinating. Not all the garments here are by Van Noten; an equal number represent the Rolodex of *haute couture*. From Balenciaga and Chanel to Yves Saint Laurent, it takes a while to realise the historic works are mounted on dummies. Van Noten's, by contrast, are all shown on mannequins.



Installation view of *Dries Van Noten: Inspirations*  
Below: *Hundreds and Thousands*, Angela O'Kelly, 1999  
Opposite: *Prototype XL1 chair*, Michael Marriott, 1991

The exhibition's visual art and artefacts are really astonishing. They include smart society paintings by Elizabeth Peyton, Kees van Dongen and Cecil Beaton – but also important works from Johannes Bosschaert, Léon Spilliaert, Francis Bacon and Mark Rothko. A Schiaparelli butterfly print pales in comparison to its backdrop, which is a huge wheel of the shimmering insects by Damien Hirst. Even Van Noten's penchant for 'the foppish' becomes a gallery – one that includes a van Dyck, a famous portrait of Proust and Boldini's oil of the dandy Robert de Montesquiou. Near the end of the show, one finds both Bronzino's 16th century *Portrait of a Sculptor* and Gerhard Richter's equally splendid abstract, *Mohn*.

Nor is there a lack of sculptures, films or objects. One can see the sword designed for Jean Cocteau by Cartier (it's part of his *habit vert* for the Académie française) and the bespoke shoe collection of Baron Alexis de Redé. Clips from *A Clockwork Orange* and *Chariots of Fire* are showing, as well as images from David Attenborough's *The Life of Birds*. On the tonier side, one can see *Carnations* by Pina Bausch and a Van Noten *défilé* in outsize slo-mo.

A stimulating bow to its subject as a man of taste, this multi-faceted exhibition is a big sensation. Its many loans comprise

a real accomplishment by Pamela Golbin, one of the French museum system's youngest-ever chief curators. What she has assembled is indeed amazing. But, at the centre of it all, there is something missing.

The stock of Van Noten's inspirations may be exhaustive, but all this dazzle effectively suppresses the personal. Nothing is really divulged about this creator's singular palette, his signature approaches to both colour and texture. Engaging as it is comparing his camouflage with Toile de Jouy, I also wanted to know about the Van Noten family (Dries marking its third generation in the garment biz).

Posing the question of 'inspiration' need not mean resolving it. However, some of the tableaux here put Van Noten's work in the shade. For instance, Christian Dior's long-legendary *Bar* suit – the ivory jacket and full black skirt which codified his New Look – appears behind a radiant *Blue Venus* by Yves Klein. Each of those pieces comes from a very different discipline and each exudes an individual virtuosity.

Yet both are striving to capture the absolute. It makes a stunning composition and a poetic moment. But it's one that makes Van Noten's nearby gowns and jacket superfluous.

*Cynthia Rose is a journalist and broadcaster based in Paris and London*

## Crafts with a social conscience

**Hidden Agenda: Socially Conscious Craft**  
Granary Gallery, Berwick-Upon-Tweed  
22 March – 1 June 2014

Reviewed by Anna Burnside

Socially conscious craft? Twenty years ago, this would have been the cue for a joke about hand-knitted armpit hair. Not today. The green movement, craftivism, the conscious decision of many non-artists to revisit the homely skills of their grandparents have combined to turn subversive ceramics and provocative embroidery into recognisable trends rather than aberrations from a decorative norm.

This small show, at Berwick-Upon-Tweed's enviable Granary Gallery, shows many of the different disciplines that shelter beneath the 'socially conscious' umbrella. The idea sprang from a recent piece by Doug Jones, who worked on the show in conjunction with the Crafts Council and Berwick Visual Arts. Another exhibit is the result of a call-out to artists in the north-east of England; the remaining works are from the Crafts Council's own Collection. All of which is further proof that this is part of the new mainstream.

Some of the choices, such as the prototype of Jane Atfield's *RCP2* chair, are functional objects constructed from unexpected materials (her smudgy, psychedelic plastic is made from old yoghurt pots). The anti-consumption message is in the construction; the



object is simply useful and, in this case, deliciously groovy. Similarly, Michael Marriott's *XL1* chair (made from found oak and old tea chests) uses reclaimed materials to produce an easily manufactured piece of furniture that has a light footprint in every way.

Recycling can be part of the story as well as the main point. Lois Walpole's *Apple Laundry Basket* combines coiled willow and old juice cartons in the shape of, naturally, an apple. It borrows from the craftspeople of the developing world, who refold exercise books into paper bags and cut up flour sacks to make *papier mâché*, but using a familiar British form. The shape leavens the message. It would be hard to lift that lid, using the handle-stalk, without a smile.

Paul Scott has amended an existing pattern to make a powerful political point. At first glance, *A Willow for Ai Weiwei*, *Wen Tao*, *Liu Zhenggang*, *Zhang Jinsong*, *Hu Mingfen* looks like any other splendid Willow platter. But there is only one figure: Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist, dropping a Han dynasty urn from the bridge. Weiwei appears as a jagged outline, as he had 'disappeared' when Scott made the piece in 2012.

