

'All museums have to manage their resources to look after their collections,' Matt Smith tells me, seated in his office in Konstfack, Stockholm's prestigious school of art, craft and design. As well as being an artist, working with clay, Smith is a professor of craft at the school, specialising in ceramics and glass, and behind him, just visible through a glass window, a student workshop hums with activity. 'This means when new objects arrive, there's a change; it's more of a stretch. It's a double move: they bring something new to the museum, but also allow us to review the status of quo of what's already there.'

For the best part of a decade, Smith has studied the workings of public collections, making ceramics that respond to the peculiarities and patterns of individual institutions, performing exactly this double move he describes. It makes him well versed in the ways in which newcomers to a permanent display might cause a shift, changing, even subtly, how the original objects are seen. And there are, he points out, parallels between human movement and the movement of objects that are more than merely incidental. The way our institutions assimilate difference

and new perspectives reflects an openness in society more broadly; a willingness to accommodate change and make space for multiplicity.

Over the years, this fascination with museums has led Smith into the storerooms and archives of numerous institutions, from National Trust properties, where he co-curated *Unravelling*, inviting artists to respond to historic buildings, to the ambitious project *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 2010, in which he asked how the museum might represent the LGBT lives absent from its public displays. Now, his latest exhibition takes him to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, where he will respond to the Glynn Collection of Parian ware, a 360-strong group of Victorian statuary Parian once owned by collector David Glynn, and recently allocated to the museum by the government. For once, Smith's creations won't be the only new kids on the block.

Made up predominantly of Parian busts, as well as some full-length portraits, the collection represents figures popularly celebrated at the time – there are eminent figures from history, as well as contemporary Victorians and characters

from myth and legend. Perhaps inevitably, this means there are 'an awful lot of moustaches and uniforms', as the Fitzwilliam's curator Helen Ritchie points out, and very few women, but the collection is full of complex stories for an artist such as Smith to respond to, opening up routes into the murky and contested areas of history that have long fascinated him.

When we meet, the response in question, *Flux: Parian Unpacked*, is a little over a month away from opening. As the show's title hints, it's a clear-eyed study of change and instability, on both micro and macro scales. 'Change happens,' Smith explains of the show's conceptual underpinning, 'and that can either be difficult or joyful or both.' And he makes clear that his point is not to 'make people feel bad about the past', but instead to reflect its complexity. The question of Empire became one way of doing so, as a legacy we are still coming to terms with. It brings him to questions at the forefront of contemporary politics too: 'There is so much going on, I can't not talk about it, however obliquely.'

Smith first played around with Parian during an artist residency at the Victoria and Albert

MATT SMITH REMAKING THE MUSEUM

Matt Smith is a curator and ceramist who has spent much of the last decade responding to public collections and drawing out new histories, says *Imogen Greenhalgh*. Portrait by *Per Kristiansen*



Museum in 2016, which he was still completing when Ritchie approached him about a possible exhibition. A fine porcelain to which flux is added, Parian attains a marble-like sheen once fired, making it an affordable alternative for mass manufacturing. However, it is also unstable and tricky to work with and has tended to be slip cast using plaster moulds – a method central to Smith’s own practice, whereby he produces hybrid objects using second-hand moulds and everyday items. What results are a series of witty and intriguing three-dimensional collages, with something of the Victorian nonsense verse of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll to them: genteel busts with eggs for heads, a disembodied duck, a teapot with two male heads. Smith smiles: ‘I want people to be a bit more mixed up.’

The artist is, at heart, a sensitive storyteller, of plots both real and imagined. ‘With any museum show, whatever story someone tells they’re excluding thousands of other stories,’ he observes, conscious of the double bind this creates. ‘What interests me is not correcting that, but asking who isn’t heard, who isn’t feeling comfortable here?’ In the past this has taken him

on voyages deep into the collections of museums and stately homes, returning to present visitors with forgotten histories, paying overdue tribute to the men and women ignored or obscured by official accounts of the past. His methods are often understated, even delicate. Birmingham Museum, for instance, gamely handed over the keys to its vitrines, allowing Smith to give LGBT histories space and attention. His revisions were subtle, not always obvious to the unsuspecting eye, and intentionally dispersed through existing displays. These stories might surprise you, it suggested, but they were all there already.

Flux is the first time that Smith has delved into Britain’s imperial history, though he has grappled with the subject since emigrating to São Paulo in Brazil aged nine. Within the show, he is deploying tactics familiar from previous exhibitions: rearranging collection items to suggest new and different connections between them, and inserting his own clay objects among the displays. The figures Smith makes are strange and sometimes unsettling amalgamations of recognisable forms, and they act as small but defiant celebrations of difference once they strut among

the permanent display, deliberately resisting easy reading.

