

# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

July 2018

# #109

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EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# Turning the UK's Royal Academy Summer Exhibition on its Head

Written by Paul Bailey



**T**his summer there have been two unusual events in London. The first being extremely hot weather and the second, that a ceramic maker (the enigmatic Grayson Perry) coordinated the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy (RA).

This year, the Royal Academy celebrates its 250th Summer Exhibition, and is firmly established as part of the national tradition of the UK. It is the world's largest open submission contemporary show by exhibiting a range of art being made in this moment, in tune with the theme of 'Art Made Now'. For the first time, the Summer Exhibition spreads across the new RA and spills out onto the streets of London's West End.

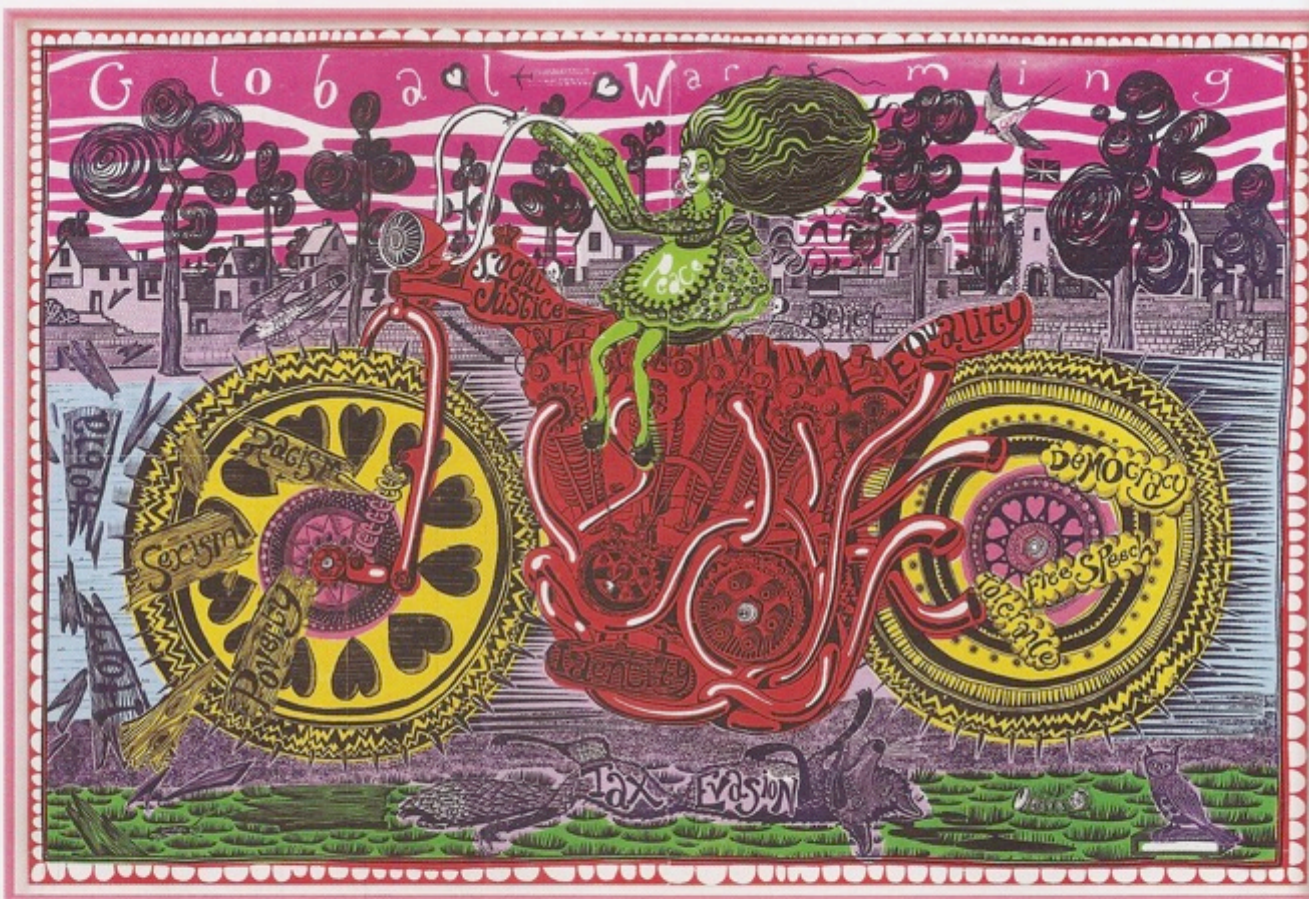
Grayson Perry RA, in his role of coordinator, encouraged artists to enter work by issuing this statement:

