



‘Becoming fashionable is one of my great fears’

Cross-dressing Turner Prize winner Grayson Perry is bemused by his journey from weirdo to hero, finds *Barry Didcock*

From the outside, Grayson Perry's London studio looks like the thing it once was – a shuttered-up former corner shop on a down-at-heel street in Walthamstow, E17. You can't see through the windows and, if you peered through the letterbox, you'd see only a dusty, unadorned staircase leading to a dusty, unadorned attic. Ordinary enough so far. But cross the threshold, turn left or right, and outside realities

refashion themselves into something more fantastic.

Two giant kilns and a glazed pot covered with figures in Georgian dress occupy one room. In the other is a desk, a long wooden table, pots of coloured ceramic glazes and shelves loaded with books and magazines. I spot *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Firearms*, copies of *You and Your Wedding*, and hardcore hardback *Spank* by Eric Wilking (£15.99 from the

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Soho Original Bookshop – it says so on the price tag). I flick through it, leaving a guilty thumbprint on its dusty cover.

The walls, meanwhile, are decorated with pictures and scraps of drawings. I see a photo of Perry's smiling daughter, Florence. On another wall, a print entitled Map of an Englishman, a dense topographical survey of some bizarre interior landscape; there are castles and churches and an island called Dreams, and the country is split by a river, the Orgasm, which feeds into the Sea of Bipolar Disorder. Grayson Perry's transvestite alter-ego is called Claire, not Alice. But there's a through-the-looking-glass feel to this place that I just can't shake.

It's six years since the 49-year-old walked off with the Turner Prize and quipped that it was about time a transvestite potter won Britain's richest art award. Critic Matthew Collings, presenting the live coverage of the ceremony for Channel 4, merely looked at the figure in the lilac satin babydoll dress standing on the winner's podium and said what everyone else at home was thinking: "Freaky". Perry became an overnight sensation. Because of that performance and a subsequent Channel 4 documentary about transvestism that he fronted, Perry is now Britain's best-known cross-dresser. The position isn't always welcome.

"In some way it takes away the frisson of being the strange weirdo," he admits. "People go, 'Oh that's Grayson Perry, he's allowed to do that'. So now I don't get the frisson of danger I used to. Now, I'm a sort of landmark." Mind you, he adds, "I was walking up the road the other day in my full regalia and I passed a pub about half past six, and the blokes outside all went 'wey-hey!' I just acknowledged them by waving my umbrella like the Queen."

As well as being Britain's top tranny, Perry is its most celebrated ceramicist. But even here, as he points out, most people know him through lurid tabloid headlines about "paedo pots" rather than from close scrutiny of his work in art galleries. In that respect he likens himself to poet Seamus Heaney: everyone knows the name, no-one reads the poems. That's

set to change with the publication of Grayson Perry, a chunky coffee-table art book and the first major study of him and his work. It brings together what is outrageous in his art, the stuff of the "paedo pots" headlines – genitalia, swastikas, expletives, sex, weapons, violence, pornography and children – as well as more reflective pieces which speak to his other obsessions: working-class culture, politics, outsider art, and his much-loved and rather tatty teddy bear, Alan Measles.

The survey begins with the 1981 sculpture Transvestite Jet Pilots – part cockpit, part shrine, part dressing table – and ends with recent works such as the luxurious cotton textiles he has produced for upmarket London store Liberty. Pictures of the works are accompanied by Perry's illuminating explanations of their meaning and genesis. And so we learn that the title of St Claire (37 Wanks Across Northern Spain) is a mickey-take of another Turner Prize winner, Richard Long, and that Perry – who appears on the pot dressed as Claire and in the guise of a saint – is "an inveterate masturbator". That's just one work, taken at random.

For some reason I'm surprised Perry isn't actually dressed as Claire when we meet. He later admits he has little time these days for what he calls "leisure trannying", but anyway it's ludicrous to think he would appear in anything other than workwear. Today that means a black T-shirt, blue overalls and boots. Adding to the macho image is the black leather motorcycle jacket hanging on a peg nearby. Perry loves motorcycles. His Harley Davidson is parked in the yard adjoining the studio and he commutes here daily from his home in central London.

I ask him if he still thinks he'll die on his bike. A mock urn he once made was

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inscribed with a legend saying he had. “Ha, ha, ha, ha,” he barks, throwing his head back. “No, I’ve mellowed. I still like going fast because it’s difficult not to enjoy acceleration. But I don’t have fast motor-bikes any more because I will always try to ride them as fast as they will go.”

In accent and vocal mannerisms Perry recalls both John Lydon and Malcolm McLaren, and his speech is littered with the same sneering certainties and sarcastic asides. He says things like “Becoming fashionable is one of my great fears” and “I’m always looking for the next sacred cow to come down the conveyor belt”. Of the Turner Prize win he says “Most artists don’t have a public profile. The opportunity for me came along and I took it.”

Perry, then, is in a field of his own. He’s an iconoclast who loves taking pot shots at orthodoxy, whether it’s Islamic Fundamentalism or the stuffiness and exclusivity of the art world. He calls conceptual art “a long, stale mini-tradition” and complains that the art world is over-intellectualised because that’s how collectors and critics like it. They emphasise ideas over the more visceral subjects – sex, say – while the curators who control the institutions dole out “brownie points” in the form of exhibitions.

Perry won the Turner Prize for a major show in Amsterdam. I ask him if he would have been granted a similarly generous exhibition in this country at that time. “No,” he says, shaking his head. “There was a suspicion that I was a lightweight. Certain people in the art world had real difficulty getting their head around pots. That was it basically. It was really deep-seated and that was why I kept making them. It was endlessly fascinating for me that anything could be art, but if you made things that were really decorative objects, that excluded you.”

He freely admits though that his use of pots as a vehicle for his art is “a gimmick”, one he has “ring-fenced” because there’s “mileage” in it. “I’ve had craft students and potters say to me, ‘Do you think this means the art world will be more open to craft and pottery?’ I go ‘No, they’re just more open to Grayson Perry.’ There’s not a rash of taxidermists because of Damien Hirst. It’s about the art, not the craft.”

By the looks of it, that openness is paying dividends. Perry’s art is thriving – and expanding. He continues to make pots but is also at work on a tapestry, to be called *The Walthamstow Tapestry* in a humorous nod to the famous Bayeux Tapestry. He also plans more prints, textiles and a large sculptural piece. But if it was the Turner Prize win that gave Perry’s profile its much-needed boost, it was counselling that gave his art a lift. Having suffered from depression in the past, he started therapy in 1998 and found it focused rather than weakened his creative impulses.

“I became a much better artist afterwards,” he says. “I was more aware, more intellectually engaged, more confident. A lot of artists are scared of therapy because they have this belief it will iron out their quirks but I’ve never found that.”

No. Where Grayson Perry is concerned, the quirks seem pleasingly unpressed. Talking of which, how is Alan Measles? The teddy bear has been with the artist since childhood and has featured in many works, most notoriously as a glazed ceramic figure in the 2007 piece *Prehistoric Gold Pubic Alan*. Perry wore it attached to his crotch for the opening of a recent exhibition in Japan. The rest of the costume consisted of a cape emblazoned with phallic birds.

Oh, Alan’s thriving too, he says. “He’s on his way to world domination. You wait. Before long he’ll be overtaking Scientology.” If that happens, we’ll know we really are in Wonderland. ■

Grayson Perry, by Jackie Klein, Thames and Hudson, £35.

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Perry, who has suffered from depression, says therapy has helped focus his creative impulses and made him a better artist

PICTURE: PAL HANSEN