‘The base of this one came from the Spode factory, but I have no idea what it originally was. Then this part came from a knock-off of a Georgian candlestick, and this part on the top was a plumb bob for wallpaper,’ Smith explains, chuckling at the unlikely anatomy lesson he is giving me. ‘It can be read in loads of ways. If you put stuff together, you get something new, which is kind of fun. It’s sort of a metaphor for museum collections; you’re pulling objects together to tell narratives that weren’t necessarily there when the objects were made.’

Alongside these interventions, as he refers to them, there will be a series of arrangements elsewhere in the museum, intentionally blurring the line delineating the temporary exhibition from the permanent display. The idea, he explains, is to trip visitors up as they navigate through the gallery spaces, and make them re-examine what’s in front of them. For example, beneath Millais’s painting *The Twins*, visitors will find a new, two-headed Parian bust by Smith of two women in ‘a tussle’, their necks twisted and their eyes smooth

and unseeing. Looming over them are two busts from the Glynn Collection, and from the whole composition something uncanny and evocative emerges: ‘It’s all about looking and not looking, seeing and pretending not to see.’

Alongside these individual displays, visitors will also encounter a major installation in the Octagon Room, a 1930s extension in the centre of the museum. Here, Smith plans to present close to 150 busts from the Glynn Collection, alongside six wallpapers he has created especially for the show, using scenes from oil paintings, magazines and newspapers from the era – all competing forms of pro- and anti-imperial propaganda. Each wallpaper relates to a specific aspect of British imperial rule, foregrounding relevant figures from the Glynn Collection – the main challenge being, he explains, to make what might seem like an austere ‘mass of dead people’ from the past become real, and ‘talk to us today’.

Organising objects in suggestive *mise-en-scènes* such as these has been at the core of Smith’s practice from the very beginning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his interest in the inner workings of institutions, he started out as a

curator. It was while studying for a masters in Museum Studies in 1997, however, that the edges of his curatorial ambitions began to fray.

During a lecture he was shown the work of artist Fred Wilson, invited in the early 1990s to review the collections of the Maryland Historical Society from the viewpoint of an African-American. The show caused ripples that spread far beyond Baltimore, but it was one work in particular that stuck with Smith. Titled *Metalwork 1793-1880*, Smith cites it as a kind of wake-up call. ‘Wilson had chosen this repoussé silverwork, and presented it alongside some slave manacles from the same period,’ he explains, showing me an image of the work. The juxtaposition is a simple but startling one, the word metalwork suddenly exuding a chilling force. ‘It just made me realise how edited, how selected, how *careful* museums displays are. And I thought: I can’t be a curator and work in the same way any more, I’m not willing to be a part of this.’

Rather than giving up on the role of institutions to serve as gatekeepers to the past, Smith now approaches them from a different angle, ready to redress and review, embracing the free-

dom that being an outsider affords him. They are, he argues, ‘powerhouses’ and continue to provide a ‘mirror’ reflecting society at large. This makes them fundamental, even when imperfect. ‘I think when you experience being silenced by cultural organisations, you begin listening for it, because you know that *you* are not there. So if this story about your country doesn’t include you, who else doesn’t it include?’

What will unfold this spring at the Fitzwilliam is not the first critique of the issues Smith highlights, but it is a timely one, as debates about otherness and national identity continue to divide. And it’s firmly in the role of artist and maker that he plans to contribute to the conversation. ‘I grew up with grandparents and parents who made. Not in a professional sense, but there was this sense that you have agency... You don’t have to accept what, say, a mass manufacturer will allow you to buy; you can make the world you want to make. And if the way things are lined up doesn’t quite work for you, you can realign it.’ *‘Flux: Parian Unpacked’ at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 6 March – 1 July 2018.* mattsmith.com



Previous page, left: one of a series of ‘conehead’ figures, destined for the Fitzwilliam’s porcelain galleries, and right: Matt Smith in the ceramics studio at Konstfack, Sweden

