



BOULEVARD

BIOGRAPHIES

Grayson Perry (1960-)

Grayson Perry works and lives in London, England. He was born to a working-class family in 1960 in Chelmsford, Essex. He left for college in 1979 and graduated in 1982 from Portsmouth Polytechnic. His late teens and twenties played out against a national backdrop of social unrest and increasing economic division. When Perry first moved to London in the early '80s, he was part of a fashionable post-punk scene whilst simultaneously causing a furor in the poetry classes he attended because of the provocative and rebellious work he was creating. His native rural Essex was central to the visual imagination, and he was also part of the Neo Naturists, whose performances were an anarchic mix of body painting, alchemic cooking demonstrations, rural traditions, and 1960s hippie culture.

Perry is a contemporary of the YBA (Young British Artists), a loose group of practitioners, including Sam Taylor-Johnson, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Rachel Whiteread, and Damien Hirst, who came to prominence in London during the late 1980s, and were known for their openness to materials and process, as well as shock tactics. Charles Saatchi, the British dealer, gallerist, and collector best known for putting YBA on the map and for his scandalous "Sensation" show in 1999, was an early patron of Grayson Perry. For the last decade, Perry has been represented by the Victoria Miro Gallery in London.

After working for several years in a range of media, including performance, film, drawing, and collage, in 1987, Perry bought his own kiln and became more focused on his ceramic practice. It is pottery through which the artist has made his name. Perry maintains an insistence upon handmade craft and the physical act of making, creating each pot himself without the help of studio assistants. Ceramics have consistently been viewed by the art world as unintellectual, amateur, and unfashionable. The artist's focus on ceramics provides a particular affront to an art world that has typically shown disdain for pottery's associations with craft, domesticity, and decoration—aspects Perry plays up/upon. Subverting ceramic's second-class status, and disrupting the clear binaries (or boundaries) between high and low, serious and comic, antique and cliché knick-knack, artistic and accessible, art and craft, intellectual and sensuous, is fundamental to the artist's message.

His ceramics, tapestries, and works on paper explicitly conjoin traditions old and new, imaginatively mixing allusions to ancient Greek, Chinese, Japanese, and Islamic pottery, Anglo-Saxon history, medieval heraldry, African brass plaques, antique cartography, and American folk and outsider art, among other things. These historical templates are transformed with figural signs and symbols of contemporary British life: markers of culture, gender, sexuality, class, consumerism, and taste. Well-steeped in history and designs from the past, Perry's objects relate as much to traditions of 16th-century Dutch mapmaking, Chinese scroll painting, Celtic tracery, etc., as they do to his obvious 20th-century art world provocateur precursors, Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. Perry is fascinated by themes of ritual, belief, pilgrimage, and community, as these concepts have been articulated, consciously or unconsciously, throughout time.

Perry's content satirically exposes social tensions/assumptions and provides commentary about British society, sometimes regarding deeply political issues, but also about the broader human condition. This is accomplished through thoughtful, humorous, and sometimes shockingly raw references – ranging from actual contemporary events, and fiction created around working class types, to the artist's quite personal autobiography, mined from a volatile and repressed childhood, which engendered a rich fantasy life, and his early awakening as a both an artist and transvestite (and including some of the struggles and pleasures related to each of these identities). Flamboyant cross-dressing has become increasingly part of Perry's self-expression through the artist's over-the-top alter ego Claire. Another recurrent figure is "Alan Measles," a childhood teddy bear, represented across various media in several of the artist's pieces. Alan Measles serves as a god-like figure, an idol in animal form, a guerrilla resistance leader, and a surrogate father, according to the artist. Adding poignancy, humor, and provocation to Perry's art, Measles reflects both an attempt to translate ancient ideas of ritual and worship into present day culture, and late 20th-century difficulty in finding connection and supportive male role models.

A lightning rod for controversy among the art establishment of curators and critics-both pro and con, Perry is also arguably one of the most popular British artists today, feted internationally, eliciting enthusiastic support from certain audiences, including the Royal Family, and even becoming something of a media celebrity. He has appeared regularly on radio and TV, had his own series on Channel 4, and written a humorous book on the contemporary scene called *Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in its Struggle to Be Understood*. But, by the same turn, he was awarded the Turner Prize for contemporary art in 2003, became a Royal Academician in 2010, and in 2015, was named a Trustee of the British Museum and Chancellor of the University of the Arts London.