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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ARTISTIC PROCESS

Grayson Perry

Abstract: *This is the transcript of a talk given by Grayson Perry at the conference 'Making Space' at University College, London, in 2012. Further details of the conference can be found in the editorial of this issue.*
(Images of Grayson Perry's work appear courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery. Some images from Grayson Perry's talk cannot be reproduced here for copyright reasons. Where this is the case, a note appears in the text and web links are provided where available.)

I'm here to talk to you about my creative process, or about what I think about psychotherapy, psychoanalysis. You know, in a way, I should ask you who's an analyst and who's a therapist, because I know even those lot can't get on…You'd think that if therapists can't make up their minds how they're meant to go about it what hope is there for the rest of society? Because I always struggle with that… for goodness sake, get integrated.
So I'm going to talk to you about my career, but no it does feel a little bit like dissecting a frog, you know, when you talk about your creative process, in that the frog dies and you don't really learn much. But… I will try, because being aware is something I'm very interested in. In the notes that Valerie sent to me about what we're doing today the phrase that sort of jumped out to me was 'truth seeking'. So, I thought that that's something that I've always been interested in – clarity. As an artist I've got a style, I like to be clear. I'm always looking to be more clear and so I hope that I might elucidate a little bit about how I actually go about things and I might learn something myself. Because I never enjoy giving a talk unless I've said something new to myself.

This is my first pot I ever made (Fig. 1). This is an ashtray I made for my mother, I don't know if you can read into that whatever you will…wanting to kill her perhaps.

Fig. 1.

But I made it in a state of sexualised excitement when I was 8 years old. They made us wear these plastic smocks and mine was very tight. We had a very pretty teacher so I was put into a plastic smock by a very pretty teacher. I think I might even have been moved over to the girls table, for playing up. So you can read into that what you will about my career. And here (Fig. 2) … scroll forward 15 years or so to when I started evening classes, 1983, this was the first piece of pottery I made in evening classes.

Fig.2: 'Kinky Sex', circa 1983

My main subject matters over the years have been sex and religion pretty much, and craft; so there you have a plate on a vaguely crude version of a kind of early English slipware, from the 17th century, and Jesus in the middle and it's called 'Kinky Sex'. So I think I set my stall out pretty soon. I haven't really changed, my agenda is the same. And here's another early piece of mine (Fig. 3):

Fig. 3: 'One of Life's Wankers', circa 1987

It's from the middle 80s, and you'll notice there's a crack across it, I used to charge extra for Araldite in those days…because there was this idea that pottery had to be perfect … jokingly I'd put five quid on if it cracked, to sort of dissociate myself in many ways from what I saw as the negative connotations of 'craft' at the time maybe. But if you read the text underneath (I put it in because of the text underneath) it says 'People often ask me how I get my ideas. I say that I am one of life's wankers, but so I believe was Picasso'. Most men are you know, there's nothing

wrong with being a wanker, and often people used to ask me how do I get my ideas, I said 'I have a sexual fantasy and then just make notes afterwards'. And that was how I had ideas. I was young and I was quite angry and probably quite enjoyed shocking people. Nowadays the idea of trying to shock people I find Ooh, very bad taste. Not that it's a crude thing, it's just that the idea of shocking people has become so boring, that's what people expect now when they go to an art gallery is to be shocked. So in a way I want to give them a shock of a different sort. You know, maybe a bolt of awareness, is what I want to do. And so psychotherapy has been very good for me because it's given me a kind of ammunition store of ideas and ways of looking at the world that perhaps will bring people up short when they come to see my exhibition. So I freely admit that psychotherapy has been my major influence over the last 15 years probably now. Yes, I think '98 I started. But of course I was doing therapy on myself from a very early age. This is another fairly early pot: 'People with awful parents' (Fig. 4):

Fig. 4: 'People with Awful Parents', 1992

So I knew I wasn't like one of these middle class people whose parents were covertly horrible to them. I was from a working class background, and I knew full well that my parents were horrible. So, I knew the basic mechanism but of course many of the therapists here will know it's one thing knowing the basic mechanism, it's another thing 'feeling it'.