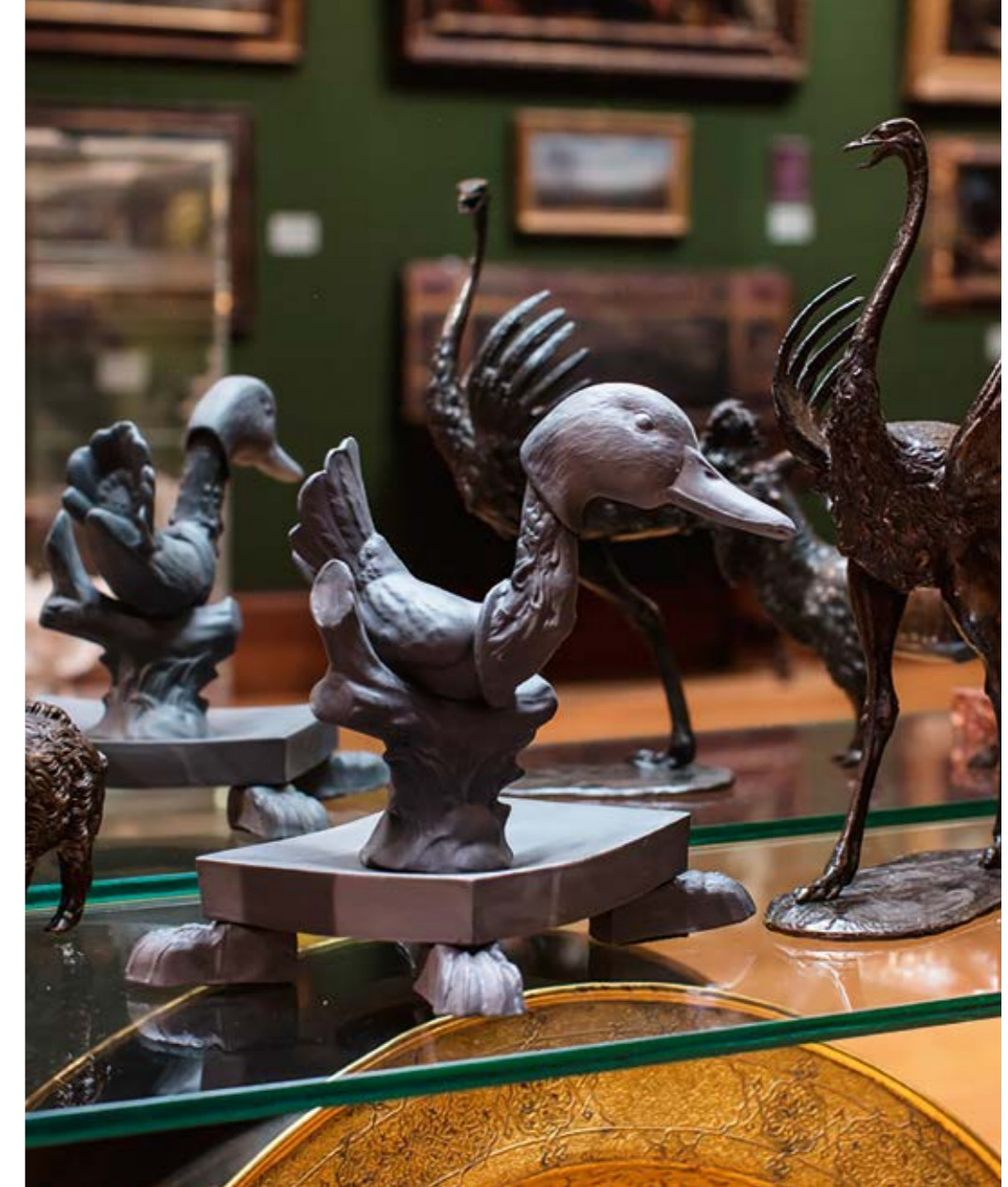
Above: *The Bullock Buttocks*, ceramic, screen-printed decals, underglaze, enamel, lustres, at Uppark House, part of *Unravelling Uppark*, 2014. Right: *Dandy at The Vyne*, part of *Unravelling The Vyne*, 2013. Opposite: a hybrid Parian figure installed in the Fitzwilliam’s bronze galleries



CONEHEAD: PHOTO MATT SMITH | UPPARK: PHOTO JIM STEPHENSON, COURTESY THE ARTIST | THE VYNE: PHOTO SUSSIE AHLBURG | FITZWILLIAM PHOTO: SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN

‘What interests me is asking who isn’t heard, who isn’t feeling comfortable?’

MATT SMITH





Left: *Spout-necked Woman*, 2018, created for the Fitzwilliam's Bronze Galleries. Below: *Conehead Geishas with pearls*, 2018, created for the Porcelain Galleries. Opposite page: *Other Kinds of Love*, 2018

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Left and below: figures from *A 31 Note Lovesong*, presented at Victoria and Albert Museum in 2016



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