Elsewhere there is much fun to be had in the subversion of traditional

forms. Lynn Setterington's delicate white quilt would not look out of place on a Moses basket although, given her history of embroidering Iceland carrier bags and shopping lists, this seems unlikely. Sure enough, a closer look reveals a hammer, spanner, electric drill and other tools lurking on the body of the fabric.

Karen Thompson's *Trilogy of Death*, based on an early 19th century Staffordshire pottery ornament, is both clever and funny. James Lowther from Berwick Visual Arts chose this after the call-in process, and it was a great decision. The first piece is a copy of *The Death of Munrow*, a lurid 18th century depiction of an army captain being mauled by a tiger in India. Next comes *The Death of Sainsbury*, in which Munrow – raised from the dead – is feeding the same tiger using a knife and fork. In *The Death of a Species*, the magnificent beast has become a rug beneath Munrow's feet. The reversal of roles over two centuries, with the tiger going from predator to carpet, summed up in three small glazed tableaux.

Grayson Perry's 1996 work, *Mad Kid's Bedroom Wall Pot*, has narrative on a smaller scale (*Tracy Beaker* rather than *Life of Pi*). The multiple glazed and embossed layers capture the chaos of

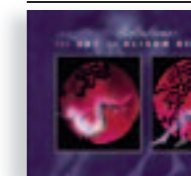
## BOOKS ROUND UP



**Materiality Matters**  
The second volume in the *Documents on Contemporary Crafts* series, this book brings together essays on materiality, looking at different attitudes within fine art and craft practice, with contributions from, among others, Jessica Hemmings, Michael Eden and Stephen Knott.  
*Edited by Joakim Borda-Pedreira and Gjertrud Steinsvåg, Published by Norwegian Crafts, pb £10*



**WA: The Essence of Japanese Design**  
Billed as the 'first ever comprehensive English-language introduction to Japanese design', this book (rather beautifully bound using a traditional Japanese method) surveys centuries of one nation's making, with 250 objects that span the disciplines from metal and ceramics to glass, paper and modern materials like fibreglass.  
*By Rossella Menegazzo, Stefania Piotti and Kenya Hara, Published by Phaidon, hb £49.95*



**Reflections: The Art of Alison Kinnaird**  
We don't often receive music CDs in the *Crafts* office, so Kinnaird's book came as a welcome surprise. Combining more than 100 images of work from across the glass artist's celebrated career, *Reflections* also offers a disc of films of her at work, as well as harp music performed by Kinnaird and her husband.  
*With contributions from Alison Kinnaird MBE and James Holloway, Published by Kinnor Music, pb £10*



**Made By Hand: Contemporary Makers, Traditional Practices**  
A survey of selected craftspeople from across the globe, *Made By Hand* stretches from musical instrument-maker Andreas Hudelmayer and glassblower Stewart Hearn both in London to bookbinder Michael O'Brien in New Zealand and Japanese paper-makers Awagami. Includes a select but charmingly illustrated glossary of tools.  
*Edited by Leanne Hayman and Nick Warner, Published by Black Dog Publishing, pb £16.95*



**Mr Eric Gill: Recollections of an Apprentice**  
As the subtitle says, this book details David Kindersley's two years as a student in Gill's studio. Thirty years after its first publication, *Mr Eric Gill* includes further thoughts from the author, as well as a new foreword from Fiona MacCarthy.  
*By David Kindersley, Published by Cardozo Kindersley Editions, pb £12*

a teenager's rancid cave and his angry, confused state of mind. Is it, as many of Perry's pieces are, autobiographical? There is a hint in the authentically spelled poem: 'I was a mad kid and now I ain't. I got out coz I could paint.'

Doug Jones's agenda in creating *Generation* – a low stage covered in 54 pairs of cast bronze chicken feet – is quite well hidden. It's hugely aesthetically pleasing, beautifully lit and arranged: yet it was manufactured in China where, far from being an object of aesthetic merit, chicken's feet are a cheap, nutritious snack for the kind of people who might work in the factory where they were made. We prefer to consume ours in a gallery.

Anna Burnside is a freelance writer and critic



## The story of design goes global

**History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture, 1400-2000**

Ed. by Pat Kirkham and Susan Weber, Bard Graduate Center, New York in association with Yale University Press, hb £50

Reviewed by Lesley Jackson

Any book that attempts to map the evolution of decorative art and design across five continents over the course of six centuries is by its very nature ambitious. At almost 700 pages and with 28 contributors from around the globe, *History of Design* is a real doorstopper of a tome. Pat Kirkham and Susan Weber, the book's joint editors, both deserve a medal simply for bringing it to fruition. I am not surprised to learn that it has taken ten years.

As they explain in their introduction, the motivation behind this huge undertaking was to create a primer for students at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, which specialises in decorative arts, design history and material culture. The book reinforces the institution's mission to promote scholarship in the field of design history and to raise its academic profile, particularly in relation to the 'privileged' disciplines of art history and architectural history (to co-opt one of the editors' favoured terms).

