

Rewriting his story

Matt Smith is best known as a ceramicist but a move to textiles is allowing him to challenge the status quo in new ways

'THERE'S SOMETHING REALLY NICE about taking an old textile that nobody knows what to do with and giving it a new chance,' Matt Smith tells me.

Best known as a ceramicist – in 2014, he won the inaugural Young Masters Maylis Grand Ceramics Prize and is currently artist in residence at the V&A's Ceramics Gallery – Smith has recently undertaken a fascinating textile project, reworking vintage tapestries and domestic textile kits.

Four and a half years in the making, and exhibited at Brighton's Ink_d Gallery last July, the *Trouble with History* series features a selection of tapestry artworks, which explore the intersection between craft and LGBT identities.

Smith is interested in how history is a 'constantly selected and refined narrative' that edits out marginalised histories, presenting itself as a fixed and accurate account of the past.

Drawing on his PhD in Queer Craft, also called *Trouble with History*, he wanted to explore the notion of queerness within society. 'I'm very interested in looking at this period from 1870 to 1970 and looking at what happened to gay male identity in that period.'

After sourcing the original tapestries, mostly on eBay and auction sites, Smith laboriously unpicked and re-stitched them to subvert their original meaning – often 'sewing out' the central figures or intended focal points, in order to challenge our perceptions, and highlight the fluid nature of memory and history.

It was, he recalls, a strangely intimate experience. 'The unpicking takes a long time and you end up with this really personal relationship with the person who's made it. By the time you've unpicked a whole section, you get an idea of their 'writing', whether they're methodical, whether they're going around places with the thread, and after a while you get quicker at unpicking somebody's work because you know naturally where they've gone on. But there are some people you despise,' he adds wryly, 'because they're really difficult to unpick.'



An installation of Matt Smith's textile works from *Trouble with History* at Ink_d Gallery, Brighton in 2015
Images courtesy Ink_d Gallery

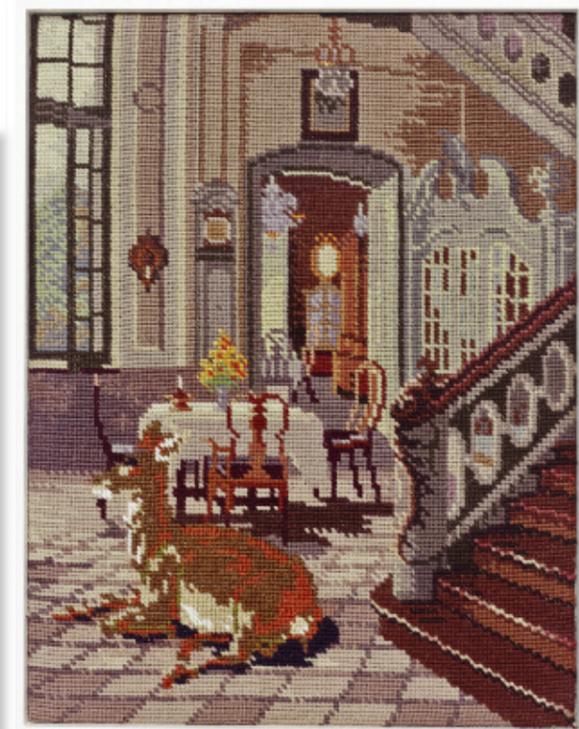
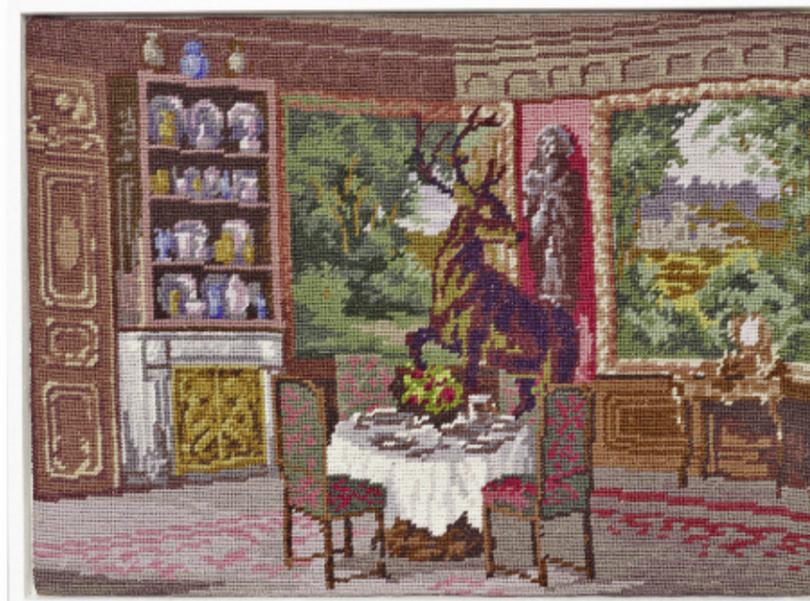
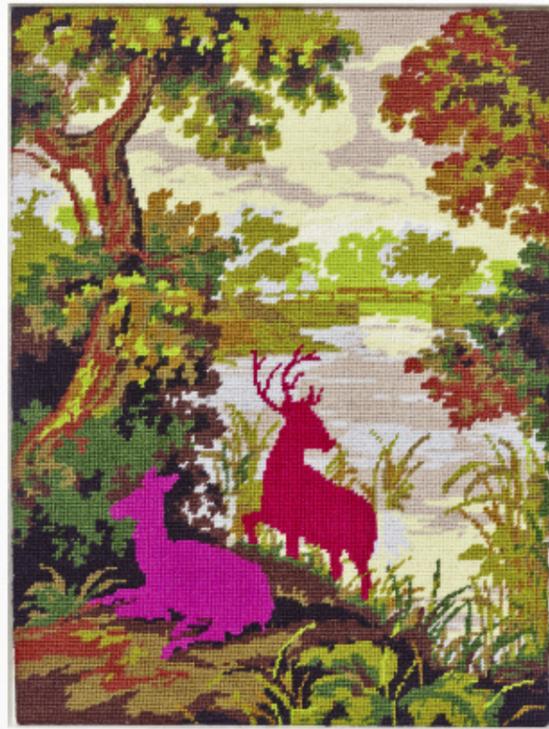
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Left to right: *Triptych Part I*
46 x 60 x 3cm

