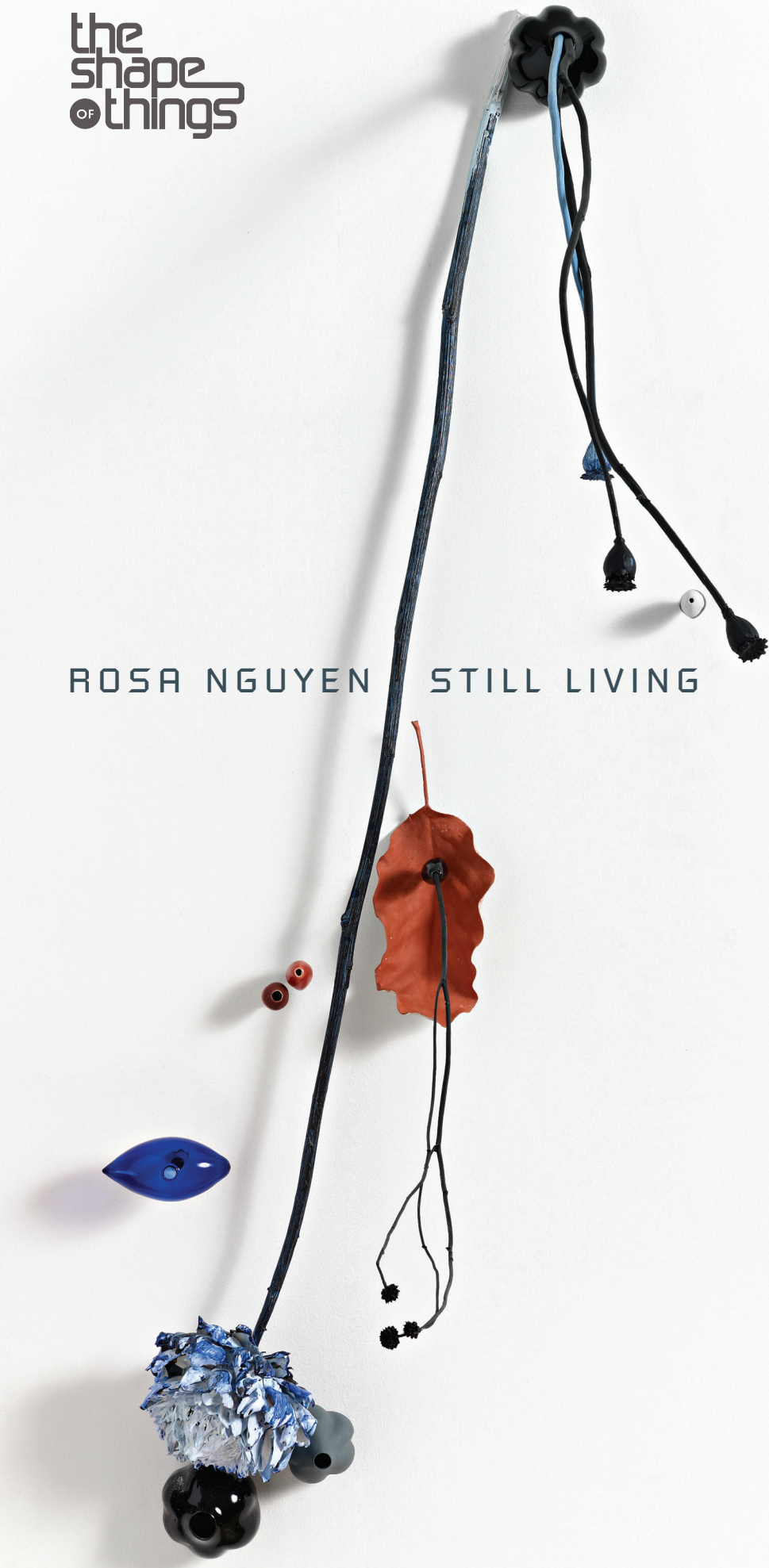


the  
shape  
of things

ROSA NGUYEN STILL LIVING







# On lunar landscapes seen through salt-fogged portholes

Frances Loeffler

Front cover: *Still Living*  
(detail), 2010

Left: glass forms for *Altar*,  
2010

Today, we are surrounded by an abundance of objects: ornaments, gifts, trinkets and toys. They amass around us, on our office desks, at home on shelves and tables and in the display cases and windows of shops and department stores. Since the eighteenth century, material production has continued to accelerate apace, accompanied by ever advancing technologies of assembly and distribution. Alongside this accumulation of stuff there is an accompanying impulse to collect, classify, interpret and present, actions whereby the overwhelming plethora of things in the world may gather new meaning. Ordering the humdrum array of our possessions can create an 'illusion of mastery through delineating a "knowable" space within the apparently endless universe of materiality.'<sup>1</sup> Objects are never really 'knowable', however. As they pass through hands and in and out of different constellations, collections and displays, they shape-shift unpredictably, taking on new meanings. To assemble them is to create a new world. Momentarily aligned, they form a shared universe of meaning that shifts and changes as we ourselves move through it.

Rosa Nguyen deals with the unsteady shifts in meaning that can occur in the act of putting things on display. In her installations that combine natural objects, such as cut and dried plants, with glass and ceramic forms, she accentuates and makes visible the very language of presentation, in order to show the ambiguities that can occur as we pluck things from the world around us and re-arrange them into a new order. The artist's work is not a critique of the cultures of display *per se*. Instead, she whole-heartedly participates in the game, staging hyper-ordered, parsimonious yet sensuous environments that constitute a delicate network of colours, materials and forms. In addition, there is a sense of pleasure in the unpredictable jumps in meanings as things are translated across cultures, taxonomic categories and temporal boundaries, or intersect at the edges of natural and crafted worlds. Nguyen devises a recondite visual language, one we are privy to only in part. Our eyes are confused by temporary distortions, even while we are struck by the precise ordering and clarity of the arrangements.

For an exhibition at House Gallery, London, in 2003, the artist created a series of 'tulip vessels', organic ceramic forms designed to hold cut tulips. Arranged on a low shelf, the overall ensemble of vessels and plants orchestrated with great care, the work's references ranged from eighteenth-century Dutch still-life paintings to *Ikebana*, the highly regulated and governed Japanese art of flower arrangement,

<sup>1</sup> Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, *The Value of Things*, (Zurich: Birkhauser Publishers, 2000) 31.







