

Shades of Grayson Perry



Sachiko Pearce

What is the relationship between art and the arrangement of flowers? We all know, understand and appreciate traditional paintings of flowers arranged in a vase: that is probably what most of us see in our mind's eye when we think about floral art as a genre. But what happens when the flowers become part of the work of art, when a flower arrangement responds directly to the work of an artist or even forms the main element in an art piece around which the more traditional aspects of artistic creation take their place?

These questions are addressed in the pieces we see here. They are the top three entries in a competition at the Surrey Area Floral Art Show 2019 organised by the Surrey National Association of Flower Arranging Societies (NAFAS). The title of this class was *Shades of Grayson Perry*. This clever title was clearly designed to encourage a wide range of responses: "shades" can refer to colour and tone, light and shadow while "shades of" means that we are reminded of or encouraged to think about the person in question.



Ann Kennedy

Grayson Perry is one of the most interesting and provocative artists at work today. He is well known for his transvestitism and his adoption of a female public persona, Claire, and he is not short of controversial opinions. His work is surprisingly and refreshingly accessible using elements of craft and folk art that set him apart from most other Turner Prize winning artists. His best work is in ceramics which he uses to combine the art of Classical Greek vases with bright colours and the naïve, folk patterns found in craftwork. This mixture of traditions is

important: "I like the whole iconography of pottery. It hasn't got any big pretensions to being great public works of art, and no matter how brash a

statement I make, on a pot it will always have certain humility". One of Perry's reasons for using ceramic as a medium is that he sees it as "feminine" and, indeed, much of his art (and his life generally) deals with questions of the place of women in art. All of this makes Perry's work the perfect starting point for floral art arrangements.

The three pieces we see here adopt and play with so many of the elements in Perry's ceramics and use them to create entirely original flower works. They all start with a pot or a vase and build references to Perry's art around it. The patterns are simple and bold but the colours are full of fun and femininity with plenty of pink and pastel particularly in the arrangements by Sachiko Pearce and Annette Urquhart. High heeled slippers and lacy hair bows and ribbons nestle amongst the flowers.



Ann Kennedy's piece plays with stronger colours and textures - an astute reference to Perry's technique of working additional materials and small relief sculptures onto the surface of his pots. What all three arrangements share though, is a wonderful sense of humour from Ann Kennedy's upside down, head-in-the-sand human figure to the gorgeous frilliness of the other two works that look sweet enough to eat.

These works spin off from Grayson Perry's own art but use flowers to develop his ideas of the importance of colour, texture, decoration, humour and the feminine. These things are, to a great extent, bypassed by "high", or "serious" art which tends to regard decoration or decorative art with some suspicion. Floral art and flower arranging are treated in a similar way. They, like ceramics and pottery are regarded as subjects fit only for craft or domestic art. That is what Perry is talking about and implicitly criticising in his comments on pottery.

Grayson Perry's work breaks down the traditional barriers that exist in so much art; the barriers between high and low, art and craft, the serious and the humorous, masculine and feminine. The message of Perry's art and of the best floral art is the "humility" of a vase or pot or a flower arrangement can tell us as much as a great painting or sculpture and provide infinitely more pleasure.