Although there are many publications on individual aspects of decorative art (on which this survey liberally draws), as well as general books tackling larger chunks of design history, the latter tend to be fairly

selective and, by definition, partial, focusing on a particular country or region, or a specific period or style. *History of Design* adopts a more systematic approach and presents a much broader picture, both geographically and chronologically. The book is divided into four parts, each covering between 100 to 200 years. The multifarious continent of Asia is broken down into three sections – East Asia (subdivided into China, Korea and Japan), India and the Islamic World – reflecting the cultural diversity and richness of this vast area. Africa, Europe and the Americas are also treated separately.

Inclusiveness is one of the most impressive features of this publication. Although Australia and Oceania are omitted, even this oversight is temporary as the editors state that they plan to tackle these areas in future editions.

A good example of the book's fair-mindedness is the way in which it tackles artefacts from the editors' home turf. Whereas standard histories of American design had (until relatively recently) been heavily biased towards the USA and had largely focused on the post-colonial story, *History of Design* recognises the earlier and on-going contribution of indigenous cultures, hence the use of the term 'the Americas', rather than America or the US. In the section covering 1400-1600, for example, three separate threads are traced side-by-side: the established traditions of Native Americans in the North, the extraordinary artefacts made by the Aztecs and the Incas, and the impact of Spanish and Portuguese settlers in the South. This democratic approach is carried right through to the end, so the account of 20th century European and North American design (which would normally be allotted the lion's share of coverage) is relatively condensed.

As might be expected, all the contributors are authorities on their subjects, one way or another, so there is little doubt about the factual reliability of the information. However, as each scholar's approach is somewhat different, reflecting academic conventions in their particular field, the tone and emphasis of the text shifts throughout the book, not a bad thing as it adds variety and demonstrates the validity of multiple approaches. In the opening chapter, for instance, the rituals of Ming dynasty China are elucidated through detailed analysis of a handful of specific objects, such as silk robes, porcelain vessels and cloisonné enamels. By contrast, in the final section of the book tracing the development of 20th century European design, the structure is more fragmentary, and the narrative jumps from country to country, highlighting the input of many different nations

concurrently. One minute we're in Russia, the next minute we're in Spain. While I sympathise with the rationale behind this approach, in the end I concluded that this scatter-gun or tick-box strategy was less satisfactory than the in-depth case studies. Although it covered more ground, it felt more superficial.

The key point about a survey like this is that it offers a brief introduction to a wide range of topics, so the less you know in the first place, the more receptive you are likely to be. Those already familiar with a particular subject are likely to be more critical, as they will inevitably question why X gets a full paragraph, while Y only warrants a sentence and Z is omitted altogether. It could be argued that it is impossible to condense six centuries of design history into the sturdy hardback covers of a single tome.

Yet, at the same time, the reasons for attempting it are self-evident and perfectly justified. Either way, I take my hat off to Kirkham and Weber, who have devoted such a huge amount of time and energy to this elusive task. If, as the editors hope, this book succeeds in raising the profile of an undervalued discipline and captures the imagination of a new generation of budding design historians, then it will all have been worthwhile.

Lesley Jackson is a writer, curator and design historian

## The subtle subversion of ornament

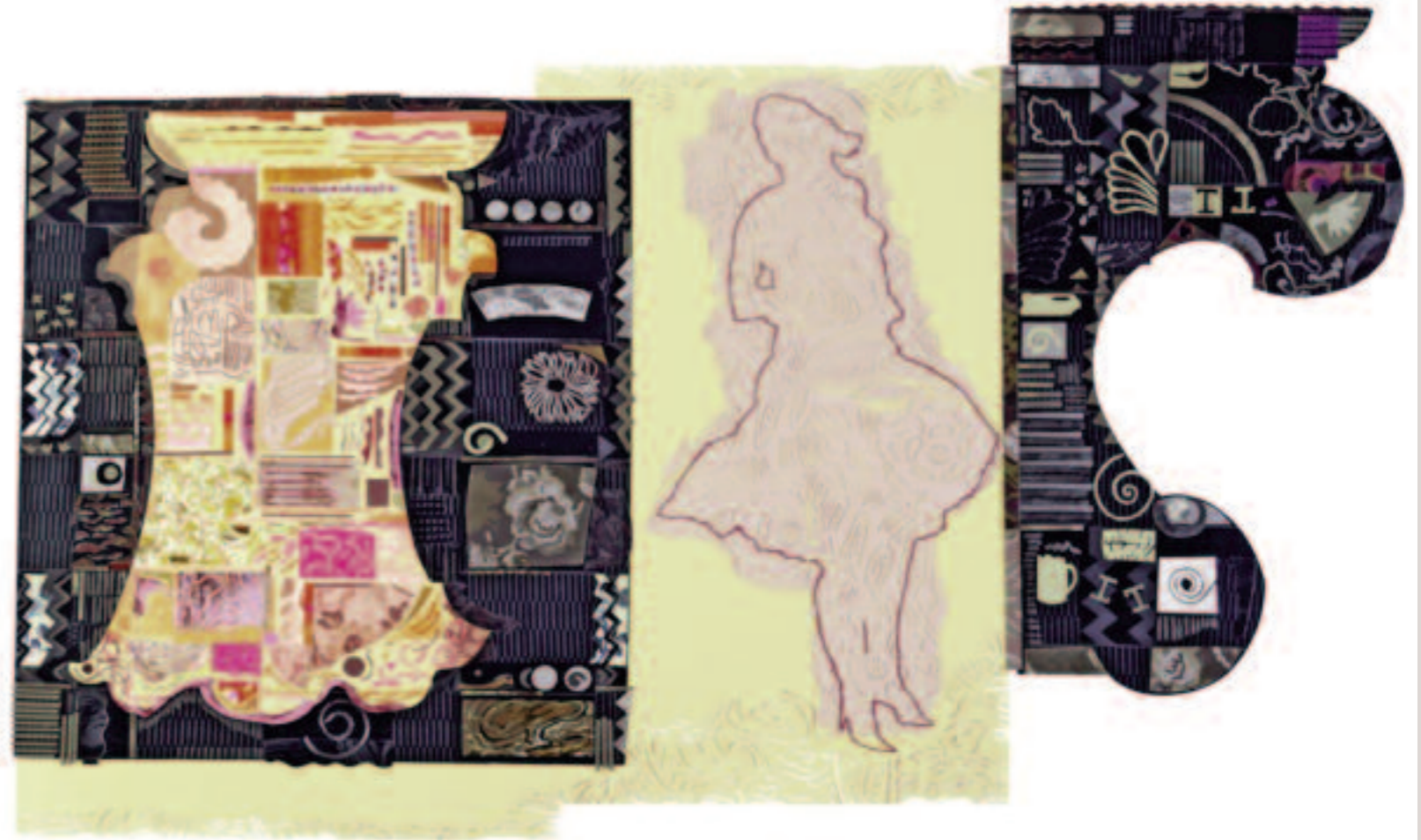
**Charlotte Hodes – The Grammar of Ornament**

