

## CULTURAL IDENTITY

**THE SHAPE OF THINGS**  
BRISTOL MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY  
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What artist would not jump at the chance to get up close and personal with priceless treasures from a museum collection? At the end of 2009 eight artists working in craft media were chosen by open submission to do just that as part of an Arts Council England initiative titled *The Shape of Things*. The eight were awarded bursaries to create and exhibit new work in one of four venues, all museums or arts centres attached to museums, exploring the role contemporary craft can play in our understanding of cultural identity in today's multicultural Britain.

The museum curators played a key role, as David Kay, Director of *The Shape of Things*, explains. 'Curators worked very very closely with the artists, both to broker relations with other colleagues in the institutions and to draw the artists' attention to aspects of the collections.' This was certainly true for Rosa Nguyen, one of the two ceramists involved, whose exhibition, *Still Living*, was on show at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Curator Julia Carver worked alongside Nguyen from the shortlist stage. 'The way Rosa approaches her work is very holistic', she says. 'We looked at different aspects of the collection, including the historic ceramic collection, Chinese glass and the natural history collection. I was really excited as she was very inspired by the Chinese glass.'

So inspired, in fact, that Nguyen decided to use glass in her work, the first time she had revisited the material since her glancing crush on it as a student in the late seventies. It features in her installations here, as does her long-standing practice of *ikebana*, the Japanese Zen art of flower-arranging in which Nguyen, a Buddhist by faith, is a recognised master. These elements come together in her installation, *Altar*, a quiet, reflective and moving composition of tall hand-blown glass jars – their forms evocative of seed-heads and other natural shapes like many of the



pieces in the Chinese collection – some of which contain the bodies of small birds ('study skins' of crossbills from the natural history collection) interspersed with the upright stalks of dried flowers.

Nguyen borrows from the ceramics collection too. A yellow Chinese plate becomes the sun in her moonscape-stage, *Lunar Tank*, where upturned porcelain teacups make instant mountains. Some of the collection's seventeenth and twentieth century gravy-boats have been commandeered for *Fleet*, and are arranged in convoy on a glass shelf, long 'ropes' hanging beneath them, dragging sea-green glass and clay shapes. Jugs full of gravy,

ships full of cargo – a nifty allusion to Bristol's maritime heritage.

Though diverse and multicultural – fulfilling the bursary remit absolutely – *Still Living* shines a light on the crafts themselves and their importance to societies past and present. For David Kay craft gives us a unique way of understanding cultures other than our own – the central tenet of *The Shape of Things*. The range of materials, traditions and processes of craft are shared across multitudes of cultures. Their ways of making all have their nuances, but the fundamentals are common to all.' **Emma Maiden**



## THANKS FOR...

**PYROMETRIC CONES** Assessing the temperature inside a kiln was, and still is, a skilled business. Too much heat and the work is ruined, too little and the result is dull and lacklustre. Using a combination of time, load, colour and draw rings (removed from the kiln to check glaze maturity) potters could accurately assess the moment to shut the kiln down. All that changed with the invention of the cone in the nineteenth century by the German technologist Hermann Seger, following on from earlier experiments by Josiah Wedgwood and others. Tall, tapering triangular devices, cones are made up of ceramic materials that, according to their composition, soften or melt at a known

temperature. Placed in the kiln in front of the spy hole, they are observed by peering into the heat to check if they have moved or even 'touched their toes'. Unlike mechanical devices such as thermocouples and pyrometers, which usefully indicate the kiln temperature's rise and fall, cones indicate heat work achieved by 'cooking' the ware. Usually three cones of slightly different temperatures are used, one serving as an indication to watch closely, one the desired temperature, the third a warning of overfiring. Cones carry some of the mystique of the alchemy of ceramics, their ritual placement in the kiln the final act before firing. Their smooth, bent forms indicate the change from earth to something special. Long may they survive. **ER**