I started making works blatantly about my 'issues' if you like. And one of the strange kind of parental tics my mother had was that she had this sort of fantasy that I would go off into the world (she always thinks her children are going to rescue her) and I would go off and join the RAF because my father was in the RAF. I was very keen to be a jet pilot when I was a child and she thought I would go off to the RAF and I would come back and I would turn up in a kind of sports car with a scarf blowing like some RAF hero, and take her off to a country cottage! When I got older I thought that's a very strange fantasy for a mother to have somehow, there was something kind of weirdly like some Greek play. And so I made this pot (Fig. 5) about that, and it's called 'Look Mum I'm a Jet Pilot':

Fig. 5: 'Look Mum I'm a Jet Pilot', circa 1998

Because this was as near being a jet pilot as I was ever going to be by this point, I realised. I think I might have still just about been in contact with my mother at this point, before we broke

up. This was about thirteen years ago I'd say. So I was probably on the cusp of opting for one or other of those two phrases:

Fig. 6: 'Look Mum I'm a Jet Pilot' (detail)

This is a picture of me from about 2007 (Fig. 7):

Fig. 7: 'Portrait, My Civilisation', 2007

You can see the dates there - this was me in Japan, and they always like to have a title for an exhibition, and so I called it 'My Civilisation' because the sort of art that I really like is art from people who create a whole world. And if I go back to when I was a child, I had Airfix kits (Fig. 8) and all of my games had a kind of cohesiveness about them.

Fig.8: Airfix Kit

And if you think about one's creative process as being related to how one played, in a way what I do as a job now is I'm a kind of serious well paid person just playing! I'm in the leisure industry! It relates back to how I played as a child. I do, in many ways, the same thing. And I like artists who build their own worlds, and of course the sort of artists that perhaps most obviously do that are outsider artists, people who are spontaneous and outside of the regular art system. This is Walter Flax … I think this is taken in the 60s. [Slide of Walter Flax with constructed 'navy'] He wanted to join the navy but he couldn't, I don't know why. So he built his own navy. Here he is, that's his little house at the background and there's his navy all made out of bits and bobs and things, and he became so famous for this that the navy contacted him and took him for a sail in one of their battleships so it kind of worked out for him in a way and I like that. And this is probably one of the most famous outsider artists, Henry Darger. [Slide of '… or the Evening Redness in the West' http://hotelvitrine.tumblr.com/post/10930203657/henry-darger-writer-outsider-artist-usa-1892]. His entire oeuvre was discovered after he died in his apartment: a 19000 page novel, hundreds of huge collages and drawings, all illustrating the realms of the unreal which was his life's work. He died when he was in his 60s so he'd been doing it since

he'd been a teenager practically, so this was a huge thing of building his own world on a planet where the children were all enslaved. A therapist could have a field-day with it - it's basically a huge metaphor for his unconscious. When I first encountered his work in '79 at the Outsiders show I was really fascinated by it, and I've done a lot of work basically ripping him off over the years (Fig. 9):

Fig. 9: 'Us Against Us', 2004

Because I felt a lot of sympathy for the way that he created and the finding of metaphorical symbols for one's 'issues' in the world. And that's of course, as an artist, what I've done all along, consciously or otherwise.

Another outsider artist that I admire greatly is Adolf Wolfli. He was in a mental asylum for most of his life. [2 slides of Wolfli drawings including 'St Mary Castle Giant Grape', 1915 http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=e&level=3&sublevel=0].He was doing works like these in 1900 or 1905. These pictures date from long before modern art really got going. So he was really out on a limb then. He couldn't possibly have seen pictures like this when he was making them. He again had a very complex world that he built up and I've ripped him off as well. Here's a tapestry in my British Museum show (Fig. 10):