*jaggedart*, 28 Devonshire St, London W1G 6 March – 5 April 2014

Reviewed by Mella Shaw

I didn't realise until I saw this show that I harboured a secret desire to run amok, possibly naked, through the Soane Museum. The liberated figures, all women, sitting, reclining and sometimes dancing through Charlotte Hodes's landscapes of pattern and decoration can have that effect.

At *jaggedart*, Hodes is exhibiting a selection from an overall total of 37 large-scale collaged papercuts, and an additional 37 ceramic plates made in playful response to Owen Jones's 'General Principles' of the same number. Published in his seminal work of 1856, *The Grammar of Ornament*, Jones's principles



**Above: Proposition 07 Interstices**, Charlotte Hodes, drawing, printed, painted papers, 56 x 89 cm, 2013-14  
**Below: P5 Fine Balance**, Charlotte Hodes, enamel transfer on ceramic, edition of 100, 30 cm diam., 2013-14.

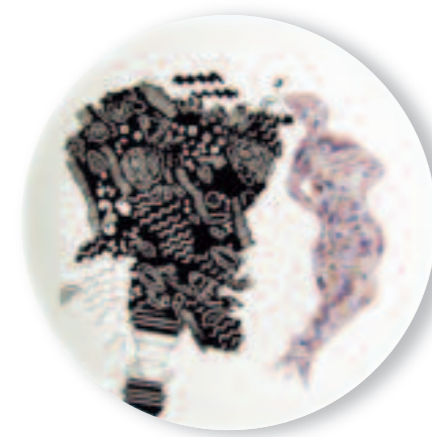
amount to a design manifesto concerning the arrangement of form and colour, specifically for architectural ornamentation but also for the decorative arts. Application of these principles, Jones believed, is necessary in order to truly ascertain decorative beauty.

And Hodes's collaged papercuts are beautiful, some strikingly so. Arranged as a double frieze around the room, the 20 papercuts hang well together. They are presented non-chronologically and curated on their visual resonances alone, with no obvious reference to the relevant individual propositions (although this information is available in the catalogue).

Their impressive scale and complexity mean that each one rewards intense looking. Her use of intricately cut papers including photographs, textured cartridge paper and surfaces she has painted, printed and drawn on, all add to the resultant painterly feel. The devil is certainly in the detail, and what detail! Floral and Greek key patterning, architectural features, urns and wine glasses all collide. But Hodes has expertly counter-balanced this complexity with confident and spacious composition; helpful in this small gallery where the works are hung cheek by jowl.

In the papercuts, particularly, Hodes is working within a tradition inevitably considered feminine: precise, delicate and time-consuming. The fact that she is doing this now, rather than in a Victorian parlour, immediately raises interesting questions about status, of ornament versus art, the domestic space versus the public sphere and women as both makers and consumers.

Knowingly reminiscent of a whole lineage of female figuration, there is a baroque physicality to her statuesque silhouettes. Hodes combines them with contemporary insertions and fragments of elusive narrative. In *Red Flowers on*



*Green*, a reclining woman seems to be shirking her domestic responsibilities, as a picnic or possibly the remnants of a boozy party lie strewn around on the grass. In *Architecture*, an Ionic column is dramatically upstaged by a voluptuous figure sashaying past. These women are motifs, yes, but they are bold and empowered; there is a profound sense that they are in control of their tableaux. And this, we are told, is the point.

