

1977 single *Orgasm Addict*.

Forty years on and the image still packs a punch, blown up several metres in height, to provide the Nottingham Contemporary show with its striking opener. What follows across four, themed rooms, as well as through a sequence of installations at Chatsworth, is something more ruminative, however, a kind of grand tour through the artist's mind, testifying to her sensitivity to the way objects and artworks might talk to each other across great expanses of time. To take one, poignant example, a creation by the recently deceased jeweller Judy Blame shares display space with commemorative hair jewellery from the 18th century. 'I ne'er shall look upon her like again', reads one.

The temptation, in the face of shows as capacious as this one, is to keep on itemising; to capture the character and eclecticism through lists. But to do so might prove reductive; part of the free-wheeling pleasure of Linder's two shows are the moments of surprise. For any artist, a chance to spend half a year sifting through the Chatsworth estate's mammoth – and mostly untapped – collections would be a gift. Luckily for us, Linder has turned it into one in which we all can share.

Imogen Greenhalgh is assistant editor of 'Crafts'

Rebalancing history

Flux: Parian Unpacked

*Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge CB2 1RB
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Reviewed by Priya Khanchandani

The Fitzwilliam took a gamble when it decided to exhibit a far from conventional take on a set of new acquisitions – the Glynn Collection of over 300 19th-century sculptures – and it was a gamble that has paid off.

The collection comprises figures made from fine, unglazed porcelain known as Parian, which could be moulded and hence mass-produced cheaply, unlike marble, which is the more common material found in museum sculpture galleries. The majority are busts depicting celebrated Victorian figures that fit with the museum's existing displays, both historically and decoratively. But rather than simply displaying them, the Fitzwilliam commissioned contemporary ceramic artist Matt Smith to produce an exhibition that is refreshingly

Right: part of Matt Smith's *Flux: Parian Unpacked* at the Fitzwilliam Museum



contemporary visually and also a breakthrough in terms of the way in which museums deal with the politics of colonialism.

The core of the intervention unfolds in an octagonal gallery. Busts of six notable Victorian figures from the Glynn Collection are displayed against wallpaper, designed by Johan Bisse Mattsson for the exhibition, which incorporates archival images depicting the atrocities of Empire. For instance, six busts of Queen Victoria are unconventionally shown against a backdrop of skeletal figures and other scenes from the Bengal massacre of 1943, when millions died of starvation under British rule. Similarly, Henry Havelock, General Gordon, Peel, Gladstone and Kitchener – individuals who were decorated for their roles in furthering colonialism's cause – are all shown in new light.

At the centre of this room, white busts of less familiar figures peep out of stacked boxes as though they have literally just arrived at the museum, highlighting their state of 'flux' as our knowledge of them is re-aligned. Conventionally placed on plinths or mantelpieces as objects representing the validation or success of those they depict, the meaning of these sculptures is placed under scrutiny by their re-positioning. The precariousness of the stacked boxes seems to symbolise the fragility of their history as we knew it.

Meanwhile, new meanings are being 'unpacked' before us. The museum becomes a platform for renewed interpretations, as opposed to a place that is tacit in the validation of colonial legacies as Victorian museums were built to be.

The rest of the exhibition consists of new ceramic works by Matt Smith. These

respond to and are interspersed among the Fitzwilliam's collection as though in dialogue with it. They vary from figures with cone heads that metaphorically underline gaps in our understanding of the past to sculptures moulded from objects of different periods that Smith found at the Spode Factory in Stoke.

Adjacent to an 18th-century sculpture of classical figure Leda being raped by a swan is Smith's *Other Kinds of Love*, which comprises a mélange of objects that appear collectively erotic, such as shells, a female mannequin, a torso and the suggestive bent leg of a horse. This work is finely executed and exhibits Smith's virtuosity as an artist. The subtle commentary on the objects we 'museumise' is both thought-provoking and at times funny, particularly when it satirises familiar high Renaissance and Baroque forms. Conceptually, this is the more challenging part of the exhibition and the cursory explanatory text deliberately leaves the objects open to interpretation, although could leave a non-specialist audience with more questions than answers.

The exhibition's triumph is giving a voice to untold parts of history and this was clearly important to the artist. It is not very often that museums in the UK talk about the dark side of Empire, even when they display objects that were implicated in its very creation, and this has left a deep void.

We seem to be reaching a moment when museums are not being let off the hook. 'Decolonisation' is a trending subject of museum conferences; protest groups and activists have begun to haunt museums; minority groups want to have a voice. We need more exhibitions like this to rebalance the scales of history. *Priya Khanchandani is a curator, writer and arts manager*

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