Triptych Part II
38 x 50 x 3cm

Triptych Part III
51 x 40 x 3cm

All reworked textiles with wool
Images courtesy Ink_d Gallery



Figures in the *Trouble with History* tapestries lose their faces and hands – as the textile is reworked with neutral grey wool, vivid pink silk, embroidery, a 19th-century Berlin wool work pattern, or even an expanse of Scandinavian knitting pattern. ‘I spend a lot of time trawling looking for grid patterns,’ he explains. ‘And knitting is one of the obvious areas to look for. In other pieces I’ve also used wallpaper patterns and gridded them up. Sometimes I’m just taking the meaning out and putting decoration back in, getting away from that idea of modernism and clean lines and purity.’

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Smith works in tent stitch. The real jigsaw is working out which bits you want to keep, and which bits you lose, he says – and knowing when to stop before you overwork a piece. In the famous old master paintings (the series includes a Boucher print and a Dutch still life), the background is blocked out or recoloured to foreground different details. A clown painting becomes quite sinister. Sometimes you can hardly work out where the figure starts and the landscape ends. ‘You start getting away from this hierarchy of who gets talked about and who doesn’t,’ he adds.

Smith picks up glass beads in New York or old seed pearls to use as ornament. In *Secret Lovers*, the hair of the two figures becomes a wild mass of glass beads, so that age, sex, ethnicity is unrecognisable. While in

Triptych Part I, II and *III*, he has unpicked the deer from a countryside scene (replacing the void with coloured silk) and transferred the beasts to two different interior landscapes.

‘It’s such a slow and perverse thing to do, but there’s something quite nice about unpicking it, stitch by stitch, to create another pattern,’ he jokes. The incongruous addition of a wild stag to a domestic interior certainly gives new energy to a traditional setting. And also – poignant subtext – Smith tells me, the slang for deer in Portuguese sounds very like a derogatory word for ‘gay’.

Using craft, with its connotations of the amateur, accessibility and gender, is key to his work. ‘This textile has been sewn by an amateur sewer and then I take hold of it, as a named artist, and unpick their work and take it from an amateur craft thing into a fine art work.’

Smith is best known for his ceramic assemblages, using a slip casting technique to merge items old and new, but he has increasingly been experimenting with textiles, costume and found objects

Working as a hybrid artist, curator and historian, using craft materials and techniques, he is able to infiltrate establishment organisations to shift their points of reference.

The trick is to look at what museums aren’t telling, he suggests. For a solo show at Birmingham Museum

and Art Gallery, (2010’s *Queering the Museum*), he tackled it like a school project. ‘I thought how are we going to put queer lives into this museum? Museums constantly say how difficult it is to talk about lesbians and gay people in museums so I thought let’s see how we can do it.’

One great set piece involved making a cape of 200 green carnations (a Victorian code used by gay men) for a Jacob Epstein statue of God (where the head was actually modelled on a woman, and the body on a man). ‘I’d walked past that sculpture so many times and never clocked what was going on. Because we all put this heteronormative filter over things. We expect to see what we expect to see.’

While he has huge respect for museums, he is keen to query the ‘voice of God’ style of display, where objects are catalogued with anonymous labels, which close down debate, or any hint of diversity. He cites the African-American artist Fred Wilson as a key inspiration, in particular his *Mining the Museum* show at the Maryland Museum (1992), where Wilson laid silver pieces from the collection next to slave manacles. ‘It made me realise museums edit and order, they aren’t neutral.’