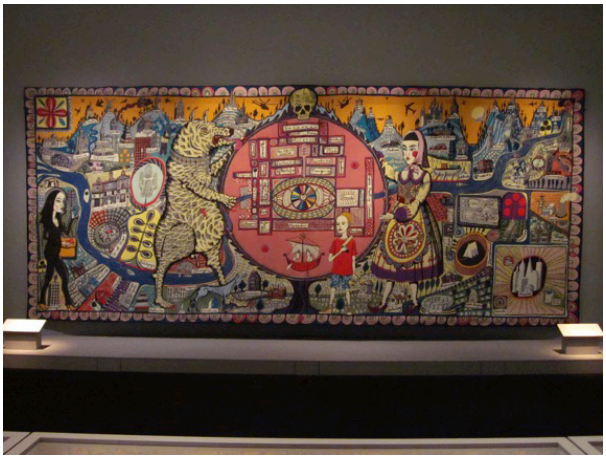

Fig. 10: 'Map of Truths and Beliefs', 2011

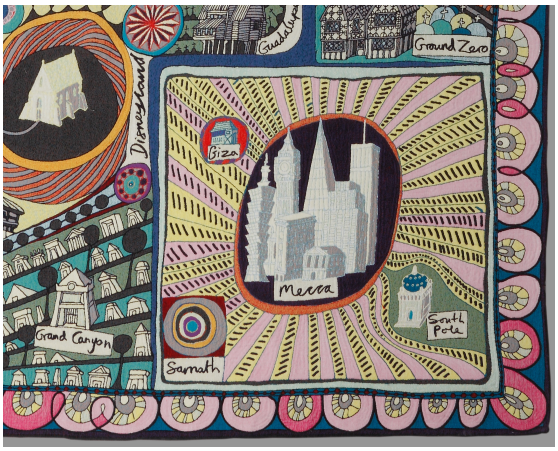

Fig. 11: 'Map of Truths and Beliefs' (detail)

I was looking at Wolfli a lot when I designed this tapestry which is a map of truths and beliefs. I've always been interested in that - when people get their beliefs muddled up with truths. In many ways what you lot are all dealing with often is people who get their truths and beliefs muddled up. So I wove that literally into this tapestry (Fig. 11). All these places are places that people made pilgrimage to on the map. And some of them I've illustrated with little pictures that kind of make sense. Mecca looks vaguely like that - it looks a bit Las Vegas nowadays. But the South Pole doesn't look like that and Giza where the pyramids are doesn't look like that. So I wanted to tell people in the kind of way I've used the imagery 'It's not logical, you know, art isn't, it's not like a proper map'.

Probably my most elaborate and involved um, piece of art therapy is this 'The Map of an Englishman' (Fig. 12):