*Fellow artists! 2018 marks the 250th anniversary of the Royal Academy, so the Summer Exhibition will celebrate a quarter of a millennia of artistic innovation. As coordinator, I have decided that the theme of the show will be 'Art Made Now'. I want to champion the democracy of the exhibition and show off the diversity of art being made in this moment, so I encourage you to submit works that you have made in 2017/18. I am also planning a special 'Room of Fun' in a newly built part of the Academy, so the committee may well look favourably on artworks that we find amusing.*

Above:  
(c) David Parry / Royal Academy of Arts

Opposite:  
Laina Watt  
**Grayson Perry  
Burial Urn**  
Sculpture | Glazed ceramic | 3.0 kg  
33 x 29 x 27 cm.  
Image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts.





by Kay Latta uses ceramics and other materials to produce her *The Unbearable Lightness of Seeing*, again featuring Perry.

Another artist who has exhibited at the show previously, is the international ceramic maker Katharine Morling. Her white porcelain piece with its black defining lines is called *Boom* and must be close to Perry's wish to have fun with the show. It is based on the 1980s American influence of ghetto blasters, the height of cool and exotic music of the time.

*Happy Horse* by Varla de Milo is the result of someone who discovered clay at her local Adult Education Centre and progressed to making horses, mostly through trial and error. The aim has always been to create characters that will raise a smile.

In contrast, Zhang Songtao, director of the sculpture department at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in Wuhan, China is showing a challenging piece innocently called *Blue and White Porcelain*.

Jane Welch is a newly emerging artist with an original spin on the world. Having inspired primary aged children for many years she brings a sense of fun and energy to her work. Her sculptural pieces make us question the reality of everyday objects, whether this is a ketchup bottle or a pile of sticks. She completed a City Lit

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The response to Perry's call has been some 20,000 submissions. After the selection committee had chosen their preferences there are a final 1,351 works on display. Together with the status in being shown, many of the works are for sale.

What is so remarkable about the show is that it has work from established artists, members of the Royal Academy, and members of the public, unknown to anyone except their immediate circle. People working away quietly in their homes up and down the country, suddenly finding their work alongside some of the leading artists working today. And through the profile that Perry has in the media, he has helped add his voice to the steadily growing renaissance regarding the importance of ceramics.

Highlights this year include the Royal Academician Anish Kapoor's monumental sculpture *Symphony for a Beloved Daughter*, in the Royal Academy's Annenberg Courtyard.

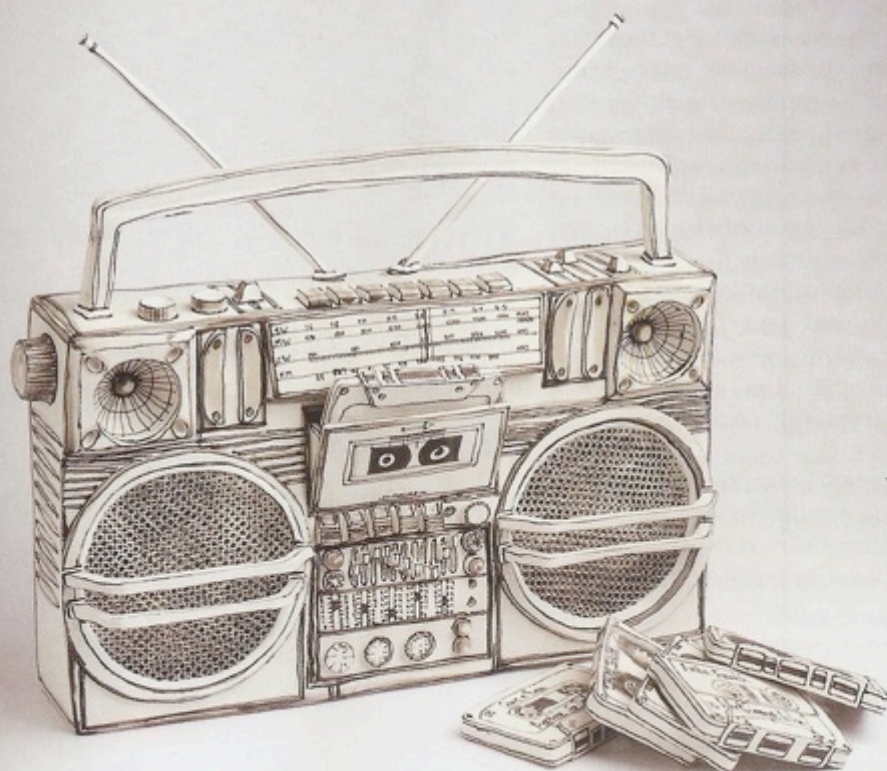
In the Main Galleries, David Hockney RA shows two vast new works which combine photographs taken from many view-points into a single monumental image. These enormous photographic drawings, both over seven metres in length, are an exciting extension of Hockney's long experimentation with reverse perspective and his manipulation of photography.

The Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos exhibits an enormous textile work *Royal Valkyrie* in the Central Hall which revisits and reinterprets palatial fashion with the colours and motifs traditionally found in Nisa, a village in Portugal. Banksy shows a new work, *Vote to Love*, created from a UKIP (the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party) placard and priced at £350 million. One can only guess that he doesn't want to sell it.

Perry has had the gallery walls he is responsible for hanging painted bright yellow and they are now packed with work from floor to ceiling. The theme of colour and fun throughout the show is central to what Perry has achieved at the Summer Exhibition – including his humorous response to obvious politicking. There is a large piece of his own work in the print room titled *Selfie with Political Causes* that shows him riding a motorbike, with right-on slogans fluttering around him. It is his response to the way politics has become increasingly fashionable in art. In another gallery Perry has made one of his 'statement' large pots with images applied called, *Stupid White Thing*. Throughout the show there are many homages to Perry. Laina Watt has produced something not dissimilar to traditional Staffordshire ware, titled *Grayson Perry Burial Urn*. Another work

*Untitled*  
 2012  
 The unbearable  
 lightness of seeing  
 (sculpture) Ceramic,  
 aluminium and bronze  
 (medium) glass, paint,  
 reinforced metal clamp  
 (medium) 60 kg  
 140x120x30 cm

*Untitled*  
 2012  
 (sculpture) Porcelain  
 reinforced stain | 6.0 kg  
 100x100x100 cm



Opposite:  
Grayson Perry RA  
**Selfie with  
Political Causes**  
Woodcut  
300 x 300cm  
The artist and Paragon  
| Contemporary  
Editions Ltd.

Right:  
Zhang Songtao  
**Blue and White  
Porcelain**  
Sculpture |  
Porcelain | 1.5 kg

Below:  
Vania de Milo  
**Happy Horse**  
Sculpture | Ceramic  
| 2.0 kg  
33 x 29 x 9 cm

Ceramics Diploma course last summer in 2017 studying under renowned practising artists. Her signature piece is *Ode to Kitsch and Pop*.

Cathy Lewis has made two figures which are constructed from hundreds of small pieces of broken porcelain, which is a departure from her precise modeled figures which are highly sought after. Most of her work is concerned with ideas about culture, social history and identity. She often combines several ideas in one piece, each influencing the outcome of the work.

Amongst all the merriment of the show and the constant stream of people there is another element: why is the exhibition mounted every year?

One of the founding principles of the Royal Academy of Arts was to 'mount an annual exhibition open to all artists of distinguished merit' to finance the training of young artists in the Royal Academy Schools. The Summer Exhibition has been held every year without interruption since 1769 and continues to play