Left: *Still Living* (detail), 2010



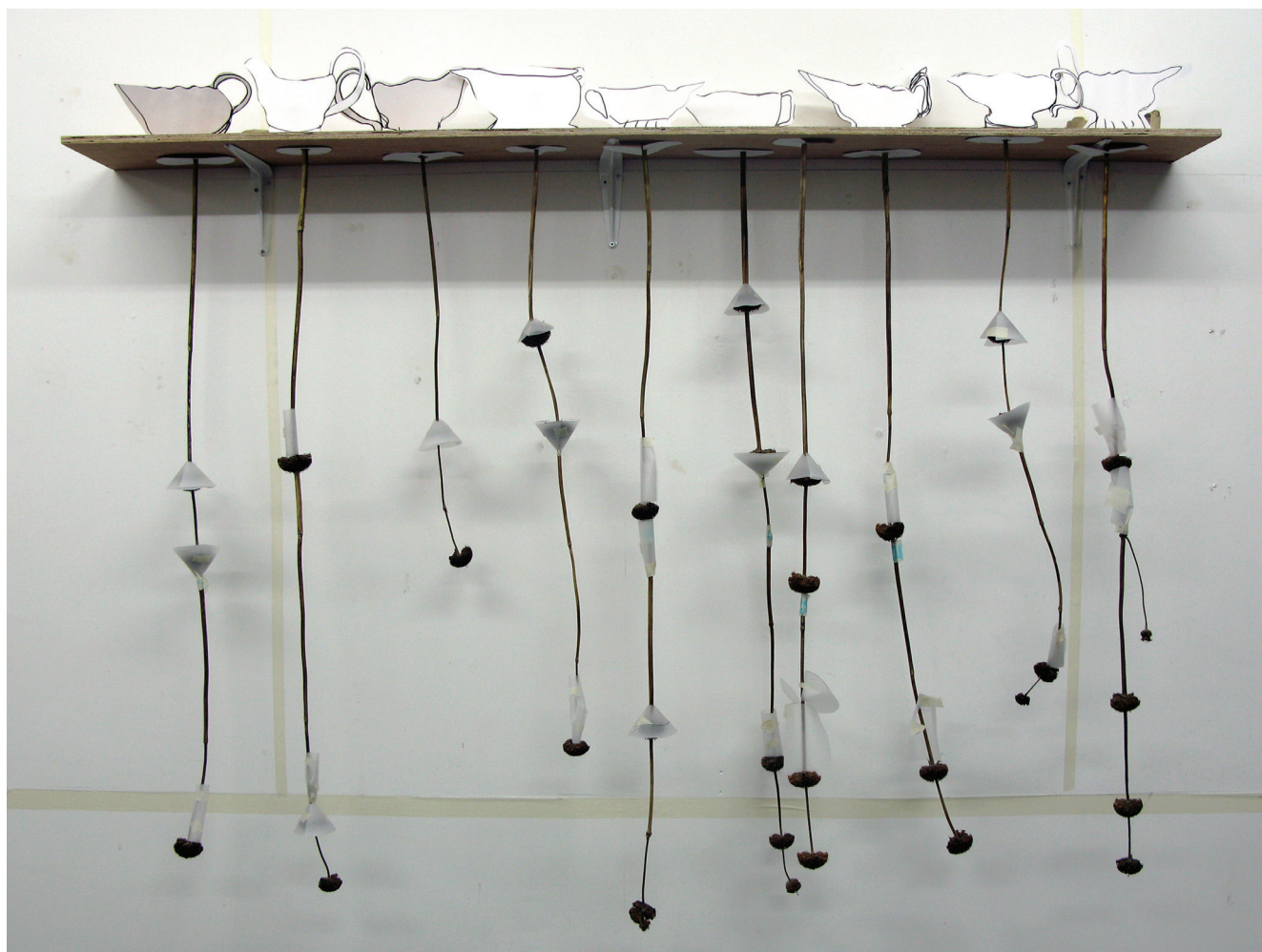
and *Tokonoma*, the Japanese practice of displaying flowers, bonsai, ceramics, and calligraphic or pictorial scrolls in custom-made alcoves. The looping forms of the tulips mimicked calligraphic scrolls, forming long, winding hieroglyphs across the walls. In the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades, the heart of what the novelist Honoré de Balzac called Paris's 'great poem of display', Walter Benjamin saw the birthplace of modern consumer culture<sup>2</sup>. While it borrows from the language of commercial displays, Nguyen's work seems indicative of the older symbology of *Ikebana*, in which flower arrangements spell out certain implied meanings: sun, moon, earth, sky or love. The looping hieroglyphic forms of her installations invite reading, but their inner workings remain beyond ordinary ken. Without the necessary means to decode this arcane language, it is the sensuous relations between things that come to the fore; humankind and the natural world (the repeated action of replacing the plants when they began to die formed a reciprocal ritual of sorts); natural and non-natural materials; outer and inner surfaces – the convex and curve of hollow and full; line-to-line; and the overall choreography of colours and shiny substances that flicker and flare as they catch the light.

While the artist's background lies in hand-crafting ceramic objects, in recent years she has made increasingly minimal gestures, recycling materials, working with local artisans to outsource the production of her ceramic forms and frequently intervening into existent situations to delicately displace them. In *Petites Terres* (2008), for example, the artist subtly disrupted the display of a museum collection to create new meanings. This work was undertaken during a residency at the Maison Patrimoniale de Barthète in Boussan, a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century tiles and earthenware from the region of Martre Tolosanne in the south west of France, an area known for a long-standing tradition of ceramic production. A private collection, its modes of display depart from established museological systems, frequently doing away with vitrines and display cases and instead arranging ceramic pieces into colourful tableaux that run across the walls and along the museum's floors. The artist adjusted these highly personalised displays with the most muted of actions. Collecting the lids of blue ceramic bowls, for example, she formed a thin line of blue that ran through a floor display like a stream in a valley. She then seeded small gardens of moss into their upturned forms, creating miniature living landscapes sometimes accompanied by tiny ceramic water droplets.

Following on from her intervention at the Barthète Museum, for Bristol Museum and Art Gallery Nguyen has staged installations in which she combines objects selected from across the Museum's collections with new work of her own. Making multiple trips to the Museum's various departments as part of her research process, she chose the skins of crossbill birds, a landscape painting in watercolour by the Bristol Quaker Thomas Pole and objects from the Museum's collection of Chinese antique glass and British eighteenth-century ceramics. These items are presented alongside the artist's own collection of dried, glazed and painted plants, threaded

<sup>2</sup> See *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Walter Benjamin and the *Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989).







Left above: studio macquette for  
*Fleet*, 2009

Left below: working sketch for  
*Lunar Tank*, 2009

through and intertwined with ceramic and glass forms commissioned for the exhibition, to form four tableaux. In their unfamiliar arrangements, the Museum's artefacts take on new, somewhat unconventional roles. For example, a collection of eighteenth-century sauce boats is transformed into a small fleet of brightly coloured jostling ships, moored by long strands of plants; while a yellow Qing-dynasty glass plate has become part of a lunar landscape, hanging majestic alongside a collection of smaller bowls, a miniature galaxy of pink and white half moons.

Perhaps the apotheosis of humankind's desire to collect, arrange and interpret is the modern museum. Unlike private and personal collections, in which objects are subject to the 'chaos of memories'<sup>3</sup>, in museum collections, at least since the nineteenth century, items have been presented as though inscribed into a closed and neutral system. They are departmentalised, neatly classified and displayed behind glass with interpretive labels providing dates and descriptions. By lifting things from the Museum's classificatory systems and re-ordering them, Nguyen has opened them out to new meanings and interpretations. Rather than thinking of the museum's collections as a finite and neutral system, she has re-worked them into new, capricious, and rather fantastical worlds in a highly idiosyncratic way that mimics the fragmentary, allegorical arrangements of Baroque *Wunderkammer*. Doing away with conventional interpretive labels, the artist has sign-posted these worlds with brief titles suggesting narratives for each scenario: *Fleet*, *Altar*, *Lunar Tank* and *Still Living*. As the overall title for the four installations, *Still Living*, suggests, these objects are not circumscribed as dead things into a closed system, but are alive to the possibility of new stories we may set spinning.

