

Goodbye, Philip Roth



Thursday 24/05/18

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a sea stack in the Outer Hebrides respectively), Emin offers a tautly concise study done in black gouache. Its subject is even more intimate: entitled *Saying Goodbye*, it depicts her dying mother.

Perry's, meanwhile, is a witty take on the RA's summer exhibition, presenting highlights from his own oeuvre reinterpreted as if by other artists - a statue of his alter ego, Claire, constructed in the blocky style of Eduardo Paolozzi; a Warholish image of one of Perry's own motorbikes. A tiny mock Jeff Koons hovers in the background. "It's a kind of self-portrait, as all art is," he says.

The most abstract is Fiona's, which features the bubblegum-bright palette and swooping brush strokes of her recent paintings.

Though this is the first stamp she's ever designed, Fiona admits she has long dreamed of this moment: as a child, she was an ardent collector, hoovering up stamps from Australia and communist China, many of which she still possesses. Before beginning her design - painted in oils on a canvas 61x49.5cm, photographed, then shrunk "like something out of a Hollywood movie" to see whether it still had visual presence - she pulled out her old stamp books and ransacked them for visual inspiration.

"It's a bit like writing a poem rather than a novel," she observes. "It's this tiny world: you have complete control. Everything is in easy reach. But you have to make every gesture count." Might her design find its way into her personal collection? "God, yes!" she laughs. "I really want to see an envelope addressed to myself with my own stamp on it. Totally tragic, isn't it?"

Which raises the obvious point: to say stamps are an under-regarded art form is putting it mildly. Most of us barely register the images that decorate our postage. It's time we gave stamps their due, argues the graphic designer and philatelist Blair Thomson. An Instagram feed set up by Thomson, Graphilately, showcases designs from countries including Brazil, Soviet Russia, Mexico and Japan - marvels of miniature modernism. It now has over 87,000 followers, and has even spawned its own book, the lovingly produced *Graphic Stamps* (2016).

The form's functionality is what makes it appealing, Thomson says. "It's somewhere between design and art; you're capturing a moment, trying to communicate a message. The best stamps make you feel something."

While most national postage services play it safe - commemorating anniversaries and public figures, or marking scientific or technological achievements - occasionally designers are permitted to be more adventurous, particularly outside the UK. Says Thomson: "The most interesting ones are often the most abstract, or which experiment with the limitations of the form, or make playful use of

Below, stamps by Grayson Perry and Barbara Rae



typography or layout. There's real poetry in producing an elegant stamp design. They deserve to be noticed much more."

Some artists have done exactly that: in the 1930s Kurt Schwitters constructed collages incorporating ephemera such as stamps and pieces of torn-up envelope, while Robert Watts, a member of the avant-garde Fluxus collective, created hundreds of unofficial stamp designs, many of them jubilantly pornographic.

The most famous exponent of "mail art" was the American Ray Johnson, who from the 1950s onwards posted sketches and doodles to other artists, many of whom he'd never met. The idea was that they'd add their own embellishments, making it into a kind of collaborative art - a witty response to the serendipity and unpredictability of the postal service.

Perry is a particular admirer of the Italian arte povera artist Alighiero Boetti, who in the 1960s and 70s used stamps to make obsessive collages and dispatched envelopes to fictional addresses, making the journey that an object took through the mail into the subject of the work. "He got people to send letters backwards and forwards: they'd build up stamps and labels."

For herself, Fiona admires the democracy of the form, not to mention its humanity - the way stamps are available to anyone, can be sent anywhere reached by the postal service and are affixed to messages of every kind, from a rapidly jotted postcard to a painstakingly crafted love letter. "It's a way of owning a little bit of art. They're a huge part of our cultural life." But part of the attraction, she adds, is that stamps do so often go unnoticed. "They're part of the flotsam and jetsam of what surrounds us every day. There's something beautiful about that." The stamps are issued on 5 June and can be preordered at royalmail.com.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND VIGO GALLERY, LONDON

My best shot

Hassan Hajjaj

'The girls work among the snake-charmers and belly-dancers of the central square in Marrakech. I christened them Kesh Angels and gave them the heart-shaped sunglasses for a bit of rock-star fun'



When I first met Karima, she was 14 years old and selling bracelets in Djemaa el-Fna, the bustling central square in Marrakech. She's the girl on the very right here, leaning to the side. They're all henna girls now, Karima and her friends, and they posed for this in 2010, in front of the Theatre Royal in Marrakech.

Djemaa el-Fna, which means "internal space", is where all the snake-charmers, storytellers and belly-dancers work, in among food stalls and other types of entertainment. The square's been there for centuries. It's like a vast piece of street theatre, full of people all day long - tourists and Moroccans alike, there to buy food, have henna done on their hands, or just become part of the big play.

Karima and her friends understand the camera: they know how to play to an audience. They are artists. The bikes are their own: Marrakech is famously a bike city. Because of the way the Medina - the old Arab quarter - is built, it can take you 15 minutes by bike to reach the main road and the new town, but half an hour if you're walking. So everybody goes by bike.

Although I was born in Morocco, I spent part of my childhood in England, so have a different perspective on my country. I like to push buttons. Here, I wanted to play with the way a veiled woman riding a motorbike might seem jarring from a western perspective. I called them Kesh Angels, with Kesh short for Marrakech, and Angels from Hell's Angels.

It can be hard to tell, because of the way I usually set up my images, but here they're all wearing their own clothing. The only props I gave them were socks and the heart-shaped sunglasses, just to have a bit of fun with the cliché of the rock star, the biker in the leather jacket. I work with whatever I can find cheap in markets. I think the glasses came from Camden in London.

I'm constantly collecting stuff and pulling it out at the right moment - either to use as props, or to put borders around my images. The borders are partly just a graphic pattern, but I also like mixing recognisable western brands with Arabic writing and goods. Sometimes they reference the subject of the

shot: I'll use beef stock cans, for example, when I'm shooting a beefy guy.

A lot of planning goes into a shoot and I always start with a sketch. But then I go with the flow. This was an extremely lively shoot. Once I set up the scene, the women started loosening up. I have some other images of us all riding en masse, from location to location, messing about. We had a lot of fun.

I used a wide angle, shooting from below, to create something cinematic. I was looking at classic photography from 1950s Italy and America, as well as the martial arts movies and music videos I grew up with. I chose this location for its movie-like quality. The theatre is one of the biggest in Africa; I liked that it is obviously Arabic - and unfinished. Also, its modern appearance contrasts with the women's traditional garb.

There were four cinemas in my town when I was growing up in Morocco. I remember the movie posters they put in their windows. They had these powerful single images your mind could latch on to, allowing anyone who couldn't afford a ticket to imagine

the film. That's what I wanted to create here - a still from a movie you haven't seen.

Interview by Dale Berning Sawa. Hassan Hajjaj's work appears in Hyper-real at the Arts Club, London, until 9 September.



The CV

Born Larache, Morocco, 1961.
Studied Self-taught, left school at 15.
Influences North African heritage; London's club, reggae and hip-hop scenes.
High point 'Shoving at the 8th Bamako Encounters in Mali.'
Low point 'Travelling means I miss birthdays and family occasions.'
Top tip 'Hard work and passion. Keep going.'