

The second installment of 'Unravelling' is at The Wyne, says Pamela Buxton

Changing rooms

Something strange is going on at The Wyne in Hampshire, the historic National Trust property dating from the 16th century. In one room, scarlet roots emerge from a fireplace and spread around the space, while one floor up, in a room lined with tapestries, a tree full of birds has grown. Elsewhere textile pigeons, dressed up to the nines, enjoy a lively party.

These installations – 10 makers and artists creating work inspired by the rich history of the house – are part of *Unravelling The Wyne*, the second of the three-part project *Unravelling the National Trust*, which began last year at Nymans house and gardens in Sussex.

According to Caitlin Heffernan, who co-founded the Unravelling group with Matt Smith and curator Polly Harknett, the project allows artists to unpick The Wyne's rich and sometimes hidden stories, creating unusual, contemporary responses, and narratives very different from the conventional notion of the place. These add new layers of interpretation to its highly crafted interior, playing, as Heffernan says, 'with the history and heritage of what's part of the house and what is part of the intervention.'

The project, says Smith, allows the various artists to 'explode the narrative of the wealthy man passing on the estate to his son.' His own pieces tackle the close, long-standing relationship between 18th century owner John Chute and writer-collector Horace Walpole. Both were bachelors sharing a passion for collecting art and design, the exact nature of their relationship open to modern speculation. They considered themselves as arbiters of style, setting up the 'Committee on Taste', but didn't always agree – the many objects Walpole tried unsuccessfully to encourage Chute to collect are amalgamated into Smith's piece *The Gift*, a single extravagant ceramic work topped with strings of pearls. Fittingly, for such an unwanted present, it is displayed behind the staircase.

Another piece reflects on the nature of the dandy in Walpole's and Chute's

This project allows artists to unpick The Wyne's rich and sometimes hidden stories



Clockwise from right: *Two Dancers*, Charlie Whinney; *We Could Have Been Anywhere*, Caitlin Heffernan; *Short Cuts and Pop-Ups*, Maria Rivans; *We Could Have Been Anywhere*, Caitlin Heffernan. All work 2013



day, deliberately fusing what Smith perceives as bad taste with what they perceived as good, in a 1.5 metre tall totem on the staircase.

In the library, Maria Rivans's complex installation *Short Cuts and Pop-Ups* is a 'micro-environment' of piled vintage books and intricate paper cut-outs, referencing both the landscape of The Wyne and the lives of those who lived there or visited over the centuries. Figures include Chute-era dandies, dancing ladies and Jane Austen, as well as cut-outs representing recent visitors since the house has been open to the public. There is also a reference to the fourth or fifth century gold ring displayed in the house, and believed to have inspired Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Plus there's a werewolf, which echoes the unsettling feeling that Rivans experienced as she toured the house.

Heffernan's tree-and-roots piece is inspired by the 18th century tapestries depicting fantastical Persian and Asian scenes. In bound fabric with hand-made leaves and birds, her tree also evokes the family history of the generations living in the house, with its roots heading off towards the fireplace and emerging in the room below as crimson, wired satin ropes seemingly invading the richly coloured wallpaper.

Several exhibitors refer to the house's social life. Textile graffiti artist Mrs Smith uses pigeons to evoke the hedonistic upper class social whirl of the 'Season', while Charlie Whinney's steam-bent wood sculpture evokes the movement of dancing figures in Tudor times. Two metres high, the installation is made of intertwined, 11 mm thick oak and ash pieces, and sited in a room previously used for dancing. It represents male and female partners, and Whinney hopes visitors will be able to imagine them dancing, hundreds of years ago, as they view the piece.

Alec Stevens has also taken inspiration from Tudor days, carving 49 pomegranates from oak cubes and arranging them as if being swept under a carpet in the Oak Gallery, a wood-lined promenade. The pomegranate was Catherine of Aragon's symbol, found 49 times in the room's panelling. When Henry VIII visited after his divorce, the carvings were covered up, to avoid offence.

Unravelling The Wyne will be followed next year by a show featuring site-specific commissions responding to the historic property Uppark in East Sussex. *'Unravelling The Wyne' is at The Wyne, Wyne Road, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG24 9HL, from 28 June – 22 December 2013. www.unravelling.org.uk*

curtain on process. There's a mesmerising looped film of the kitchen during service, chefs in total focus working balletically around each other. It's a particular pleasure to see a selection of the primitive blobs of coloured Plasticine used to define the placement of components on the plate. A display of equipment sits alongside a short film of their use. There's everything from the basic silicone moulds and soda siphons to the simple-yet-ingenuous 'caviar machine', which in reality is no more than a series of syringes suspended in a frame – when the plungers are pushed, droplets of mixture fall into a calcium chloride solution resulting in spheres of flavour. And then there are the machines that no home cook would recognise: Pacojet or Teppan Nitro, anyone?

