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When forms become attitude

A consideration of the adoption by an artist of ceramic display as narrative device and symbolic landscape

When artists ‘intervene’ in museums, the material at their disposal is not merely the collections and the galleries in which they are displayed. At their most ambitious and effective, they take on the entire conceptualization of an institution. This remains the case even when a museum’s collections *per se* are not the content explicitly addressed by the artist. Instead, notions of a canon, a shared understood narrative about history, even signifiers of a community’s collective identity, may be wrapped in the work’s grasp.

Shocked silence

FATHER	What?...So we’re going to destroy this Leach tea set?
SON	Yes
FATHER	But isn’t it...Valuable [<i>sounds reluctant</i>]
SON	I think it’s really important to understand that the characters have to destroy this, because as long as this ideal vision exists, it leaves them in the shadows of it.
FATHER	I’m not sure what I think about that [<i>shakes head</i>] No, I’m not sure what I think about that. I mean, is that ethical? [<i>concern in his voice</i>]
SON	It’s...Necessary

*Extract from : Script for Rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery) by Simon Fujiwara
2011 -2*

This is the moment of truth in Simon Fujiwara’s installation, ‘A rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)’, shown as part of a large show by the artist presented at Tate St Ives in 2012.

On a video monitor we have seen two figures approach each other and sit at a table, evidently on some sort of stage set. If we have been paying attention to other works in the exhibition, one is evidently the artist, playing the role of ‘son’. The other character, ‘father’, is played by a person who is clearly not the Japanese father described in the script.

The script they have been discussing refers to a tea set by Bernard Leach, and a reproduction Leach/Hamada style tea set apparently made by ‘son’ and what the script describes as his real father. The characters do indeed proceed to smash up the real Leach tea set. It is a catharsis both for the players and for the audience.

The version of the installation at Tate St Ives used the curved display space originally created for the display of work by Leach, Hamada and their circle. The fragments of the broken pots and the reproduction pots are shown alongside other Leach and Hamada pots familiar from Tate's past displays, and, less familiar, a kettle, a tea urn and some tea bags, and other bits and pieces, including a book. We presume that the ceramic shards have been carefully kept from the performance shown on screen, and in turn will now be carefully kept for future re-presentation.

In the Tate St Ives version, a variety of details ensure that visitors familiar with the gallery know that the display is a pastiche reproduction of one of the original Tate St Ives historic ceramic displays – a reference made equally explicit in the documentation and visitor interpretation of the exhibition. Plinths are the same plinths used for the collection's Leach and Hamada pots. The wall mounted monitors showing the performance replace paintings such as a William Scott still life.



'A rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)' was one of a group of installations in which Fujiwara re-presented his own past. The curatorial thesis for the show, entitled 'Since 1982', took at its starting point the fact that he grew up in St Ives, being 11 when Tate St Ives opened in 1993. It was on a scale which might be termed something like a 'survey' if it were by an older artist.

The Leach piece was one of six room-sized installations. Whilst others dealt with Fujiwara's past travels, most turned upon the deployment Fujiwara's autobiographical connections to artists and works of art specifically associated with his own past, and with past St Ives displays: Patrick Heron and the iconicity of abstraction transformed by the metaphor of the teenage bedroom; the

fantasised world of Alfred Wallis ; and the renegotiation of the symbolization of powerful female artists, with Barbara Hepworth at the centre.

The Leach installation builds on a number of layers of prior knowledge that are articulated in the exhibition wall texts and the standard introductory leaflet. Simon Fujiwara's mother was British and father was Japanese. As a child, he was taken to the Leach pottery (before the renovation which gives it its present character took place). As an adult, he travels to Japan and visits his father, now separated from his mother.

In a generic sense, these interpretative texts embed certain details where jokes and implausibilities prompt doubt. We must assume that he and his father really did meet up at his father's original home town of Mariko (which is easily confused with Mashiko, of course) and had a go at making pots, which then resembled Leach/Hamada style pottery.

We must further accept that his father really did sketch Leach furniture, and consider making reproduction versions. This historical research is a surrogate research history mapped in the catalogue. It is obvious, meanwhile, that Fujiwara *films* is posing as a kind of Imperialist traveller connoisseur in the photos of him admiring pots *in situ*. The catalogue images which reproduce past installations referencing Japanese interiors are plainly constructs which play on the real and the distant.