In this new order, diverse cultural histories and viewpoints combine, not intersecting at right angles, but running in parallels and encapsulating one another. The brevity and precision with which the artist has arranged the four displays is echoed in Pole's rigidly formulated watercolour, combining the rigidity of *Tokonoma*-style flower arrangements with the stylised formulations of an early nineteenth-century conception of the picturesque. As in the regulated phrase theory of Japanese *Haiku* or eighteenth-century classical verse, what comes to the fore is the structured rhythm of each syllabic ordering. All things have their place, including space itself. No longer the negative of form's positive, it takes on new importance. It is the caesura's audible beat, or in *Tokonoma*, *Ma*: space become form. In its merging of Eastern and Western forms, Nguyen's work could be understood as an allegory of translation – translation understood not merely as a process of communication between languages, but as a metaphor for inter-cultural interpretation and the fluidity of post-national identities.

However, in spite of an overriding sense of clarity and precision, frequently *Still Living* has been arranged to impede perception. Our view of Pole's landscape, for example, is partially obscured by a screen of dried threaded plants. The glass vessels in *Altar* are sandblasted in part, leaving ridges and islands of distortion and

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', in Hannah Arendt, ed., and Harry Zorn, trans., *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 61-62.







Left: detail of Phlomis stems and glass bells for *Fleet*, 2009

opacity in their transparent forms. We can interpret objects as to their positioning, and with the knowledge and tools we have to hand. A glass plate according to its context can be many things; part of a valuable collection of antiques, a moon in a lunar landscape, or a symbol of hope, love or springtime. But perhaps beyond this we never gain much understanding. The Chinese glass pieces included in these works, so strongly reminiscent of early twentieth-century modernist design, could also be intervals in the grammar of pure form, blank surfaces that the eye glances over and along without gaining much depth, that resist all interpretation.

The artist's preoccupation with perception could be summed up in the eye as a recurring motif in her work. Her 'eye vessels' pinned tapestry-like to a wall or threaded through with the stripped branches of weeping willow trees and other plants, remind us of the uncertainties that abound as we attempt to make sense of the world. Peering into the depths of these clear, blue or black glass beads, frequently inlaid with mirrored surfaces, one catches sight of oneself, looking. Michel Foucault, writing of the unruly and unfathomable taxonomic system of Borges's fictive Chinese encyclopaedia, thought that it enabled one to see not only the 'exotic charm of another system of thought, but also the limitations of our own.'<sup>4</sup> Nguyen enables us to become alive to the act of presenting, exhibiting, putting things out to be seen, and our own movements as we observe the display.

Museums are institutions dedicated to showing, looking and understanding, but Nguyen renders the practice of seeing and knowing problematic. The strength of the work lies in this potential for distortion and ambiguity that pervades *Still Living* down to the smallest detail even while it appears to speak with the greatest lucidity. It is not clear, for example, what role her ceramic forms play in their overall constellations. Tuber-like, they appear to function as a support structure of sorts to the delicate forms of the natural world, holding the heavy heads of tulips or guiding thin wayward grasses into place, and yet, whether we are witnessing an act of empathy or a more rigid operation remains uncertain. They could be tubers or manacles, there for sustenance or force-feeding.

In *Lunar Tank*, a fragile glass vessel is threaded through with dried caraway plant. I see a deep-sea creature so delicately transparent that its brittle skeleton has become visible through translucent gills. In the places where opaque and clear glass collide, dense fragments of gold lie in the ridges of the vessel like strange fish seen through salt-fogged portholes. When we are uncertain of what we are seeing, we peer across and between, filling in for the gaps in meaning, the visual obstructions. In the process, what comes to the fore is not what is on show, but the way things and meanings hang together. Paramount in the work is not the objects themselves but their penumbra: the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Standing in front of *Still Living* we are struck, not by the individual components but by their connections and contingencies – the spaces between – and the overall ensemble's delicate membrane logic, reminding us of the fundamental unity of all things.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Vintage, 1973) XV.

Frances Loeffler is a curator and writer. She is currently part of the curatorial team organising the Liverpool Biennial's 2010 International Exhibition.