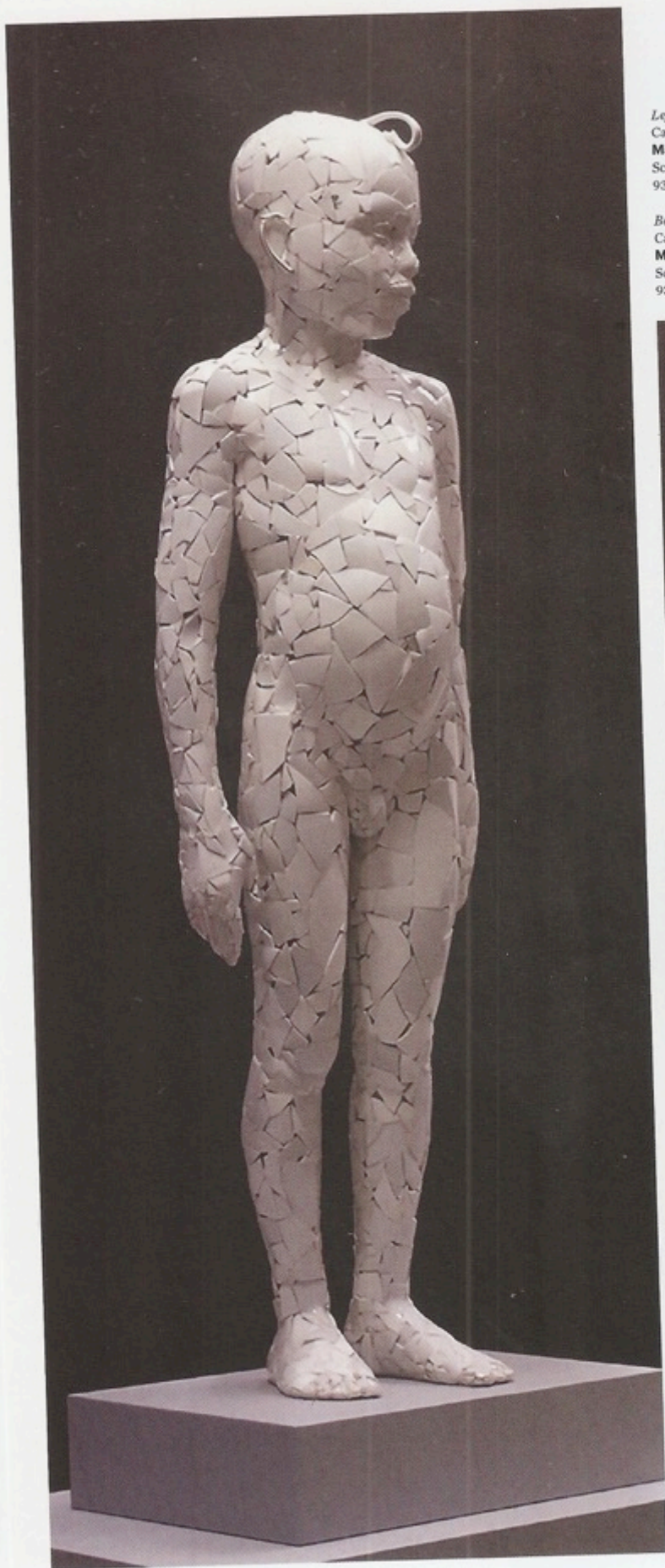


a significant part in raising funds to finance RA students. As the longest established art school in the UK it offers the only free three-year postgraduate program in Europe.

The public know it simply as the world's largest open submission contemporary art show, but it is important to understand that the Summer Exhibition provides a unique platform for emerging and established artists to showcase their work to an international audience. Also, that it comprises a range of media from painting, ceramics and printmaking to photography, sculpture, architecture and film. For over 250 years there have been works included in the exhibition by Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough, Constable, Turner, up to present times with Emin, Hume and Hockney amongst many others showing recently.

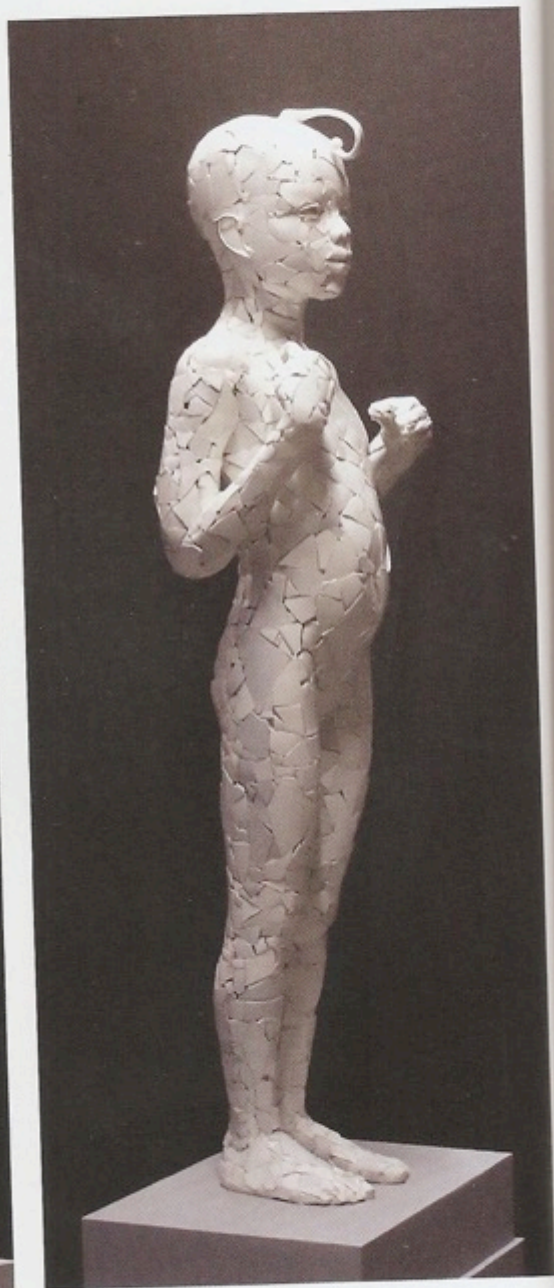
The show has always garnered a mixture of reviews in the national press following the private view and exposure on television. But what they miss is being there each day when the public are massed in each gallery, the huge amount of interest in the art, and the obvious sheer pleasure of the people walking around the show.