More recently Smith co-curated the three-year *Unravelling* project: sating witty, provocative and beautiful art interventions by contemporary makers in National Trust historic houses – partly to look at how craft and domesticity overlap, and partly to make sure they’re not just a shrine to ‘posh white men’.

Selecting makers was totally democratic – Smith himself had to submit his work to take part. For 2012’s *Unravelling Show* at Nymans House and Garden, West Sussex, which was home to society family the Messels,

he created *Piccadilly 1830*, where a hand-beaded military jacket and ostrich plumed bearskin was draped over a broken-nosed Roman sculpture.

The piece was inspired by a 1930 stage production by the theatre designer Oliver Messel but it also made reference to Messel’s male partner, Vagn. While Oliver’s siblings’ marriages and divorces were recognised throughout the house, his own remained off the record. So Smith literally reinstated it. To his delight, after the show, Oliver’s partner was added to the family tree handed out to visitors.

Although his family were very creative – growing up in Peterborough, his mother did needlework, his grandfather was a knitter, his father, an engineer, built boats in the back yard, it was, he says, ‘a really circuitous path’ for him to get into the art world.

‘My mum taught me to sew when I was seven and she bought my brother and I small tapestry kits. My brother stabbed at his a bit and then went off, whereas I just really enjoyed it and went on doing it until my early 20s, which I don’t think was quite the result my mum wanted,’ he laughs. When he was nine, the family moved to Brazil for four years for his father’s work. ‘It was quite a culture shock going from a rural village to Sao Paulo, this massive metropolis.’

He yearned to study art but to satisfy family expectations, he took a degree in business studies, sewing in the evenings. During this time he found ‘the haven’ of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and later sought out jobs in museums, including a dream job at the V&A, where he did admin in the conservation department and relished ‘having physical hands-on time with the objects’.

Later working at the Science Museum on a

millennium project celebrating 250 years of science and technology, he was put in charge of collecting dolls and bears. 'I made sure we included different racial Barbie dolls of the 1970s and Billy and Carlos gay dolls of the 1990s,' he recalls with a laugh. In retrospect it was a way of responding to several centuries of white male bias 'and letting other stories come in'.

He took an MA in Museum Studies. But by his thirties, he felt his only legacy would be minutes from meetings. So after a ceramics course at the City Lit, he signed up for a Ceramics BA at Westminster University (2003-05).

Moving to Hove in 2006, where there wasn't a great job market, he became a full-time ceramist, almost by default. 'I was making lidded vessels with a load of Virgin Marys flying around and tableware bowls covered in cowboys and cowgirls.'

'Ceramics, once fired, are done, there's not a lot of coming back. Whereas with textiles you can stitch and unstash, pick and unpick and it's a far more circular process'

Winning the Young Masters Maylis Grand Ceramics Prize put him on the map. Textiles didn't really come back into his life until one day when, talking to his great work friend, artist Gavin Fry, he suddenly remembered the childhood tapestry kits. 'When it came to doing the work for Nymans, it seemed natural to focus on Oliver Messel's work, and his stage costumes.'

He decided to remake Messel's original *Piccadilly 1830* stage costume (the guardsman's jacket was worn in the production by Serge Lifar, Diaghilev's boyfriend), hand-beading it with thousands of individual mirror-backed glass bugle beads. 'After the production was over, Oliver had it re-tailored so he could wear it to parties in Paris. So when I made the jacket, I made it to fit me so I could wear it to parties, it was layer upon layer of connection with history.'

He taught himself to make it by getting a book out of the library. 'Gavin's partner is a tailor who has worked at the National Theatre and Glyndeboune. He looked at the jacket and just went: 'It's not bad, the sleeves could be better', which was about as good as it was going to be!'

The costume was supposed to be a celebration of family and parties but as soon as Smith placed it on Nyman's Roman statue (where the nose and genitals had been removed at some point), 'It became quote cadaverous, about death and mourning and loss and de-sexing'. That's the joy of these installations, he adds. Until pieces are on site you don't quite know what will happen.

There is a modesty and generosity to Smith, alongside his fierce intelligence. Even today he has a

slight horror of making an object to stand on a plinth in the modern white cube gallery: 'It feels a little too shouty, too *look at me and this thing I've made*.' Instead he prefers to enter into 'a dialogue' with other makers, a house, an institution, and try to unpick stories. 'I'm just inherently nosy about the world around me rather than, I hope, indulging in introspective navel gazing.'

I ask him about the difference between working with ceramics and textiles. He thinks it's about permanence versus transience. 'Ceramics, once fired, are done, there's not a lot of coming back. Whereas with textiles you can stitch and unstash, pick and unpick, and it's a far more circular process.'

LIZ HOGGARD

mattjsmith.com



Opposite from far left:
Secret Love
Reworked textile with beads
49 x 37 x 3cm

Study in Pink & Red
Reworked textile with silk
60 x 50 x 3cm

Blueboy (grey)
Reworked textile with silk
28 x 41 x 3cm

Above: *Les Enfants*
Reworked textile with wool
52 x 66 x 3cm

Images courtesy Ink_d Gallery