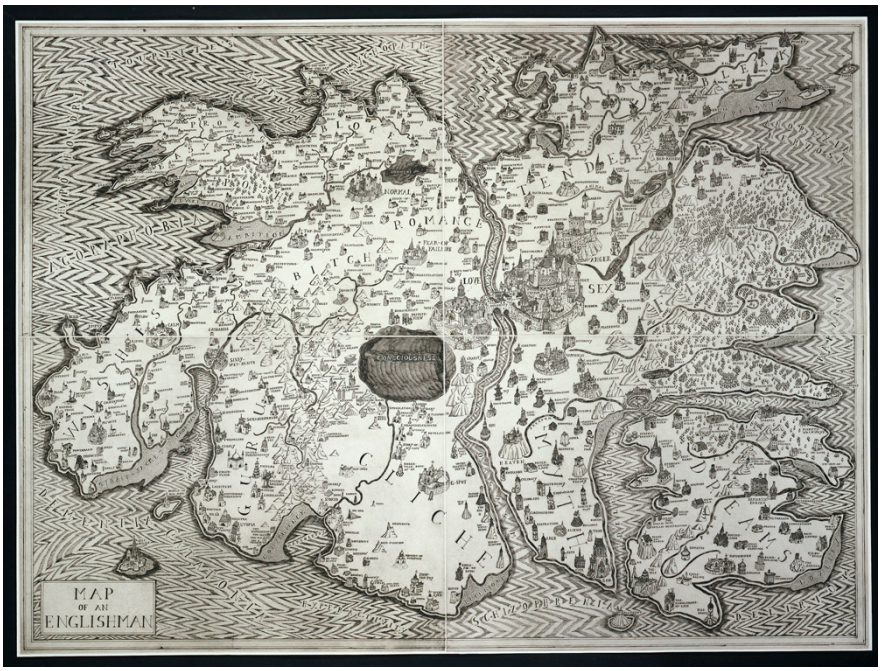

Fig. 12: 'Map of an Englishman', 2004

I wanted to just do a map, but of course what I do is I start in the top right hand corner and work my way down to the bottom left hand corner. This is quite big - about life-size, maybe a little bit bigger. It's a map of my mind and I just let it go, let it ramble: Radio 4, powdered milk, pen. Three months later you end up with an art work. And of course psychotherapy sort of pops up in this because there it is, a little port (Fig. 13):

Fig. 13: 'Map of an Englishman' (detail)

And this is the 'Island of Dreams'. Because, as the therapists know, dreams are the 'royal road to the unconscious' they say. And, of course, here are the perfect parents being knocked off their pedestals. And this is Rex, my therapist, he's sadly dead now but he is there, he's like the boatman over the Styx.

About the time I started therapy I was having this recurring dream, about my father… and a symbol of my father was a kind of vintage car, you know, nice idea but a bit useless, always breaking down. And I dreamt this T'ang dynasty bronze racing car, Chinese style. So I went to the British Museum (I made this (Fig. 14) in about '98) and I made it.

Fig. 14: 'Dad number 1', 1988

And I built a little shrine to it. It's like the 'Shrine to Essex man' (Fig. 15). So this is like a pre-cursor in many ways to my show the 'Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman'. There's me and my daughter visiting the shrine (Fig. 16). I've styled the photograph like one of those old encyclopaedias I would read as a child with all the sepia pictures of what they got up to in 'ethnic land'.

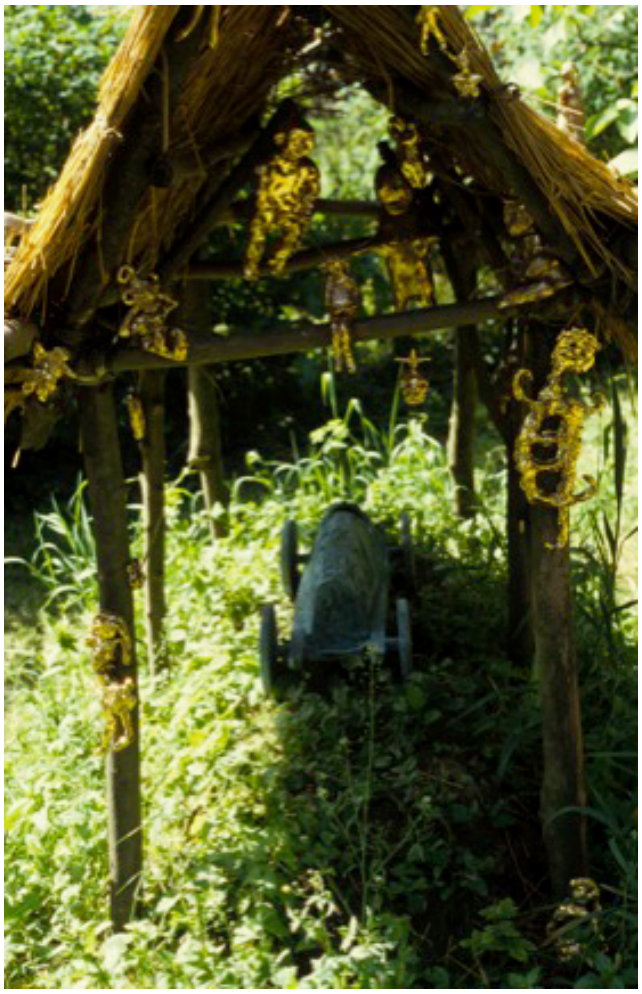

Fig. 15: Shrine for 'Dad number 1'

Fig. 16: Grayson Perry and his daughter at the shrine

Another piece that relates perhaps directly to my father is this one called 'Our Father' (Figs. 17 and 18).