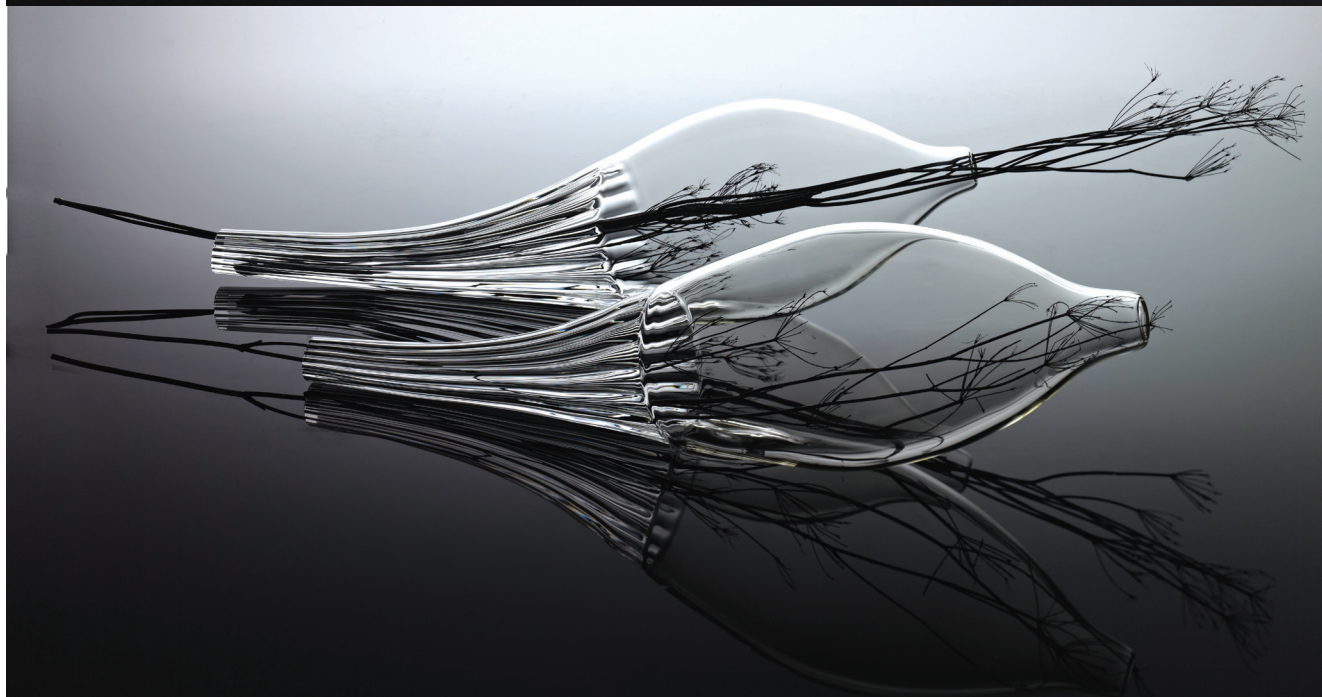
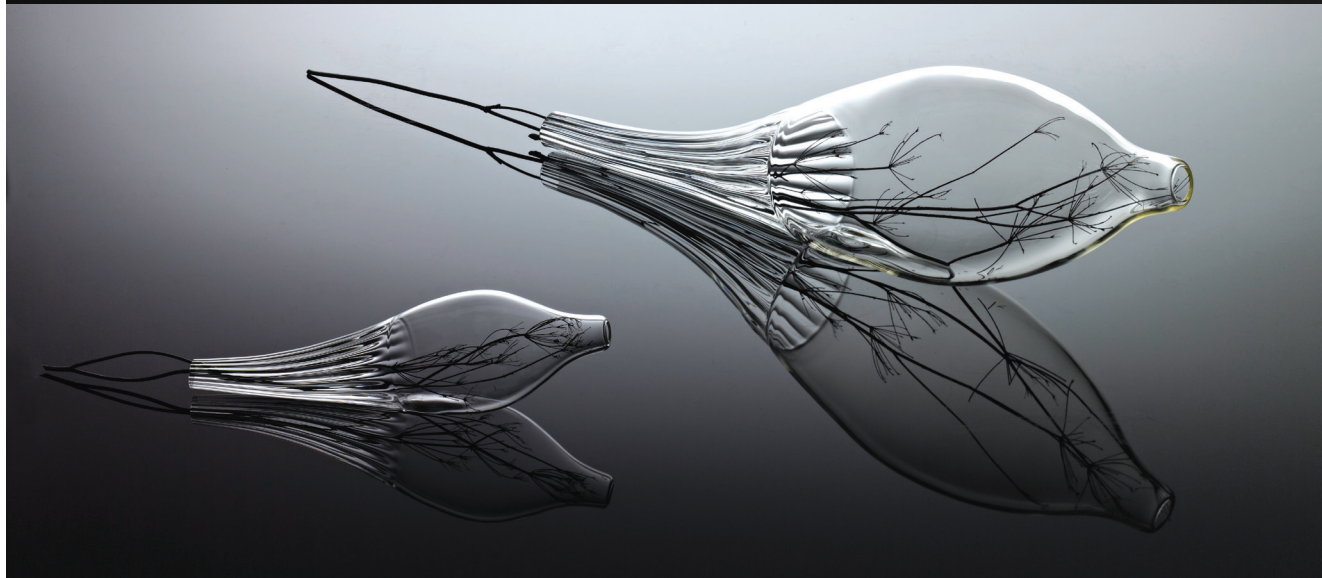
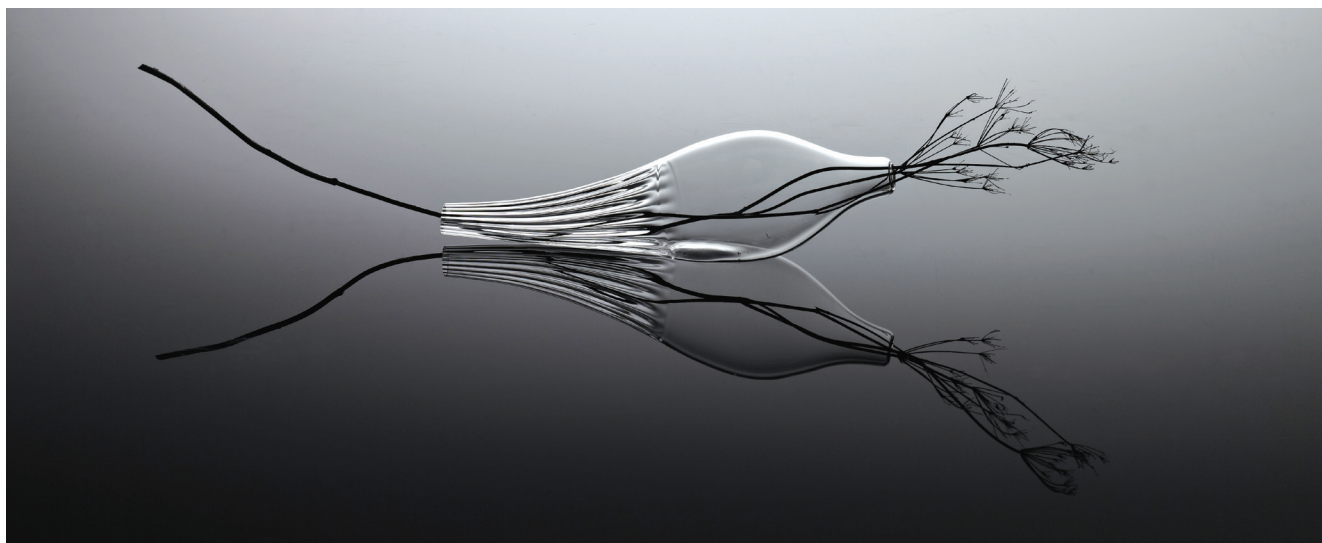




*Still Living* (details), 2010









Left: glass forms for *Lunar Tank*,  
2010

## Rosa Nguyen: curriculum vitae

[www.nguyen-ceramics.co.uk](http://www.nguyen-ceramics.co.uk)

---

### Solo exhibitions

- 2001 Installations at Egg, London  
'Feed', Loman Street Studio, London
- 2005 'Atrium', PricewaterHouse Coopers, London
- 2006 New works, Galerie Tino Zervudachi, Paris  
'Sakura', Moyses Stevens, London  
'Adornment', Bamfords, London
- 2008 'Petites Terres', Maison Patrimoine de Barthète, France
- 2010 'The shape of things: new work by Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen',  
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

---

### Group exhibitions

- 2000 'British Ceramics', Grimmerhaus Ceramic Museum, Denmark  
'Risk Takers and Pioneers', London University of Arts  
'Pattern Crazy', Crafts Council, London  
'Art in the Garden', Chelsea Physic Garden, London
- 2003 'Off the Plinth', House Gallery, London
- 2005 'Surface, Form, Structure', Tokyo, Japan  
'Ozone', British crafts and design, Tokyo, Japan
- 2006 'Breakers', Pitzhanger House and Museum, London
- 2008 'International Environmental Ceramics', Wison Art Centre, Shanghai

---

### Public collections

Leicestershire schools and college, Leicester  
Crafts Council Collection, London  
Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Wales  
Shigaraki Ceramic Museum, Japan  
Aberdeen City Museum, Aberdeen  
Wison Art Centre, Shanghai



Right: glass forms for *Altar*, 2010





## Notes on museum processes and artists' intentions

*In the face of diverse practices by the makers on the ['shape of things'] panel are non-European makers always going to be determined by their ostensible cultural otherness?*<sup>1</sup>

This question was posed by artist Raimi Gbadamosi at the launch of 'the shape of things' on 5 November 2009 with the panel of participating artists, curators and project director chaired by writer Bonnie Greer<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps this was a question that we had been waiting to be asked regarding a project about identity and cultural diversity.