Still, I wonder if, taken out of context, the subversion would be noticed. On closer examination of the remaining 17 papercuts reproduced in the catalogue, the selection on show seems to be a little safe. For my money, some of the very best, and perhaps more challenging, are not on display. As it stands, it is hard not to see the collages' potential as greetings cards. I can imagine them being snapped up in museum shops throughout the land. And the application onto ceramic plates, each one available in an edition of 100, certainly compounds that sense.

The colour matching and print quality of the plates is a little disappointing. This may be due to the combination of ceramic transfers with direct enamel screen-printing – and I can see Hodes's rationale, in a desire to reproduce the layering of her papercuts. But this seems an added

shame when, as a design reformer, Jones was rightly so particular about colour. So much so that on discovering that the contemporary Victorian printing techniques were not sophisticated enough to reproduce the intricate designs he had sourced from around the world, he took it upon himself to develop the new, and extremely complex, process of chromolithography, with enormously successful and influential results. Perhaps if Hodes's ceramics were not shown next to the originals this would matter less, but as they are it is hard not to compare them. The collages are so vibrant, and in my view the ceramics a subdued translation.

Still this is a hugely rewarding show; Hodes's grammar is one of subtle subversion, with much wit, pleasure and beauty mixed in.

(*Charlotte Hodes – The Grammar of Ornament* is touring. For details see *Crafts Guide*.)

Mella Shaw is an artist/maker and freelance writer with a background in museums and galleries

## Chevalier goes under the covers

### Things We Do in Bed

Danson House, Danson Park, Bexleyheath, Kent DA6 8HL

1 April – 31 October 2014

Reviewed by Charlotte Dew

In this playfully titled exhibition, we are invited to see quilts selected by novelist Tracy Chevalier. She developed this interest while researching her latest book, *The Last Runaway*, which is set in Ohio, in the 1850s, the novel follows the life of a Quaker émigré and quilter from loss to love, against a backdrop of slavery and prejudice. Chevalier was invited to curate *Things We Do in Bed* because of it, but surprisingly, and to the show's benefit, it is not about the quilts in the book.

The tone is set by Sara Impey's *Timelines* (2007), encountered as you enter to purchase a ticket in a shop stocked with quilters' catnip (small piles of colourful fat-quarters). *Timelines*, formed of regularly spaced, embroidered letters, invites us to consider the life-events to which our bedding plays witness. And it is these events – birth, life, sex, illness, death – that are the thematic structure here. Each is explored in what was one of the top-



*Unchained Melody*, Sue Watters, 2013  
**Opposite, left:** *Telescopic Tower*, Tim Stead, elm, 1998-99  
**Opposite, right:** *Untitled drawing*, Tim Stead, pen and ink

floor bedrooms at Danson House. The 16 exhibits, dating from 1725-2014, are displayed on beds, or hung from the walls and ceilings. The domestic scale of the rooms, and open display where possible, lend intimacy to the viewing experience.

The themes are effective, with the exception of the room titled 'sex', in which Impey's second work is found, *Interconnections* (2013); a textile chain, each loop embroidered with a word alluding to both intimacy and textile-making, such as 'bond', for example. The form of the piece makes subtle reference to bondage, displayed against dark red walls. The difficulty is not with this work, but with the lack of a second perspective on sex, for instance a marriage quilt.

For all other themes, historic quilts are displayed alongside contemporary ones. Brought together, it is clear that the former were made with functionality in mind, at a particular juncture in life.

Whereas it is the iconography rather than the use of the contemporary quilts that align them to a time in life (their materiality often rendering them poor bedfellows). The mix of old and new guarantees a visual richness and intellectual provocation not possible in a chronological exploration. In the 'birth' section it gives rise to the effective juxtaposition of a tiny, white cot-cover, quilted between 1725-50, in minute stitches with a feather pattern, and Grayson Perry's double-bed-size *Right to Life* (1993), made in response to the abortion debate in the US, which combines a traditional tumbling block pattern with a repeat of embroidered fetuses.

The works by Sue Watters, Becky Knight, Christine Chester and Karina Thompson, grouped under the heading 'illness', are innovative, while also exploring craft as therapy. Knight's *Depressions* (2004), a quilt weighed down

by regularly spaced stones stitched into place, embodies the burden of mental despair. Sue Watter's *Unchained Melody* (2013) was made while sitting with her husband, suffering the severe stages of Alzheimer's – the title coming from the song of the same name, expressive of her feelings as she stitched. Fittingly, the last room considers death. *A Dart of Death Quilt* (1860-1900), lent by the American Museum in Britain, is shown alongside Barbara Todd's *Dark Coffin Quilt* (1993). The older quilt would have belonged to a widow, as denoted by its black dart pattern. In the more recent work, the interlocking coffin-shapes mean the link to death is less coded.

The selection of works suggests that contemporary quilts have a more political and expressive dimension, than those of the past. It would be interesting to see this teased out, as quilt historians would likely argue that the politics of the past are also there, undercover. But *Things We Do in Bed* does not offer a history of quilting – the V&A's *Quilts: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* gave us this in 2009.