Fig. 17: 'Our Father', 2007

Fig. 18: 'Our Father', 2007, Installation view, Mudam Luxembourg
Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg

I call him 'utility man'. Susan Faludi, the feminist, calls them utility man - the people that used to make stuff. Nowadays, a lot of people in 'the creative industries' probably couldn't change the plug on their ipad charger, but my father could make anything pretty much. So I made this as a kind of monument to his generation of the kind of guys that carry all the traditional things with them and all the utility things. But also he's made out of iron, an industrial material, and we all carry our baggage to use that very therapeutic word. There is a matching figure of 'Our Mother' who's of course got an awful lot more baggage than he has.

This, of course, is my real father 'Alan Measles' (Fig. 19):

Fig. 19: Alan Measles

He's my surrogate father, he took over the role very much when my father left when I was about five, and I projected all my positive male things onto him. And so I had an internal father in many ways, so that was quite lucky. He has then subsequently become my God. I've always liked religious art so I thought 'Who am I going to have as God?' Because I don't believe in any of the traditional Gods, so I thought I'd make my own God, I'd make Alan a God. So I did a lot of work about Alan as God and of course when I was a child and I was very angry with my stepfather and my mother, Alan was a rebel, he was a fighter, a guerrilla fighter. So here he is with a suicide bomber belt standing on top of the twin towers (Fig. 20):

Fig. 20: 'Vote Alan Measles for God', 2007

There are all the symbols of the War on Terror around him, because Alan was an angry guerrilla fighter in those days. I honoured him in this piece which is in the British Museum show (Fig. 21):

Fig. 21: 'Alan Measles on Horseback', 2007

Alan on horseback like a kind of military hero, but it's in the style of an old lead soldier. So it's acknowledging the games I played with Alan. He was a brave fighter and fought the psychic battles that I needed to win in order to survive. A child's imagination is amazingly good at coming up with solutions for survival, and Alan is a great example of it I think.

Of course as an artist in my pomp now I'm very aware that I can mythologise myself very well, and Alan is a great thing to do that with. I take my example from this man Joseph Beuys who

mythologised his past very much [Slide of Joseph Beuys installing 'The Pack', in the Moderna Museet, 1971. http://pukovnik.tumblr.com/post/10822311930/joseph-beuys-the-pack-stockholm-1971-joseph]. He famously said that he crashed in the Crimea during the war and was rescued from the wreckage of the plane by Tartar tribesmen and wrapped in fat to keep him alive and covered in felt blankets, and that's why he used fat and felt a lot in his work. But apparently that was all a myth that he wove. He did crash in a Stuka but he was never rescued by Tartar tribesmen. So Alan, of course, crashed in his jet in the psychic war. This is a pot from the British Museum, 'The Near Death and Enlightenment of Alan Measles' (Figs. 22 and 23):

Fig. 22: 'The Near Death and Enlightenment of Alan Measles', 2011

Fig. 23: 'The Near Death and Enlightenment of Alan Measles' (detail)

He's gone through a transformation! He's gone from the fighter pilot here, he's crashed, he's being rescued by Latvian peasants and he's sort of nursed back to health. Now, post-therapy if you like, Alan becomes more of a guru type. He's gone from warrior to wise man and, if you look at my motorbike parked outside the exhibition, at the front of the motorbike he is a warrior and at the back he's a guru.

Here is my father, he's still alive, he came to my show the other day, and he's on a motorbike (Fig. 24):

Fig. 24: Grayson Perry's father

This is the only photograph I have of him as a young man. Then I looked at this photograph (Fig. 25):

Fig. 25

That old gestalt thing is happening again and again and again, it comes round and round and there I am. I didn't pose to look like my father. I've got the same hunch basically. Here is me on my motorbike (Fig. 26):

