

curtain on process. There's a mesmerising looped film of the kitchen during service, chefs in total focus working balletically around each other. It's a particular pleasure to see a selection of the primitive blobs of coloured Plasticine used to define the placement of components on the plate. A display of equipment sits alongside a short film of their use. There's everything from the basic silicone moulds and soda siphons to the simple-yet-ingenious 'caviar machine', which in reality is no more than a series of syringes suspended in a frame – when the plungers are pushed, droplets of mixture fall into a calcium chloride solution resulting in spheres of flavour. And then there are the machines that no home cook would recognise: Pacojet or Teppan Nitro, anyone?

In the run up to the show's opening, I kept hearing the same reservations about an exhibition on food with nothing on offer to eat. Sure, you don't get to try the food – these are elite objects after all – but though critics are sometimes also frustrated that they don't get to sit on the furniture or try on the jewellery at the V&A, this has never been the expectation. While it might describe a recent history, the exhibition's subject is most definitely historical. From the very first room there is a sense of loss with the closing of elBulli, a personal loss of that which you will never taste but also the cultural loss of a proving ground for young chefs. In essence the show is a time capsule, a celebration of achievements past, perhaps even a *memento mori*, a 17th century Dutch still life for our time. *Teleri Lloyd-Jones is assistant editor of Crafts magazine*

## Unravelling a house of many histories

### Unravelling the Vyne

*The Vyne, Basingstoke RG24 9HL*  
28 June – 22 December 2013

Reviewed by Sara Roberts

This project is a robust 'conversation' between a historic venue and contemporary artists. The Vyne is a Tudor country mansion, built in the early 16th century by Henry VIII's Lord Chamberlain, William Sandys, with later period additions commissioned between the 1650s and 1950s by successive generations of the Chute family. The

place lends itself to being unravelled: it is rich in history and sturdy, well crafted materials – there is an oak gallery, a stone gallery, panelled rooms, print and tapestry rooms, a superb collection of Queen Anne furniture and an eclectic ceramics collection.

The artists' responses to the building are apt and thoroughly researched, with some of the most successful providing narratives which parallel and develop the house's own stories. *Lady Dacre's Wedding Gift – A Conceit*, by Penny Green, a series of deep ceramic plates depicting tales of the sometimes powerful women associated with the house, is so simply laid upon a table in the dining room that visitors may assume it is part of the ceramics collection. Some plates are even fractured and mended in a manner emulating early metal staple repairs, as if they have been subject to the ravages of time and crude conservation.

Two of the artists explore and develop the character of John Chute as 18th century dandy. Chute was a friend of Horace Walpole, and there are correspondences between the rooms he remodelled so extravagantly here and at Strawberry Hill, which Walpole, Chute and Thomas Gray designed together as the group known as 'The Committee of Taste'. Matt Smith's composite work, *The Gift*, comprises a tower of heraldic and kitsch figurines, threaded together with strings of pearls – the kind of *objets d'art* Walpole recommended that Chute purchase during the Grand Tour.

The conceit here is that they are possibly an embarrassment – bundled together and hidden behind the grandeur of the Grand Staircase – and have become a teetering monument to the vagaries of changing taste. Sharon McElroy's video, *An Exquisite Diversion*, populates the Vyne with more recent examples of dandyism: glittering, transgender 70s Glam Rock figures strut through the house, taking part in a masked fantasy party like those experienced by Chute and Walpole on their Venetian trips. Glamorous costumes strewn around the bedrooms hint at further adventures and carnal urgency.

Alec Stevens's *49 Pomegranates* is a collection of lifesize fruits exquisitely carved in oak and displayed in the Oak Gallery. Pomegranates were Catherine of Aragon's symbol, and the reference is to the precise number found on the panelled walls. The carved fruits are swept under the carpet, partially hidden from view, just as Catherine herself was after she failed to produce a male heir for Henry VIII. Stevens's craftsmanship and imaginative interpretation expand on this rich metaphor and invite a closer view of the fabric of the building.

Opposite page:  
Plasticine models, elBulli  
Clockwise from right:  
*49 Pomegranates*, Alec Stevens, oak, 2013; *The Gift (detail)*, Matt Smith, white earthenware, freshwater pearls, 2013; *Gate Gate*, John Grayson, enamelled copper, brass, 2013



ELBULLI PHOTO: PALAU ROBERT | ALL UNRAVELLED PHOTOS: SUSSIE AHLBURG

Maria Rivans's *Short Cuts and Pop-Ups* is a spectacularly complex 'landscape' on a central reading table in the library. Made with collaged, sliced vintage books, it encapsulates the history of the Vyne, depicting the Grand Tour and avid collecting, new architecture, scholarship, and botanical classification with pop-up flora and fauna; bloody aspects of its history with a particularly gruesome beheading; Venetian gondolas negotiating rippling pages; contemporary National Trust visitors contemplating the scene; the rampaging hunt.

The whole is tied together by shredded text eddying around the stacks of books, and depicting the river at the heart of the estate. The chair alongside has been flung back violently, as if during one of the dramatic events of the Vyne's history. Decoration and darkness here combine in a rich series of narratives. It is a highly imaginative response to the site, and rewards close scrutiny in its attention to detail and close historical reading.

The exhibition itself stimulates further robust conversations: some National Trust visitors do not welcome the overlay of the contemporary upon the historical, making high quality interpretation crucial. In such a context, the attitude of volunteer guides can make or break the relationship between audience and contemporary interventions; the Vyne guides, while sensitive to the opinions of the visitors, are particularly well briefed, and lead new readings of both the work and its rich context.

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