This show examines how quilts intersect with life. There is a visceral quality to the interpretative language that emphasises the theme: 'Quilts are intimate documents of our bedroom activities, literally soaking up our blood, sweat and tears.' We are confronted by our mortality; the suggestion that art can make life more bearable, but it will not stop the clock. It is profound and reinforces the narrative potential of craft.

Charlotte Dew is a freelance curator and craft associate curator at A Fine Line



WATTERS IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST | TOWER PHOTO: TIM STEAD | DRAWING © MAGGY STEAD LENERT

## Stead's deep sense of the human

**Tim Stead: Object Maker and Seed Sower, Sculpture in Wood, 1973-2000**  
 Low Parks Museum, Hamilton ML3 6BJ  
 1 March – 31 May 2014

Reviewed by Susan Mansfield

In 1999, a year before he died, Tim Stead planned a touring exhibition which brought together the two worlds in which he worked: furniture-making and sculpture. It was not fulfilled at the time but now has been, curated by Laura Hamilton, the former director of the Collins Gallery at Strathclyde University, in collaboration with Stead's widow, Maggy Stead Lenert. It tours Scotland until summer 2015, before Stead's home and workshop, The Steading in Blainslie, begin a new phase of life under the ownership of the Prince's Regeneration Trust and Scottish Borders Council.

At the time of his death at the age of just 48, Stead was well known for his craftsmanship in wood, having undertaken such major public commissions as the Millennium Clock in the Royal Museum of Scotland and the interior of the North Sea Oil Industries Chapel in St Nicholas Kirk, Aberdeen.

In his last years, declining health meant that he had to work on a smaller scale, but he did so with no less

productivity or imagination. He developed several series of sculptural pieces, continuing his investigation into materials, space and time, pushing his making further towards visual art. Here are spirals suspended from the ceiling which seem to fly, *Excavations* which look like ancient temples hewn out of rock, telescopic towers which stretch upwards, boxes and drawers which open to reveal glinting secrets.

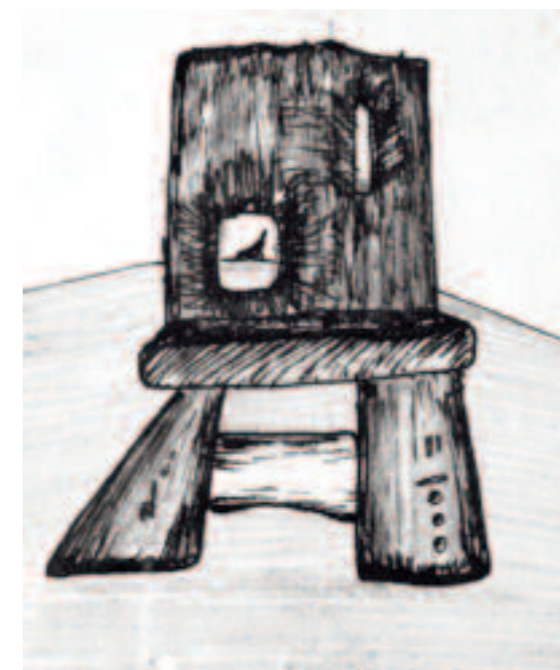
While at Glasgow School of Art in the early 70s, Stead salvaged railway sleepers, which he used to make a chess table and chairs, and pitch pine from tenements awaiting demolition. His work was characterised by a sensitivity to his materials – each piece of wood was unique to him, and he wanted it to find its own unique expression in his work. His pieces were also shaped by a deep sense of the human. One cannot look at his chess table, with its pull-out shelves for drinks and its tactile chunky pieces, without imagining companionship, engagement, fun.

So this exhibition is partly about people. Stead was a natural collaborator, and a variety of objects here celebrate his connections with other artists, from Ian Hamilton Finlay to Eduard Bersudsky. There are his birthday presents for Maggy, the last one an exquisite ear-clip box made in 1999, and the cradle he made for their children, Sam and Emma. His sense of generosity also expressed itself in the way he taught and supported young makers in the Wood School, and in his commitment to developing community woodlands near his home.

His concern for people meant that he set high standards for his furniture. A chair did not simply need to look outstanding, it had to be comfortable to sit on. Here a prototype of the *Strata* chair used in the North Sea Oil Industries Chapel comes with a modest explanation of how it was subsequently adapted: in the original, the sitter had a tendency to slide forward, and the spars of the back looked somewhat like rabbit ears.

Many of the objects in this show are sculptures, flights of imagination in wood. They are not as wedded to their purpose as a table or a chair, but they continue to invite engagement. The viewer is encouraged to take a small flashlight and explore the chambers of the *Excavations*, or take his *Layer* sculptures apart and allow the forms and grains to show us how to put them back together.

Stead's style had little connection with fashion, and already it is beginning to look timeless. He loved natural forms, tactile, sensual materials. If he worked with burr elm, as he frequently did, he did not seek uniformity, he let the idiosyncracies breathe. He softened





the edges so that, even when new, his work had the comfort of age.