Other arts shows this summer in London have demonstrated the current richness of talent, in particular the degree shows from the colleges and universities. Again, these were massively well attended but for some reason none of those makers were represented here. What would happen if some of the graduates from the ceramics and glass course at the Royal College of Arts were to take part? Now, that



*Left:*  
Cathy Lewis  
**Mainly Porcelain i**  
Sculpture | Fragmented porcelain | 8.0 kg  
93 x 36 x 26 cm

*Below:*  
Cathy Lewis  
**Mainly Porcelain ii**  
Sculpture | Fragmented porcelain | 8.0 kg  
93 x 36 x 26 cm

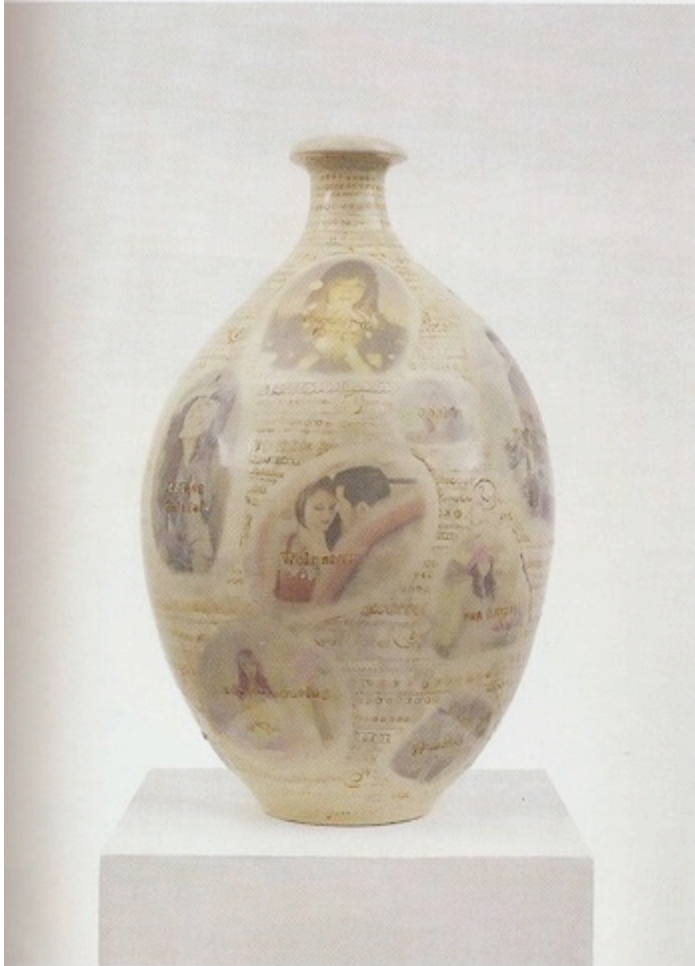


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“Fellow artists! 2018 marks the 250th anniversary of the Royal Academy, so the Summer Exhibition will celebrate a quarter of a millennia of artistic innovation.”



could cause shock waves.

So, what will the legacy of Perry's contribution to the Royal Academy – with the elevated role of ceramics in the mix – be? Among the showpieces there is a lot of mediocrity, but herein lies the fun. Perry mixes it all up in a celebration of things one simply likes looking at.

One can only hope that next year the show will be full of the bravery and fun of this years, and at some point soon Perry will be invited back to stage another blockbuster show. ■

*Left:*  
Grayson Perry RA  
**Stupid White Thing**  
Sculpture | Glazed ceramic  
65 x 40 x 40 cm

*Right:*  
Jane Welch  
**Ode to kitsch and pop art** (table decoration piece)  
Sculpture | Clay | 4.0 kg  
30 x 45 x 25 cm

**About the Author**  
Paul Bailey is the editor of *Emerging Potters* magazine and writes on modern ceramics.