



Break, Remake

Laura Gray presents the ceramists involved in *Unravelling Uppark*, a project seeing artists commissioned to create works for the historic Uppark House.

Salvaged fragments of plaster lie dejected in a plastic tray. A carefully attached swing tag gives them an archaeological air. These scraps of architraves, cornices, and brocades are evidence of the most dynamic and dramatic event in the history of Uppark House. In 1989 a fire ravaged the doll's-house-like eighteenth-century mansion. The photographs of the burning house, its roof



1 Matt Smith – *Garniture: The Bullock Buckets*, ceramic, screenprinted decals, underglaze, enamel, lustres, 2014, L250cm (installation)

to capture the transformative properties of fire? And of course the destruction of the old to make way for the new is part of the standard narrative of art history. Old materials, techniques, ideologies are swept aside to make way for the contemporary. At Uppark, however, the destruction of the house has led to the creation of... well, of exactly what was there before. National Trust folly or feat of craftsmanship, whichever way you view it, the rebuilding of Uppark raises some interesting questions about aura and authenticity. Rich in drama, gossip, and philosophical lines of enquiry about existence and reality, the rebuilt Uppark offers plenty of source material for the artists to unravel in their work.

BREAKING & REMAKING Remaking has been a part of Andrew Burton's work since a trip to India. A country where little goes to waste, he saw bricks from demolished buildings reused in new constructions, with special attention paid to blue bricks with Brahminical (and therefore religious) associations. His *Vessels* rest on the floor of Uppark's beer cellar. Like empty amphorae they wait quietly, their state of abandonment at odds with the festive colouring of the little bricks they are built from. Burton cannibalised earlier works to make *Vessels*, and in breaking and remaking his old work he forms a connection with the cycle of decay and rebirth that all life is tied to. *Vessels* echo Uppark's unique phoenix-like participation in this great cycle of creation and destruction and the alchemic transformation of house to ash back to house again.

Of the thirteen artists commissioned, five have worked with ceramics. Indeed, who better than ceramists to capture the transformative properties of fire?

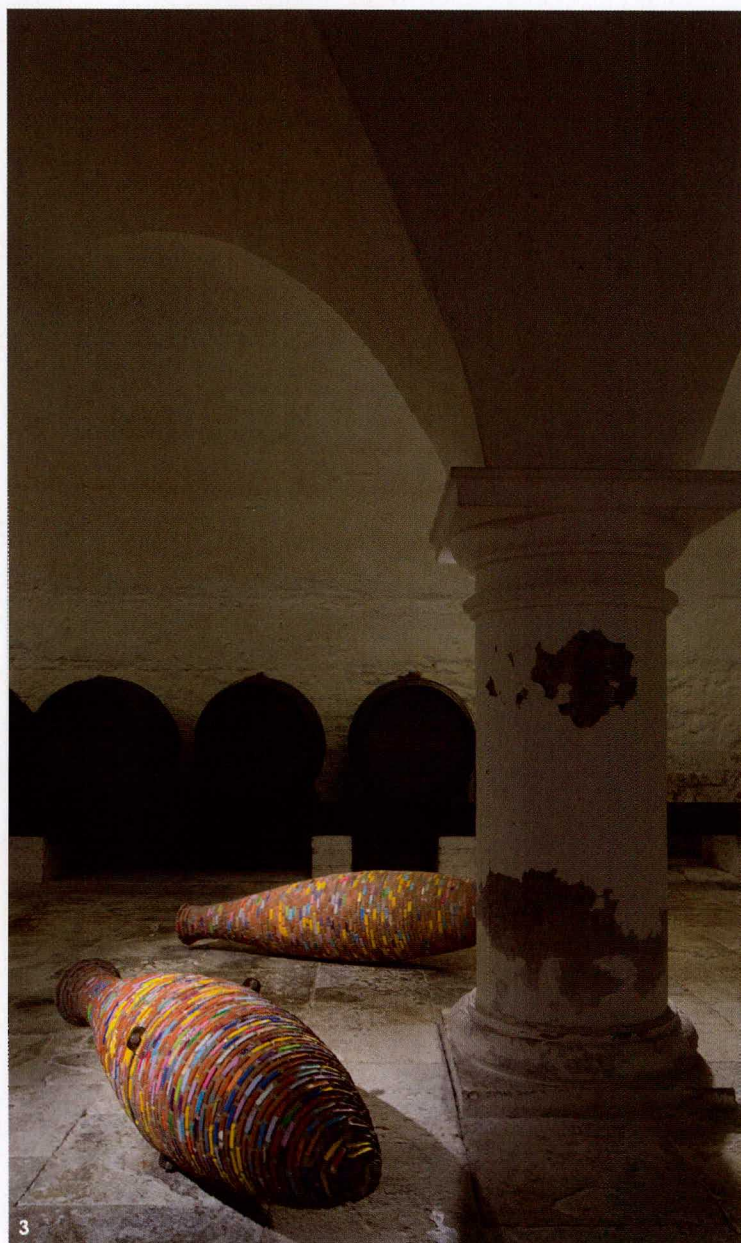
RESTORATIVE ACTS Breaking and remaking is nothing new for ceramists. Anyone who has seen *kintsugi* – repaired dishes held together with slivers of lacquer and powdered gold – knows that the beauty of the repaired object can exceed that of the unbroken example. On the other hand, the Dr Frankenstein-like staples holding together many a dish in a museum collection are a reminder of the days when restoration and conservation were more brutal than they are today. Zoë Hillyard seems to reference the brutal and the beautiful aspects of restoration in her work *Salvage*, which also offers the most overt visual reference to the destruction of the house. *Salvage* sees shattered vessels repaired by covering the shards with different fabrics stitched back together into a wonderful patchwork of colourful fabrics pulled taught over the ceramic pieces. The fragility of ceramics is retained even after this repair process as the stitched vases and bowls shift beneath the pressure of a grip if you try to pick them up. The literal instability of *Salvage* echoes the instability of categorisation, the shifting financial and intellectual value, the shifting boundaries between art forms, that can so plague ceramics.