In his furniture, the pieces fit together unobtrusively in the way expertly made things do. But in his sculpture, he allowed himself to explore a fascination with the way in which pieces could make a whole, nestling next to one another like the vertebrae of a skeleton or the baleen plates of a whale. Stead described himself as an optimist. He asked many questions, about humanity and nature, craftsmanship and art, concept and functionality, but he did so in a spirit which believed that one day all the pieces would somehow fit. (For details of tour venues or dates, see *Crafts Guide*.) Susan Mansfield is a writer and arts journalist based in Scotland

## Exploring the possibilities of felt

**Black Sheep: The Darker Side of Felt**

National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford NG34 7TW  
8 March – 11 May 2014

Reviewed by Katy Dunn

The National Centre for Craft & Design is a converted former seed warehouse on a wharf in Sleaford, Lincolnshire. It is five

*Trio of Teddy Skulls; Ursulus Mellitus, Ursulus Queribunds Disneyus and Ursulus Gasterpecturs, Stephanie Metz, felted wool, steel 2006*

storeys of intriguing exhibitions, inspiring events and also has a fantastic shop and café – which may sound frivolous, but actually the shop is itself an interesting curation of contemporary craft and design, which is changed seasonally.

*Black Sheep: The Darker Side of Felt* is an example of the interesting way the NCCD tackles the bigger subjects. Its exhibitions are rarely a head-on, spotlight showcase of works. Instead, the curators take a different view, a sideways slant. *Black Sheep* features a number of artists, raising many questions about the subject of the show as they explore it.

Felt is the most ancient man-made textile in the world, known to be used for warmth and shelter in coats, headwear and yurt-style huts since 500BC. Think felt, and you think soft, warm and cosy, a two-dimensional covering in organic colours or ethnic patterns.

That's not what you get with *Black Sheep*. This exhibition explores the possibilities of felt as a three-dimensional medium. There is no stitching involved; these are surprisingly contemporary sculptural, constructed works that can be unsettling in the relationship between form and material, while others are breathtaking in their technical brilliance.

Metaphorically the material is stretched to the extreme. For instance, there's what looks like a white ceramic or metal bowl by Dutch artist Gladys Paulus. It's very clean and pure in form and is punctured by precise circles. It's only when you get closer (and remember the name of the exhibition) that you realise it what it's made from.

Equally precise, but more natural in colour and articulation is the work of German-born artist Maria Friese. Her symmetrical sculptured vases and vessels were inspired by scientific drawings but have the appearance of sea urchins. Felt is known for its unpredictability, as it can shrink inconsistently in the process of being formed, so the geometrical accuracy of her works shows an incredible mastery of the technique.

However, the stand-out artist from the show is probably Stephanie Metz. This Californian's teddy-bear skulls are fascinatingly macabre and so very apt – if a teddy bear did have a skeleton, this is exactly what it would be. The sculptures are unsettlingly skull-like in appearance, with precise curves and angles. Feel them and they're dense and hard as bone, yet the surface is warm and textured with that little felt fuzz haloing the planes and angles.

Metz's *Amorphazoa* is also in the show; mutant organic forms with soft, doughy 'flesh' and geometric, shell-like forms with crisp folds and smooth curves – all



created by needle-felting. This technique involves repeatedly stabbing a ball of raw wool (or other natural fibres) with a notched needle to tangle the fibres together into a solid mass.

And that's another aspect of NCCD's exhibitions that I enjoyed – the fact that it's not just a visual and intellectual feast. You come away with a rounded understanding of how the pieces have been created. *Black Sheep: The Darker Side of Felt* is an exploration of the history, techniques and extraordinary versatility of felt, a material that is often overlooked, but seems to be having a creative renaissance. Katy Dunn is a writer and editor

*Above: Wild November Beast, Barbara Keal  
Below: War Games, Joana Vasconcelos, 2011*

## Bonkers yet brilliant textiles

**Joana Vasconcelos: Time Machine**

Manchester Art Gallery, M2 3JL  
15 February – 1 June 2014  
Catalogue: £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Helen Cresswell

A fabulously feathered and bejewelled helicopter, a flashing rifled car stuffed with noisy toys... Those new to Joana Vasconcelos's work can expect a highly tactile material experience, by turns surprising, kitsch and provocative – art that is bonkers yet brilliant, delivered with flair and championing the techniques and values of feminine domestic craft.

This show presents a comprehensive view of her output, new and recent work joining over 20 of her most significant sculptures, some making their UK debut. By assembling these works together, Vasconcelos has been reflecting upon her Portuguese identity and her own past, while engaging with Manchester's textile history, to explore her present and where the future may lead. Manchester



VASCONCELOS PHOTO: ALAN SEABRIGHT | KEAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Art Gallery, filled with multiple paintings featuring the female body, provides the ideal context for this artist to showcase her work, which questions established narratives about the place of women, class and national identity.

A major attraction snakes its way down three floors through the stairwell, her latest installation, especially designed for this space. *Britannia*, a colourful myriad of pulsing textile forms and parts, dominates the architecture and almost moves as if alive; engorged and fat with material, it reflects and connects to another new work for the show, entitled *Cottonopolis* (appropriately, since Manchester was both textile producer and consumer). *Britannia*'s patchwork of textile fabrics, techniques and embellishments, this pendulous piece hangs heavy in the air and yet still manages to soften the space it inhabits, a trick repeated throughout the galleries by other works.

