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Interview with Turner Prize nominee Anthea Hamilton

'I'm forever wishing I was a minimalist, but somehow that doesn't become me'



Anthea Hamilton pictured at Bloomberg Space, London for her 2013 exhibition 'Let's Go' © Valerie Sadou
Harriet Baker

Anthea Hamilton is standing at the door of her studio, explaining that she's just finished tidying up. "It was forensic, a really deep clean," she tells me. The 38-year-old British artist, clutching mugs of tea, ushers me to sit down, and I hastily clear a chair.

The studio, a bright upstairs room at the Gasworks Gallery in Vauxhall, south London, where Hamilton is a resident artist, doesn't seem particularly tidy. It's cluttered with objects: a pair of orange suede platform shoes, a stuffed pumpkin, polished stones, bricks and fruit. "Wherever I go, even if it's to the local high street, my eyes are primed for objects that might be interesting or handsome," explains the Turner Prize nominee. "These things are all somehow precious. I'm forever wishing I was a minimalist, but somehow that doesn't become me."

On the table are clues to her current shows: droplets of amber which feature in her metal chastity belts in the Turner Prize exhibition at London's Tate Britain, and a grass mat from Anthea Hamilton Reimagines Kettle's Yard, an exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield inspired by the modernist collection of the late Jim Ede (1895-1990), which is normally displayed in his former home in Cambridge, currently closed for renovation.

Such visual playfulness is central to Hamilton's works, assemblages of found objects oscillating between sculpture and installation. In person, the artist is quietly spoken, her seriousness undercut by a wry humour. Hamilton has been called a Surrealist, a label

she's "kind of ambivalent about", though her works are certainly associative, juxtaposing man-made with organic elements. She's interested in an object's formal properties and narrative possibilities. "My work grew into these collages or assemblages," she says. "It was a way of storyboarding ideas, of constructing a narrative through images and materials. I draw from popular culture, art history and my personal life. You can have as much of it as you can manage."



Anthea Hamilton's 'Leg Chair' (2012) at the Hepworth Wakefield © Doug Atfield

Although Hamilton is happy for her work to be accepted at face value, it is underscored with often obscure cultural references. “I push for ambiguity,” she says.

Her works in this year’s Turner Prize exhibition, originally in *Lichen! Libido! Chastity!*, her first solo exhibition in the US at Long Island City’s Sculpture Center, are a case in point: a 10-foot high sculpture of a man’s buttocks, originally a design for a doorway to a 1970s Manhattan apartment block; a remake of a 1997 Moschino “brick” suit; a series of chastity belts; a lichen-covered boot. Dig a little deeper and you’ll find references, in the buttocks, to the New York-based Italian designer Gaetano Pesce and the Italian film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini and, in the chastity belts, to Hector Guimard, designer of the Paris Métro.

There’s a tension between ambiguity and historical specificity here. Though many visitors may not be aware of all the references at play, Hamilton is keen for people to get their facts straight. She’s irked by the nickname which has been given to her realisation of Pesce’s buttocks in the press and on social media: the “golden bottom”. “I would feel disappointed if something was misunderstood,” she says. “It’s not golden. It’s a sculpture of an Asian man, and so I find it problematic that there’s a lack of ability to see something which isn’t the white body, the assumption that it’s simply another material and not another ethnicity.”

By resurrecting Pesce’s design in a new context, Hamilton has invited contemporary issues of race and sexuality, so that her final work is both an homage and a political statement. This meeting point between the historical reference and contemporary cultural moment characterises much of her work.



'Vulcano table' (2014) © Aurelien Mole/Glass Fabrik

Research is an integral part of Hamilton's practice. During her recent "mania" for lichen — "I could talk about it for hours, though I can see people glazing over" — she was given a tour of the collection at the Natural History Museum in London. When she needs to think, she heads to the libraries of the Royal College of Art in London, where she studied, and Victoria and Albert Museum. "It's my idea of luxury; it's not about money, it's about a quality of time. Going to the library feels very indulgent, because you have a whole building's worth of information at your fingertips."

No doubt this approach to research contributed to the success of her Kettle's Yard project at the Hepworth. Simon Wallis, director of the museum and a member of the Turner Prize jury, started his career as a curator at Kettle's Yard. He was fascinated to see how Hamilton would respond to the collection: "She has an intuitive, highly sophisticated way of bringing out the inherent qualities of objects. Her versatility is quite unusual; she has a playfulness but also serious intent. It was the right fit: she's protected the spirit of what Jim [Ede] was trying to do."

Hamilton has certainly balanced Ede's vision with her own. Throughout the gallery her own works, and those of contemporary artists, including the French artist Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann, British artist Nicholas Byrne and the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, are interspersed with objects from the collection. This is Hamilton at her best, creating conversations between different artists, eras and materials.

I ask her what people can expect at her forthcoming performance next month at London's Serpentine Galleries. "I'm interested in the principles of kabuki theatre, of exploring the body in motion," she replies. "But I haven't planned anything yet. I'd be happy with a lecture on lichen."

'Anthea Hamilton Reimagines Kettle's Yard', to March 19, hepworthwakefield.org; The Turner Prize is announced on December 5, tate.org.uk; 'The Magazine Sessions 2016: Anthea Hamilton', December 12, serpentinegalleries.org

Photographs: Doug Atfield; Aurelien Mole/Glass Fabrik; Valerie Sadoun

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