'The shape of things' came from a proposal to develop a contemporary craft programme for Decibel, the Arts Council's initiative to support and raise the profile of black and minority ethnic artists. 'Shape...' director David Kay canvassed artists and met with a range of responses, from concern about being marginalised to frustration at the lack of opportunities.

'The shape of things' then, would be a discursive process, where artist makers could create new work, debate cultural identity, interact with museums and curators, and work within the craft marketplace. In 2008 an open call for artist makers to apply for bursaries was announced and Rosa Nguyen and Alinah Azadeh were selected to work with Bristol.<sup>3</sup>

For a museum curator, working with artists to create new work is a privilege. I see 'shape...' as an opportunity for us, at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, to gain access to cultural and aesthetic dialogues taking place within British artistic and craft practice.

**'Art does not exist, art is you'**  
Situationist slogan<sup>4</sup>

From Duchamp to Mark Wallinger artists have long been challenging the power of the gallery and the

choices of the museum curator. The supposed neutrality of the institution has been uncovered by a range of site-specific, installation, context-based, participatory and other socially engaged practices, which have intervened in exhibition-making and actively engaged audiences to become involved in the creation of art and meaning. In turn there has been a shift in the role of the curator, and the relationship between artist and curator has developed towards one of collaboration.<sup>5</sup>

Such shifts have informed recent museum curation. Bristol's new Egypt gallery has eschewed the traditional connoisseurial approach to Egyptology. The gallery seeks to demythologize ancient Egypt, examining the lives of everyday people, as well as pharaohs. Curators consulted with audiences and offered them ethical choices about whether or not to view human remains<sup>6</sup>. Museum curators are open to the challenges their art colleagues throw at them: they are also passionate about the collections they work with. Might this shift in museum curating away from the paternalist tradition of defining cultures, be a reply to Raimi's question?

For 'the shape of things' Rosa Nguyen has responded to the Museum collections, almost slipping into a curatorial role to select objects and reinterpret them for her commission. Rosa comes from a French-Vietnamese background and grew up in London in the 1960s during the upheaval of the Vietnam War. The family spoke French and English at home, spending time with a large French family in France each summer, but it was not until much later that Rosa was able to travel to Vietnam and meet her Vietnamese family. Rosa describes herself primarily as a 'Londoner'.

Rosa is a ceramic artist: as a student she experimented with glassblowing but was attracted to the directness and tactility of clay. There is a traceable lineage here, to the sensual 'maker' side of the family in France, who were artists, musicians, dressmakers and cooks. Rosa's ceramic work is closely related to her drawings and she has a long-held interest in the natural world, from the intense observational drawings she made as a student of animal skeletons in the stores at the Natural History Museum, to the heads of bulls and goats she modelled early on in her career. But while the intimacy of the clay gesture is fundamental to the hand-built forms of Rosa's practice, she is also able to incorporate within this a coolly analytical design sensibility. For large-scale installations Rosa commissions pieces from other producers to sit alongside her own ceramics, a practice that juxtaposes self-expression through touch with mass production.

Latterly she has combined organic forms in her work with living and dried plants. For *Petites Terres* at the Maison Patrimoniale de Barthète in France in 2008, she cultivated plants in the lids of eighteenth-century earthenware jars, making a connection between the fired earth of her ceramics, assembled with the historic wares, and the local living soil, a self-contained natural cycle completed by watering the miniature gardens with the local spring water.

Another component of this concern with organic form is Rosa's interest in the Japanese practice of *Ikebana* or flower arranging. Buddhist in faith, Rosa brings a spiritual element to her explorations of the natural world through the concept of *chi* energy. Rosa's commission for 'the shape of things' is called *Still Living*, a play on still life or *nature morte*, in her mother



tongue, dead nature. One of her ambitions for the commission is to 'bring the collection back to the flow of life'.

We began by exploring Bristol's collection of Qing dynasty (1644–1911) Chinese glass, a dazzling array of opaque tea bowls, vases, 'chrysanthemum' bowls and carved plates in solid yellows, whites, pinks and greens, some of which were made to imitate precious materials such as jade. The glass looks astonishingly modern to a Western eye: Rosa commented that it reminded her of Ettore Sottsass's ceramic and glass work for Memphis design. Her admiration for the Chinese glass inspired a return to glass in Rosa's practice, with her commissioning artists Russell Gitty and Jochen Holtz to fabricate her organically shaped glass forms for her Bristol exhibit.

The Museum's gallery of British ceramics charts the history of pottery production in the UK, especially Bristol, and makes links to Chinese-pioneered porcelain, tracing its influence on European design. Rosa enjoyed the breadth of history presented here and the various shapes of the vessels, especially the curving Baroque and curling, shell-encrusted Rococo forms of sauceboats, sweet dishes and a *bourdaloue* (which on consultation with the Applied Art curator we discovered to be a lady's chamber pot). The ordered display began to inspire a tableau in which Rosa would select a range of sauceboats to represent a 'fleet' floating high up, 'anchored' by lacquered *Phlomis* stems interconnected by Rosa's glass forms reminiscent of garden paraphernalia, small glass bells and vegetable collars.

Rosa was interested in the animals in the Natural History collection. The gathering of once-living specimens into museums has a vexed history: discussions with the Biology curator

revealed the emphasis placed on learning and conservation<sup>7</sup>. With this in mind Rosa selected a group of crossbill bird study skins (*Loxia curvirostra*), used for research rather than in mimetic diorama displays. *Altar* is a meditative arrangement of Rosa's glass pieces with dried plants and bird specimens which recognises mortality as part of life's cycle.

If *Still Living* shifts the boundaries of curatorial decision-making, then so does Alinah Azadeh's commission, *The Gifts*, opening up the selection process to engage with an audience which is also invited to contribute to the work and its meaning. Alinah is a textile and media artist. After art school she travelled to Paris to paint, returning to the UK with a desire to work collectively and with an interest in video and animation.<sup>8</sup>

Sadie Plant's 1998 *Zeros and Ones*<sup>9</sup> was a pivotal text for Alinah. Plant relates the mechanization of thinking inherent in Charles Babbage's invention of the computer, his 'analytical engine' to the Jacquard loom, the machine that automated the work of the weavers. While acknowledging the detrimental effect of the Jacquard loom on the lives of this former artisan class, Plant makes a postmodern link between the multiplicity of the non-hierarchical computer code and the matrix of the textile.

The metaphorical connection between number, language and cloth has been a rich point of departure for Alinah who, in collaboration with the Ann Sutton Foundation and Jon Bird of Sussex University, used the Internet and computer programming to create a fabric woven from digital input taken from contributors around the world in *The Loom: from Text to Textile*<sup>10</sup>.