In the run up to the show's opening, I kept hearing the same reservations about an exhibition on food with nothing on offer to eat. Sure, you don't get to try the food – these are elite objects after all – but though critics are sometimes also frustrated that they don't get to sit on the furniture or try on the jewellery at the V&A, this has never been the expectation. While it might describe a recent history, the exhibition's subject is most definitely historical. From the very first room there is a sense of loss with the closing of elBulli, a personal loss of that which you will never taste but also the cultural loss of a proving ground for young chefs. In essence the show is a time capsule, a celebration of achievements past, perhaps even a *memento mori*, a 17th century Dutch still life for our time. *Teleri Lloyd-Jones is assistant editor of Crafts magazine*

Unravelling a house of many histories

Unravelling the Vyne

The Vyne, Basingstoke RG24 9HL
28 June – 22 December 2013

Reviewed by Sara Roberts

This project is a robust 'conversation' between a historic venue and contemporary artists. The Vyne is a Tudor country mansion, built in the early 16th century by Henry VIII's Lord Chamberlain, William Sandys, with later period additions commissioned between the 1650s and 1950s by successive generations of the Chute family. The

place lends itself to being unravelled: it is rich in history and sturdy, well crafted materials – there is an oak gallery, a stone gallery, panelled rooms, print and tapestry rooms, a superb collection of Queen Anne furniture and an eclectic ceramics collection.

The artists' responses to the building are apt and thoroughly researched, with some of the most successful providing narratives which parallel and develop the house's own stories. *Lady Dacre's Wedding Gift – A Conceit*, by Penny Green, a series of deep ceramic plates depicting tales of the sometimes powerful women associated with the house, is so simply laid upon a table in the dining room that visitors may assume it is part of the ceramics collection. Some plates are even fractured and mended in a manner emulating early metal staple repairs, as if they have been subject to the ravages of time and crude conservation.

Two of the artists explore and develop the character of John Chute as 18th century dandy. Chute was a friend of Horace Walpole, and there are correspondences between the rooms he remodelled so extravagantly here and at Strawberry Hill, which Walpole, Chute and Thomas Gray designed together as the group known as 'The Committee of Taste'. Matt Smith's composite work, *The Gift*, comprises a tower of heraldic and kitsch figurines, threaded together with strings of pearls – the kind of *objets d'art* Walpole recommended that Chute purchase during the Grand Tour.

The conceit here is that they are possibly an embarrassment – bundled together and hidden behind the grandeur of the Grand Staircase – and have become a teetering monument to the vagaries of changing taste. Sharon McElroy's video, *An Exquisite Diversion*, populates the Vyne with more recent examples of dandyism: glittering, transgender 70s Glam Rock figures strut through the house, taking part in a masked fantasy party like those experienced by Chute and Walpole on their Venetian trips. Glamorous costumes strewn around the bedrooms hint at further adventures and carnal urgency.

Alec Stevens's *49 Pomegranates* is a collection of lifesize fruits exquisitely carved in oak and displayed in the Oak Gallery. Pomegranates were Catherine of Aragon's symbol, and the reference is to the precise number found on the panelled walls. The carved fruits are swept under the carpet, partially hidden from view, just as Catherine herself was after she failed to produce a male heir for Henry VIII. Stevens's craftsmanship and imaginative interpretation expand on this rich metaphor and invite a closer view of the fabric of the building.

Opposite page:
Plasticine models, elBulli
Clockwise from right:
49 Pomegranates, Alec Stevens, oak, 2013; *The Gift (detail)*, Matt Smith, white earthenware, freshwater pearls, 2013; *Gate Gate*, John Grayson, enamelled copper, brass, 2013



ELBULLI PHOTO PALAU ROBERT | ALL UNRAVELLED PHOTOS: SUSSIE AHLBURG

Maria Rivans's *Short Cuts and Pop-Ups* is a spectacularly complex 'landscape' on a central reading table in the library. Made with collaged, sliced vintage books, it encapsulates the history of the Vyne, depicting the Grand Tour and avid collecting, new architecture, scholarship, and botanical classification with pop-up flora and fauna; bloody aspects of its history with a particularly gruesome beheading; Venetian gondolas negotiating rippling pages; contemporary National Trust visitors contemplating the scene; the rampaging hunt.

The whole is tied together by shredded text eddying around the stacks of books, and depicting the river at the heart of the estate. The chair alongside has been flung back violently, as if during one of the dramatic events of the Vyne's history. Decoration and darkness here combine in a rich series of narratives. It is a highly imaginative response to the site, and rewards close scrutiny in its attention to detail and close historical reading.

The exhibition itself stimulates further robust conversations: some National Trust visitors do not welcome the overlay of the contemporary upon the historical, making high quality interpretation crucial. In such a context, the attitude of volunteer guides can make or break the relationship between audience and contemporary interventions; the Vyne guides, while sensitive to the opinions of the visitors, are particularly well briefed, and lead new readings of both the work and its rich context.

Sara Roberts is a curator and writer based in Winchester