Fig. 26

Here is Alan the warrior at the front, then here is his throne at the back for him being a bit of a guru. Where he's a God basically. It's like a little shrine where people can visit him. He's like the Pope in his Popemobile. Here he is outside the Wiese-kirke in Bavaria, famous pilgrimage church (Fig. 27). I went in because I'd seen it on Kenneth Clark's 'Civilization'. So there's Alan outside in his little pink shrine, and inside is Jesus in his pink shrine. And shrines were very much something that I was interested in at the British Museum. This is a little Japanese portable shrine that I've always liked. [Slide of portable shrine from British Museum]. I think there's something about shrines that really focus how we look at art - the whole idea that we have a special place to go. I think our idea of what Art is, if you like, comes from religion, it comes from going to a special place to look. I think that the equivalent of these pocket shrines now is your little iphone or something. You've got your pictures of your family or 'Oh look! I was only 3 rows back at Madonna!'. People share the things they believe in on them. And this is almost an inverse idea of that (Fig. 28):

Fig. 27: Alan Measles outside Weise-kirke

Fig. 28: 'Louis Vuitton Trunk', 2011

Louis Vuitton wanted to make me a trunk, so I designed a shrine, a portable shrine for Alan Measles as a trunk, so sort of carrying that idea on.

And then I wanted to finish with this - the actual tomb of the unknown craftsman and the form it took (Fig. 29).

Fig. 29: 'The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman', 2011

I wanted to honour that idea. I suppose one could read it as being related to my father because he was a person that made stuff. The idea of the unknown craftsman came off, of course, because it's quite a catchy title, I suppose. But also, if you go to the Tate Modern they know who made all the stuff. A lot of the time it's crap stuff but it's got the right name attached to it. So if some little scrap has got Picasso written on the back it's important; whereas almost the opposite is true

at the British Museum where something is significant and we don't know who made it. And so I was interested in that idea that, as an artist who's now got a name, a brand if you like, I'm very aware of that in my mind. I'm very aware of the idea that I have a kind of weird Midas touch. If I do a drawing I literally draw money. In an afternoon I could make quite a bit of money, just drawing on a bit of paper. I find it incredibly inhibiting. So I've always got this sort of amphitheatre of people inside my head going 'What's he up to now?'

And one of the things I wanted to talk to you about today was that idea that when you're not an anonymous craftsman, when you're not the unknown craftsman, you become this public figure. You've then got to carry on being creative, in public. And that is no small feat. And often the people who are successful in the top of their career, they're people who can deal with being successful. Because it's fame and, as Warren Buffet said, 'if you want to be rich and famous, try just being rich first.'

But going back to the really serious moving part of this talk, here we have a flint hand-axe, genuine quarter of a million year old flint hand axe, as the sort of central relic of craftsmanship if you like (Fig. 30).

Fig. 30: 'The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman' (detail)

And the tomb itself is covered in moulds from the British Museum collection of all the fantastic objects. There's an Ife head, the Mildenhall silver dish here, that's a Syrian relief up there and there's a Roman sort of grave marker and things. And there it is, the Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman, a kind of pilgrimage destination if you like of the visitor to the show (Fig. 31).