We must therefore test the authenticity of our own reactions when, like 'Father' in the performance, the reality dawns on us that it may actually have been a real Leach tea set that was actually smashed up in the performance. We might hope that it may have been reproduction, since it would be such a vandalistic act to attack a real one. Or perhaps we hope it may indeed have been a real one, since that would affirm our own complex of struggles with this father figure.

We also imagine the artist, now in his studio in Berlin, looking back at his younger self, recalling his youth by looking at old photos in books of Tate exhibitions, or finding old posters of Hepworth and Heron amongst other teenage ephemera. Given the importance of the erotic in his work, was the gallery gendered and eroticized for him? Did it form a nexus of power and authority *vis a vis* his imagined future, or did it offer a model of escape?

Fujiwara's audience - St Ives resident, occasional tourist and penitent acolyte alike - will divide. There will be long time residents who may remember Fujiwara as a boy. There will be those who have moved to live in St Ives in its boom era and know nothing of the pre-Tate town, and of contention around the presence of a figure such as Bernard Leach, and indeed the Gallery itself. There will be others coming as first time visitors anxious to get the basics about this celebrated fragment of art and craft history, wondering where this fits in.

There will be, amongst these different audiences, some who are today part of a nostalgic or historicized vision that Tate, the Hepworth Museum, the renovated Leach Pottery all reconstruct for visitors in search of the 'real' St Ives experience. In contrast, meanwhile, there will be the critically engaged, anxious to know what the dialogue between artist, venue and community is renegotiating on this occasion.

Fujiwara knows that all these potential prior readings on the part of audiences depend on a perception of authority. His own childhood is itself offered as carrying authority - I am actually from this town, and have personal testimony to offer. The show can therefore be read as distinct narratives and symbolisations across these audiences, adopting a certain authority in which ever discourse they require.

In this way it represented a powerful adjunct to the discourse of artists' interventions in and responses to Museums. Most of the projects described in such a category of practice gain their identity from being an interaction with a collection. They may also form a dialogue with architecture and setting. They certainly play with the way Museum buildings become ciphers for authority in the play between those two forms. On some occasions, they have invoked the collective memory shared between Museum and audience of the unique identity grounded in the history which both Museum and collection reflect.

Fujiwara's project takes a fresh step in this discourse by embracing the collective memory and the different discourses surrounding the entire programme of the Gallery. He sifts examples of visiting objects from the collection, and plays with the architecture. He references past exhibitions and projects. He makes allusions to marketing imagery used in the early life of the gallery to establish awareness, and to themes current in the debate about what constituted its identity and purpose.

Leach therefore also possesses a multi-faceted identity within Fujiwara's work. He is the father of the craft tradition which, we now take as 'read' in the

discourse, he played a large part in creating. The building blocks of Leach's narrative are the imagery of Fujiwara's installation: the marriage of East and West; the renewal of the vernacular craft practice; the enshrining of tradition in the modern. He is the father to the community, a senior figure, of the same generation as Hepworth, the female opposite, who was apparently (in Leach's exegesis at least) pursuing the separate path of high public art.

By reversing the gendering of Fujiwara's parentage – the male father from the east, returning to the east, and leaving the female in Cornwall – Leach the father begets Fujiwara *pere* the son. The father played by the actor in the work, shocked by the vandalism of the pots which “is necessary”, nevertheless becomes a willing, aware player in the drama.

There is also a metaphor of acceptance and rejection going on. What remains of the drama played out on stage and on screen? We are offered the contemporary replication and reproduction as remaining whole, not the original. The new vernacular of the electric kettle and tea bags replace the invented tradition of Leach's adoption of the bowls and vessels of the tea ceremony, as Fujiwara breaks from all three fathers (ur father, real father, role playing father) and they move aside.

Long term local residents visiting his show may recall – and indeed be part of - a social dynamic that might have begun in the period before and of the first few years of Tate St Ives was the local community's adoption – or not – of the Gallery, and how that operated for different groups within it. One memory will be of a kind of anti-gallery sentiment that mapped class, education, the perception of the visual arts and crafts at a moment just before projects like Tate St Ives itself and the reorganization of the Tate Gallery in London.