Much of Vasconcelos's practice explores surface interventions; her new textile surfaces making boldly feminine statements. By fabricating complete crochet coverings for sculptures rendered in firm materials including plastic, ceramic and concrete, she simultaneously creates striking patterns and feminises the object; a playful example would be the covered Philippe Starck chair, *Spring Ghost*, which is included within the Craft and Design gallery upstairs. There's also a palpable sense that the artist loves revelling in extreme contrasts: the interactions toy with such dichotomies as masculine/feminine, traditional/modern or soft/hard.

This is domestic craft upon a grand scale, but much more than just your average yarn-bombed site intervention. If you want to do this show justice, be sure to make plenty of time for your visit, as there's a lot to see throughout the rest of the galleries where Vasconcelos's work has been sensitively installed. Pleasingly, these juxtapositions initiate fresh dialogues with the resident exhibits and their surrounding architecture, enabling the visitor to appreciate the gallery's collections anew, encounters that are well worth savouring. This was an aim of the artist: 'I like to create a space for discovery, a first moment where you capture what is obvious in the piece, where you can consume it in the first instant. But as you come closer, you discover there's more to it and you start to deconstruct it.' Old and new work by Vasconcelos successfully engages with historical objects and artworks to inspire rediscovery of the collections and generate new visitor experiences – truly a successful time machine.

Helen Cresswell is a freelance design writer, curator and historian

## Survey of the best and brightest

Designs of the Year 2014

Design Museum, London SE1  
26 March – 25 August 2014

Reviewed by Marcus Field

Wouldn't it be great if you could fly your own plane to work, use a mobile phone in which every component has been fairly traded, and send your kids to a school that floats on water? These are just a few of the inspiring ideas among the 76 nominations on display in this year's *Designs of the Year* exhibition. The shortlisted entries have been selected by a panel of international experts who were asked to name the designs they considered the best of 2014 in the categories of architecture, digital design, fashion, furniture, graphics, products and transport design.

The resulting exhibition is a mixed experience for visitors. A bold introductory panel leads you into the main body of the show in which the exhibits – some real objects, many in the form of models or photographs – are displayed. From here it seems only natural to behave like a kid in a toy shop and rush to the most eye-catching entries, which inevitably turn out to be the full-scale concept cars (particularly the sleek and eco Volkswagen XL1, which promises 313mpg), fashion mannequins (featuring Prada's bejewelled Spring/Summer 2014 collection) and the three brightly shining light fittings which are nominated for product awards (my favourites are the colourful shades made by Columbian weavers incorporating recycled plastic bottles gathered from the country's rivers).

Other exhibits inevitably fare less well in this clamour for attention. Several phone apps and online games are nominated for awards, including the much publicised Citymapper, but looking at an app or game in a museum is as dull as watching paint dry. The same is true of a number of contenders in the graphics category, which features several lacklustre journals and corporate identities. However, some of the less starry exhibits do repay closer inspection. I particularly admired the smart thinking and humanitarian concerns behind the Fairphone, a mobile with fairly traded components, while Peek, an eye-examination kit for use in developing countries, is another example of a



Above: *Makoko Floating School*, NLE and Makoko Community Building Team  
Below: dress by Sadie Williams and Volkswagen XL1 car, installation view of *Designs of the Year 2014*

bright idea with compassion at its core.

It is only when you imagine yourself as a judge that the show's shortcomings (and those of the whole award) really become apparent. While products like the Volkswagen and Fairphone are actually on display, all the entries in the architecture category are represented by photos or models making their merits almost impossible to assess. And even though some of these projects look like worthy contenders – a new crematorium in Sweden stands out – how can you judge one against another without seeing the real thing? In fact this whole enterprise raises questions about the criteria we use to judge good design: how, for example, do you weigh up the achievement of Zaha Hadid's sinuously beautiful multi-million pound cultural centre in

Azerbaijan – a country with buckets of money and a questionable human rights record – against a modest row of low-cost terraced houses in Harlow? And, for the overall award, how do you then select one of these over, say, the ingenious life-saving syringes – designed for treating people in developing countries – which turn red when exposed to air to show that they've been used or are compromised? Furthermore, can the concept behind these syringes really be defined as design? I would argue that many of the products on display here could more correctly be classified as inventions.

But thankfully we are not judges, so we can put these questions aside while we enjoy the *Tomorrow's World*-type entries alongside the designs that appeal more for their old-fashioned merits of being beautiful, functional and well made. In this category there is a handsome oak chair by Barber Osgerby designed for the new reading rooms at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and a series of ornate cast-iron panels for a Mayfair shopfront that would have pleased William Morris.

Finally, there is my own nomination for the overall winner: a school building in Makoko, Nigeria, by Kunlé Adeyemi at architect NLE, which is designed to float on a lagoon as its level rises and falls. It's an inventive and resourceful structure made of timber, solar panels and recycled plastic barrels. It's cheap to build, practical to use and a daily delight for the slum-dwelling community it serves. What better case can there be for a design of the year? *Marcus Field is a freelance writer and critic*



INSTALLATION PHOTO: LUXE HAVES | MAKOKO IMAGE COURTESY NLE