already eaten away by the flames, are riveting as well as unnerving. Not surprising perhaps, as the burning country house looms large in our collective literary imagination. The great house fires of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* and Manderley in *Rebecca* are powerful narrative moments and heavy with symbolism. Is destruction an ending or a beginning? For Uppark House the fire in 1989 marked the beginning of an ambitious restoration project that aimed to reconstruct the house as it stood 'the day before the fire'.

TRANSFORMATIVE PROPERTIES The destruction of the house has become perhaps the most arresting event in Uppark's history. It is no surprise that the fire has been an important theme for a number of artists who were recently commissioned by Unravelled Arts to create works of art for the house. Of the thirteen artists commissioned, five have worked with ceramics. Indeed, who better than ceramists

2 Zoë Hillyard – *The Uppark Vase*, ceramic, digitally printed silk, thread, 2014, H38cm 3 Andrew Burton – *Vessels*, fired clay, paint, glaze, stain, cement, 2014, L120cm 4 Robert Cooper and Stella Harding – *Dish of the day: chicken in a basket*, porcelain paper clay, onglaze ceramic transfers, 2014, H15cm
Photography Jim Stephenson

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SOCIAL MOBILITY Like Zoë Hillyard, Matt Smith draws directly on Uppark's destruction in *Garniture: The Bullock Buckets*. A neat reference to both the 1989 fire and a touch of social ascent (a dairy maid who through a fortuitous marriage became Uppark's owner) the buckets have made the transition from their usual 'below stairs' position to a prominent spot in the house. This particular garniture stand proudly on legs that imitate chairs and tables, their ornamental festoons copying architectural devices, as though posing self-consciously in their best clothes.

CRITICAL EYE Home truths rather than sugared almonds are served up by Robert Cooper and Stella Harding in their collaborative piece *Dish of the Day: chicken in a basket*. This porcelain basket, transfer printed with newspaper headlines, carries references to the connoisseurial habits of Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh who collected both ceramics and girls (including the young Emma Hamilton, who is said to have danced naked on the dining room table at one of his parties). Cooper and Harding unravel the kinds of history that the National Trust might have once been afraid of – taking a critical look at the behaviour of former owners of these large and beautiful houses that pepper Britain's countryside. The artists cast a critical eye on the materialism of those who still seek to buy women as if they were commodities.

Unravelling Uppark Uppark House, South
Harling, Petersfield, West Sussex, until 2
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Email dlau.gray@gmail.com

Web www.nationaltrust.org.uk/uppark/;
www.unravelled.org.uk/uppark.html

Laura Gray is a freelance researcher,
writer, and curator

A CATALYST At Uppark destruction has been a creative and transformative act, the rebuilding an exercise of man's self-determination in the face of overwhelming external forces, the desire to outrun mortality strongly present. As well as bringing together a huge community of craftspeople to rebuild the house (and ending forever the claim that 'we can't build like we used to'), the fire was a catalyst in the creation of new work by the Unravelled artists. They have succeeded in creating new meaning from destruction, and have drawn on the materiality of clay and its intellectual associations to do so.

Ceramic objects lend themselves to being broken. Breaking is a part of the risk of the making process, where success is contingent on various processes beyond the control of the artist. Breaking and repair deals with death, recollection, decay, and aging at narrative and formal levels. These ideas are emphasised, accentuated, and playfully adapted in Zoë Hillyard's patched vases, Andrew Burton's brick vessels, and Matt Smith's fire buckets, which pre-empt further pyromanic moments. 



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