Alinah is British-Iranian and grew up in Tunbridge Wells with a close relationship to her Iranian mother, a crochet designer. Her mother died in

the Asian tsunami of 2004, following the birth of Alinah's first child, at which she had been present. These grave experiences of the extremes of life, birth and death, have formed the basis of Alinah's work for 'the shape of things'.

Her loss left Alinah with a bequest of domestic objects, letters, chequebooks, keys, for which she had responsibility but little use. Yet it was impossible to discard them. Using yarns she'd been given on a visit to Iran she found herself binding her mother's cutlery: objects that carried memories of the wonderful food her mother had prepared. She began to wonder about the emotional traces of objects and the possibility of exploring this as a therapy and as the germ of an artwork.

"A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."

Roland Barthes<sup>11</sup>

"...my brother pointed out to me that I have set up a project where certain elements are beyond my control, and that must be a challenge I desired." Alinah's blog<sup>12</sup>

For *The Gifts*<sup>13</sup> Alinah invited people to make personal donations accompanied by written descriptions of the meanings the objects once held. Alinah would wrap the gifts in a ritual process of transformation. She was also interested in the process of acquisition in the Museum, and liked the idea of inviting people to bring anything along, deliberately incorporating the randomness that museum procedures and collecting policies are designed to control. In this her aims perhaps echoed artist collective Group Material's 1981 *People's Choice* exhibition, where people were invited to bring items to exhibit at their store-front show in New York, '...a community-based narrative [...] rather than one imposed by distanced experts'.<sup>14</sup> But also, as Alinah acknowledged in her blog,



recalling Barthes's statement about ceding authorial control, a nervy excitement about launching a project 'out there'.

Nevertheless we found that we were still governed by restrictions, for example around the size of the objects donated, and we had to be careful to ensure people fully understood that they were giving them away.<sup>15</sup>

Alinah began *The Gifts* with 99 objects: from her mother, a sim card, a cookbook, but also objects of her own, her Bill Viola video, her honeymoon knickers. Her postcard request for the 900 gifts she hoped to acquire yielded many meaningful donations. But it was largely through personal encounters with Alinah, in workshops held at the Museum and in schools, that the collection took shape. Alinah described the experiences that had led to *The Gifts* in an extraordinarily open and generous way, something she attributes to her Iranian heritage (she has commented that Iranians are prolific bloggers). She then proceeded to teach people how to wrap their objects, using jewel-bright fabrics and yarns.

Alinah's aesthetic came fully into play with the *transformation* of the gifts: through the giving, then the wrapping; and finally through the design of the installation, based on the patterns and colours of traditional Persian carpets. The gifts have been suspended, 'woven' with the collective written narratives of their givers presented as a backdrop to the installation, visible between the hanging objects. This is vital: these accounts record the emotional traces of the gifts.

In exploring the Museum's collections, examining curatorial roles, choices and interpretation, *Still Living* and *The Gifts* seek to dissolve some of the traditional barriers of the institution, in turn posing questions about how museums present and represent culture. I would suggest Bristol Museum is ceasing to define

non-European artists and practices as Other and is beginning to allow itself – the institution of the museum – to be approached in diverse ways.

Julia Carver  
Assistant Curator, Fine Art  
Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery

<sup>1</sup> Alinah replied that 'when I state that I am a British-Iranian I am acknowledging my sources, not underlining my otherness'; see her blog for more on this, [http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists\\_talking/projects/single/518804](http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/518804).

<sup>2</sup> Greer had recently appeared alongside BNP leader Nick Griffin on the BBC's *Question Time*. Griffin's appearance on the show had been the subject of anguished debate over giving a platform to the leader of a far-right political party, and he met with an indignant audience. Griffin bemoaned his treatment by the audience, claiming that cosmopolitan London was no longer representative of British society.

<sup>3</sup> The other artists and venues are: Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin, Touchstones Rochdale; Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita, Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton; and Chien-Wei Chang and Margaret Scott, City Art Gallery, Leicester.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Conceptual Art*, Tony Godfrey (London: Phaidon Press, 1998) 192

<sup>5</sup> See Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2006), Paul O'Neill, ed., *Curating Subjects*, (London: Open Editions, 2007) and Claire Doherty, ed., *Situation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2009) for recently published overviews of post-war shifts in art, curatorial and gallery practices.

<sup>6</sup> The gallery includes a display where visitors can decide whether or not to view images of a mummy being unwrapped during conservation treatment, and a covered display of a mummified body, the *Crouched Burial* where, once again, visitors choose whether or not to view.

<sup>7</sup> Animals at the Museum were not hunted or killed especially for the collections, but historic specimens acquired before

the 1960s were collected before wildlife conservation was recognised as a serious issue and some animals on display are now endangered or extinct.

<sup>8</sup> Alinah made four short films during this transitional period, which in part led her back to visual arts practice.

<sup>9</sup> Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> 2005, see [www.alinahazadeh.com/loomproject/](http://www.alinahazadeh.com/loomproject/) for details.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Death of the Author' 1957, published in *Image: Music: Text* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana: 1977, rpt 1984) 148.

<sup>12</sup> Alinah Azadeh, Blog, [a-n.co.uk/artists\\_talking/projects/single/518804](http://a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/projects/single/518804), October 2009.

<sup>13</sup> 'The idea and title actually came as a result of doing the Muslim fast of Ramadan in 2003. It came to me in the last week of the fast, which is traditionally known to be a time when one may receive a "gift" (Qadr) for one's life, a kind of spiritual fruit of the soul after such a period of abstinence...the connection between this idea and how to set it within a social and historical context was very much influenced by Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2007)'. From a note from the artist, 4 Jan. 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Ault, 'Three Snapshots from the Eighties: On Group Material' in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill, op. cit., 33, thanks to Frances Loeffler for reminding me of this project in connection with Alinah's work.

<sup>15</sup> Both artists were intrigued by aspects of the Museum's procedures. When working with organic material or objects that are brought into the Museum, such as textiles, curators are required to freeze them in order to kill any pests and prevent infestations that could be harmful to the collections. For 'the shape of things' we have had to coordinate the freezing of Rosa's lacquered branches and all 999 of Alinah's textile-wrapped *The Gifts*.



## The artists



Alinah Azadeh

Alinah would like to thank:

### Givers /groups

Julie Bennett	Backwell School
Mark Curtis	Chloe George
Golden Valley Primary School	
Julie Hill	Lis Jolley
Knowle Park Primary School	
Nick Moore	Peter Overton
The People's Panel	Steve Taylor
Studio Upstairs	Woven, Brighton

...and all those who gave objects, stories and intentions so generously to *The Gifts*.

### Studio /installing assistance

Leo Sedgley	Raphaella Sapir
Willow Winston	Sue Haseltine
Leila Friar	Benoit Bennett
Lyn Harradine	Benoit Bennett
Genevieve Brown	Natalie McGrorty
Casey Steed	Rosie Ashby

*The Gifts* is dedicated to my mother, Parvin Azadeh Rieu (1937–2004) and my family who have given me the most powerful gift of all.