The development of Tate St Ives' local education programme at this time, in which the young Fujiwara was indeed a participant, might recall the danger of using historicised or anecdotal recall of the artists and the community. Many artists, then recently deceased or nearing the end of their lives, might either be recalled negatively, or indeed still alive and active in the community – as was the case with artists as different as Patrick Heron or Janet Leach, working as they were in their own studios in the town at the time Tate St Ives opened.

The very immediacy of specific associations living on in the community at that time meant that the allure or negativity of “being an artist” would be loaded with personal associations. Fujiwara, for instance, describes how as a schoolchild he was reminded of Barbara Hepworth's death as an example of the dangers of smoking – and, by implication, not being told about her standing as an artist.

The other contemporary items in the installation offer a different example of the specificity of thinking required about the generic nature of community memory, and its sublimation in reinterpreting that for today's new visitor. We might link the gay politics made vivid and immanent elsewhere in Fujiwara's show to the foregrounding by him of the biography of Leach by the late Emmanuel Cooper: literally an object of display.

This careful placing of Cooper's book, in the perceptions of some visitors, referenced Cooper's own valuable role in the gay community in London and Britain. This was something to which, in his lifetime and at Cooper's death, many in Cornwall showed respect alongside that shown to his work on the documenting of the working ceramics community, and of his study of Leach's life and work.

Such specificities drawn from past shared memory are unavailable to the new audiences for Tate St Ives and the Leach Pottery –as is any anecdotal background for any exhibition.



'A rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)', meanwhile, has been shown outside the UK in different configurations and contexts, before and after its Tate St Ives showing. We might reconsider the title if seeing the work at, say the Kwangiu Biennale. Who is the reunion with? It is only a rehearsal we are watching – it might never actually happen.

Beyond St Ives, one speculates, the iconography of the 'broken pot' might be foregrounded over the specific location of St Ives. It is important to note, however, that this iconography does not feel immediate for the artist. Whether contemporary makers and ceramic artists who see their careers as positioned within the discourse dominated by and reactive to Leach might feel affronted by Simon Fujiwara's appropriation of it, is beside the point, since his autobiographical claim to his St Ives upbringing allows him to turn the iconography around that very issue. Imagine, he seems to be saying in some moments, growing up in a town dominated by received ideas about art and craft.

To conclude, though Fujiwara rebuilds the museum display, he also rebuilds the ways in which the museum display might prompt associations by its different audiences. And though he addresses a mainstream narrative in ceramic history, he does so from an explicitly autobiographical position which becomes for audiences a point of entry to many shared meanings.

'A rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)', uses at its core not the idea of a museum display per se, but a notion of value which resides in a canon created by a narrative of 'otherness', dependent on a complex relationship between a community in Britain and a community in Japan. Simon Fujiwara himself is both an individual whose personal circumstance mirrors this communal relationship, and an artist who then transforms his individual circumstance into a rich discourse for a museum project.

In these respects 'A rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery)' is different from many so-called 'interventions' in museums. It takes not a specific fixed display, but a generic curatorial position as its reference point. The order being challenged is not so much the order represented in any fixed way by a museum or a canon, but a set of assumptions about an underlying history and reference set. It shifts the artist's relationship to the audience as a co-curator, taking the audience's part and suggesting that the artist and audience share questions and insights that are dramatized around the body of work, the body of ideas, and the body of apparently external contingent details which turn out to be central – and are having fun with it, too.

Michael Tooby

Note :

All illustrations : courtesy of Tate, for Tate St Ives *Simon Fujiwara : Since 1982* 18 January – 7 May 2012, and c Simon Fujiwara

ⁱ The iconography of the broken vessel is another line of enquiry that might usefully be developed when considering this work. From Gainsborough's "fancy pictures" to Ai Wei Wei's 'Dropping a Hang Dynasty Urn', physical, moral and ethical integrity has been embodied – or demonstrated as brittle – in the image of the broken or cracked vase. This iconography persists in contemporary practice. The author has, for example, recently described the use of a dropped cup in 'Fragments' and related works by David Cushway, in Tooby, M. : '*Order and disorder : Some relationships between ceramics, sculpture and museum taxonomies*' in the online journal '*Interpreting Ceramics*', Cardiff metropolitan University, Issue 14, 2012.