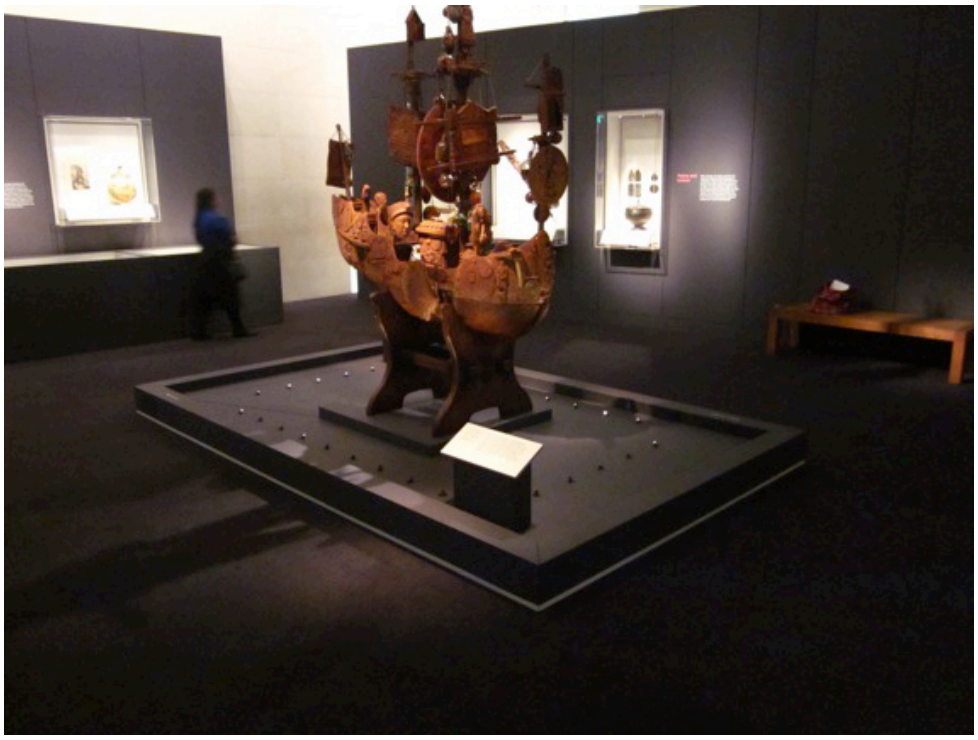

Fig. 31: Installation of 'The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman' at the British Museum, 2011

And it was a heartfelt thing, a craft for the craftsman, sailing into the afterlife, because it points directly at the middle of a tapestry which is a map of the afterlife as characterised by the British Museum. Sort of multi-faith heaven. And it goes back to why I would want to put a boat into the British Museum. Why I put a boat there was because when I was a child soon after my father left, when I was about six years old, my mother and my Auntie took me to the British Museum, and we were in the lift, going up, and they had a lift man in those days, and the lift man said to me 'Oh what would you like to see then? Where do you want to go?' I said 'I don't know'. He said 'What do you like?' I said 'I like models, you know, like model planes, like the Airfix kits and stuff'. He said 'Oh we've got some model boats in the Egyptian department', so we went to

the Egyptian department and these were the model boats [Slide of Egyptian model boats]. And I was bloody disappointed. So that's where I'd like to end it.

References

Perry, G. (circa 1987) *One of Life's Wankers*. Painted and glazed ceramics. 38 x 44.6 cm / 15 x 17.6

Perry, G. (2004) *Us Against Us*. Glazed ceramic, 45 x 34 cms, 17 3/4 x 13 3/8 inches.

Perry, G. (2004) *Map of an Englishman*. Etching made from 4 plates printed on 400 Rives Vellin Arches Blanc, signed and numbered on reverse. 112 x 150 cms.

Perry, G. (2007) *Our Father*. Cast iron, oil paint and string, 80 x 60 x 52 cms, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8 x 20 1/2 inches.Edition of 5 plus 1 AP.

Perry, G. (2007) *Vote Alan Measles for God*. Handmade wool tapestry 248 x 175 cms, 97 5/8 x 68 7/8 inches.Edition of 5 plus 3 AP.

Perry, G. (2011) *Map of Truths and Beliefs*. Wool and cotton tapestry woven by Flanders Tapestries from files prepared at Factum Arte 290 x 690 cm, 114 1/8 x 271 5/8 in. Edition of 7 plus 2 Aps.

Perry, G. (2007) *Alan Measles on Horseback*. Cast iron 86 x 69 x 20 cms, 33 7/8 x 27 1/8 x 7 7/8 inches.

Perry, G. (2011) *The Near Death and Enlightenment of Alan Measles*. Glazed ceramic. Height 42 cm, diameter 31 cm. Height 16 1/2 in, diameter 12 1/4 in.

Perry, G. (2011) *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. Cast iron, oil paint, glass, rope, wood flint hand axe. 305 x 204 x 79 cm, 120 x 80 1/4 x 31 1/8 in. Edition of 3 plus 1 AP.

Perry, G. (2007) *Portrait* My Civilisation, 21st Century Museum of contemporary Art, Kanzawa.