Rosa Nguyen

Photo: Philip Li

Rosa would like to thank:

Julia Carver for her continual enthusiasm, support and patience throughout the whole project and all those involved from the design and conservation team.

Paul O'Neil and Susanne Mooney for their invaluable advice, and generous hospitality.

Jochen Holtz and Russell Gitty for their time, expertise and beautiful glass works.

The Issen group: Lubna Chowdhary, Helen Maurer, Alison Willoughby for their perceptions and encouragement.

Andrew Day for his continual gifts of inspirational plants and the Bristol Botanical Gardens for their contribution.

Philip Li, Estelle Grandidier, Savannah Theis, and Michelle Cioccoloni for their assistance.

Alinah Azadeh for being in tune.

David Blamey and Kai Blamey for their humor at all hours.  
My father, mother and sister for a constant belief in me.  
My ancestors, who always stay close by.



**The shape of things**  
**Alinah Azadeh : The Gifts**  
**Rosa Nguyen : Still Living**

ISBN

Published by **the shape of things** February 2010 on the occasion of the exhibition 'the shape of things: new work by Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen' at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

**The shape of things**

Craftspace, 208 The Custard Factory,  
 Gibb Street, Birmingham B9 4AA

Artworks copyright Alinah Azadeh and  
 Rosa Nguyen

Catalogue text copyright Frances Loeffler, Janis  
 Jefferies and Julia Carver and the shape of things

Book design by David Hyde of studiohyde.com

Photography of the artists' work by Xavier Young

Printed in England by Chromatec

**The shape of things** provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2011.

**The shape of things** is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and registered in England, No 6534926. Craftspace is the managing agency, David Kay is the Director and a formal steering group comprises stakeholders and specialists able to advise on development and implementation.

**The shape of things** programme receives funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England, investment by our partner museums and galleries and the Athene Trust.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher. The rights of Janis Jefferies, Frances Loeffler and Julia Carver to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1998.

[www.theshapeofthings.org.uk](http://www.theshapeofthings.org.uk)



**Acknowledgements**

The many people and organisations that are part of **the shape of things**

**The exhibition at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery**

Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen for the ambition and creativity inherent in their work and response to realising this exhibition.

The Museum exhibition team for their support and sensitivity in facilitating the artists' commissions.

Janis Jefferies and Frances Loeffler for their insight into the work of the artists, Julia Carver for the introduction and editorship, David Hyde of Studio Hyde for an immaculate design and Xavier Young for stunning images that communicate the strength and depth of the artists' work.

**The shape of things programme**

The artists, curators and the teams of each venue for their creativity in responding to the aims of **the shape of things**.

Deirdre Figueiredo MBE, Melissa Davies-Lawrence and Emma Syer, the staff and board of Craftspace for their care of **the shape of things**.

Alnoor Mitha for his concept and research in promoting **the shape of things** as part of the cultural programme of the 2010 Commonwealth Games.

Lesley Butterworth for her energy and commitment to **the shape of things** education programme and fundraising.

Bharat Patel and Alex Barnard for their work on design and on the web site.

Mary Rahman of MRPR for her skillful promotion of the artists and programme.

Caroline Griffin for her research and production of our framework for identifying new audiences for contemporary craft.

The Steering Group for their exemplary contributions to the making of **the shape of things** and the following organisations for their engagement in it: Arts Council England South West and West Midlands, Audiences Central, Craftspace, The Contemporary Arts Society, The Crafts Council, The National Society for Education in Art and Design, SHISHA: The International Agency for Contemporary South Asian Crafts and Visual Arts.

**Funding**

Arts Council England for generous support from the beginning of **the shape of things**.

The Athene Trust for support of the education programme.

Our venue partners for their financial commitment and in kind investment of the time of their staff.



**The venues and dates of the shape of things exhibition programme**

Rezia Wahid MBE  
 Crafts Study Centre  
 25 September 2007 to 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen  
 Bristol Museum and Art Gallery  
 6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita  
 Bilston Crafts Gallery, Wolverhampton  
 1 May – 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin  
 Touchstones Rochdale  
 17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by the artists  
 Flow Gallery, London  
 9 September – 6 November 2010

Maggie Scott / Chien-Wei Chang  
 The City Gallery, Leicester  
 2011



## The shape of things: new work by Alinah Azadeh & Rosa Nguyen

'The shape of things' is an initiative taking place over five years providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of 'the shape of things' are in a report to Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts and recommended that an exhibition should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of the Arts Council and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, jeweller Vannetta Seecharran and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works and in the process to consider the role of personal cultural identity in their practice.

The artists presented the new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where discussion took place with invited delegates chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this with further support of the Arts Council encouraged us to move forward. 'The shape of things' is now working nationally with the guidance of

colleagues from organisations with interest in craft including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council and Audiences Central.

Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who coincidentally had been awarded an MBE. Rezia's response to the initial commission was an important influence on the potential of 'the shape of things'. The exhibition took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study Centre and enabled a test of the bursary-exhibition model.

In 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner with curators to create new work for exhibition in public spaces.

Looking at the artefacts in museum collections and recognising that very different cultures have shared in common the fundamental elements of materials, methods of making and exchanged influences with each other through trade and travel, offers a historic perspective on contemporary craft and the complexity of globalisation.

Taking this simple observation further, museum collections are important sources of inspiration for artists. In modern times the association of the crafts with the lifestyle choices we make in what we buy and how we live masks the contribution contemporary artists working with crafts media make to shaping national identity, reflecting the intercultural nature of British society and connecting Britain with global cultures.

'The shape of things' is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised

and enabled by their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

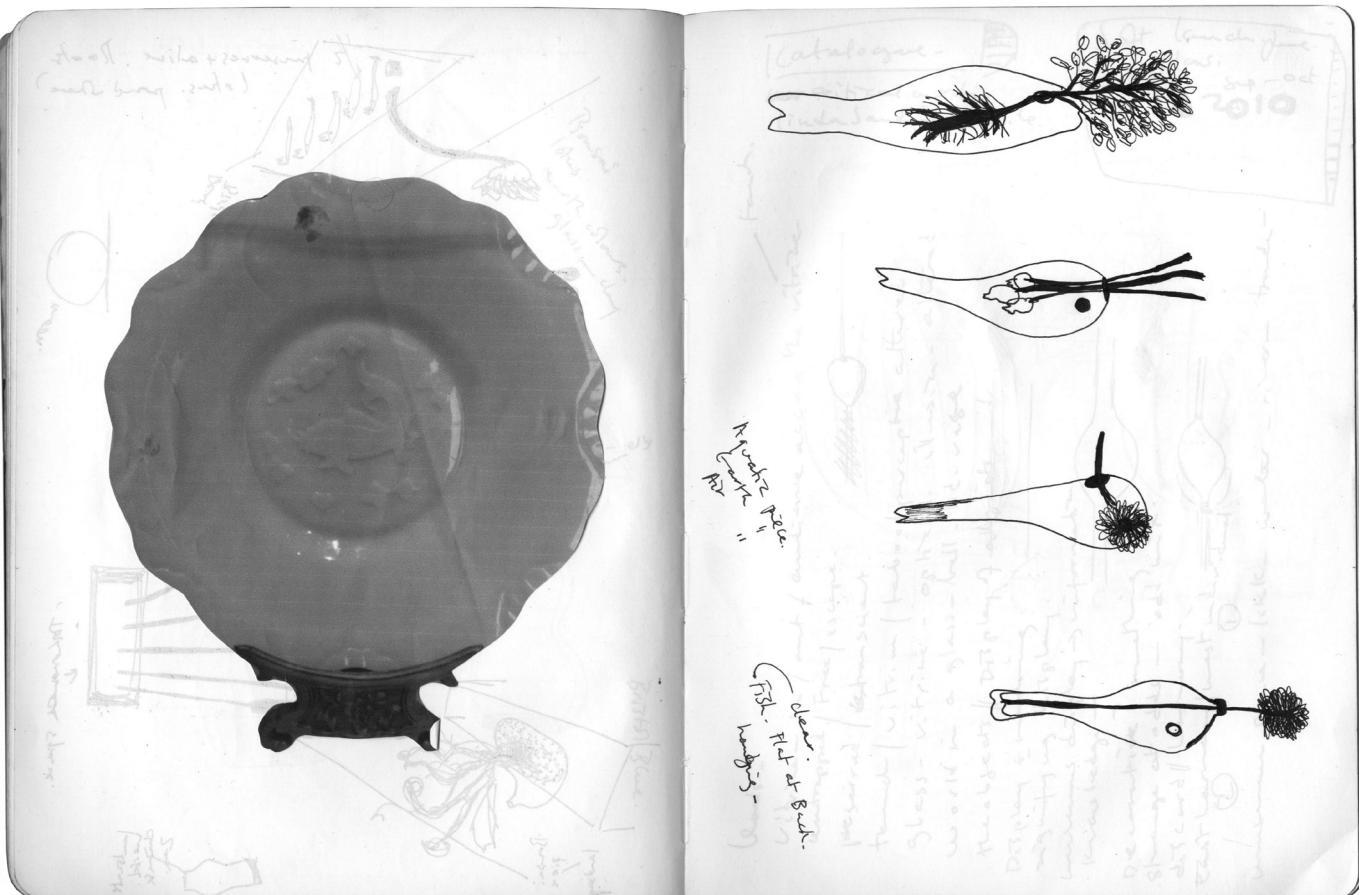
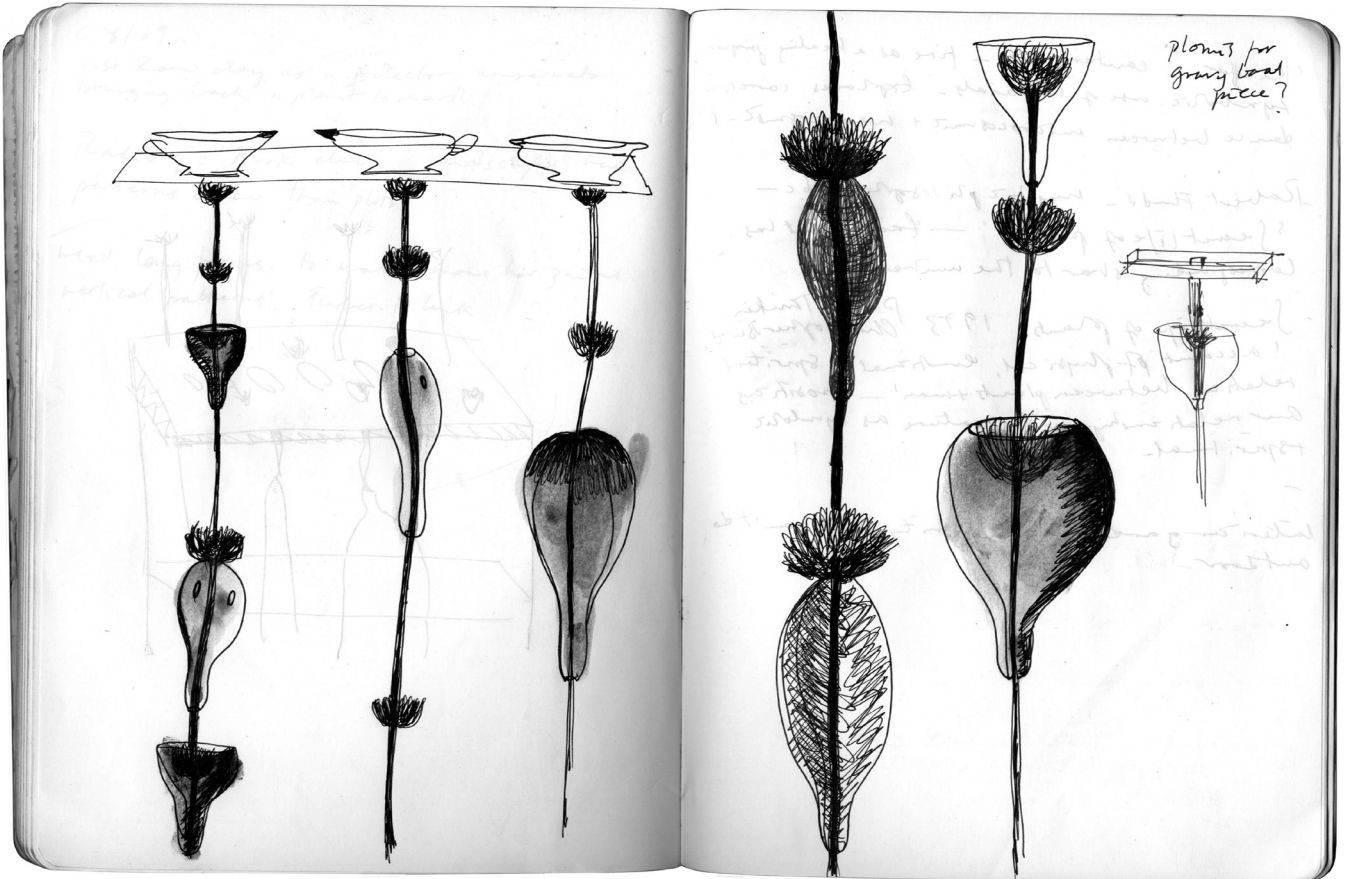
Exhibitions in 2010 present the work of Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery, Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale and in 2011 Maggie Scott and Chien-Wei Chang at The City Gallery Leicester.

Work by all these artists will be available to buy in a group exhibition at Flow Gallery, London in autumn 2010. The participation of a privately run gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and represents the strategic aim to connect the work of artists with collectors.

These exhibitions give curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. By enabling the artist's voice to be heard on issues such as how practice which is informed by identity can engage local communities, 'the shape of things' encourages a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts representative of the society we live in today. Best described in the words of the author and playwright Bonnie Greer who chaired a debate at the launch of 'the shape of things' programme on 5 November 2009: *'This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard ... This initiative, this collection of people is important now ... This is a movement, this is the beginning'*.

David Kay  
Director, 'the shape of things'







the  
shape  
OF things

ROSA NGUYEN STILL LIVING

