



Above left: *Flower Helix* (detail), Alice Kettle, 2013

functions as a guide to events, entry times and how to get there).

Post-structuralists might contend that it is the viewer who creates meaning, irrespective of the artist's intention, but this may have been asking too much at the very first contemporary art show in this villa. Certainly one longed to fill the void created by this particular piece, so uneasy and seemingly hastily made, perhaps with the observation that the contradiction between the classical interior and the 'bumptious' faux flower-bed made sense, if only you were looking from the eyes of Kettle's Henrietta portrait.

After all, if one gazes out of the windows of the Queen's House one sees, between and beyond the formal architecture and grounds of the Naval College, the City of London on the other side of the Thames. In other words, one views a parallel clash between cultures, the one traditional and controlled, the other random and, some would say, out of control. Is this another reason why Henrietta Maria looks so sour?

Tucked away from these pieces, and cascading down the centre of the Tulip

Stairs, is *Flower Helix*, a beautiful froth of splaying wire tendrils sporting flower heads, some carnation-coloured and made, badge-like, on a multi-head embroidery machine. Others are white, made using lace techniques, or of white cloth machine-stitched in cornflower blue. The label explains its inspiration: the white flowers of the wild carrot, its complexity and delicacy lending it the popular name Queen Anne's Lace.

Yet having heard that students at Manchester Metropolitan University were among the other collaborators (Kettle is a Senior Research Fellow at Manchester), one can only wonder if this was, in part, their work, despite its inclusion of elements strongly associated with Michael Brennand-Wood. Whatever the case, this is a tour de force of thread, wire and cloth. Its form dances within the scrolling ironwork; its subtle colouring seems to sing to the shadings of white steps; and it befits a space designed by Jones, himself a master of that festive and fantastical courtly entertainment, the masque. *Mary Schoeser is an independent curator, archivist and writer*

Tales of construction on a carpet

Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings

By Robert & Brenda Vale, published by Thames & Hudson, £19.95 hb

Reviewed by Edwin Heathcoate

Nurture or nature? Are architects born or made? Robert and Brenda Vale, in their new, odd, nerdy and extremely enjoyable book, suggest that the toys we use as children influence not only our choices in what we become but the style in which architects might build once they grow up. There is no psychobabble here, no faux intellectual posturing. There is also nothing about Frank Lloyd Wright and his famous Froebel blocks (surely the most famous and self-mythologising example of an architect attributing his profession to a childhood toy). Instead there is a study of those toys deliberately geared towards the construction of buildings, some well known like Meccano and Lego, others extremely obscure and long-forgotten like Wenebrik and Mobaco.

This is a weird world of tortuous construction techniques: boys in ties build while girls in pig-tails look on in respectful awe. In an era of Sim City and games in which you build entire cities with a mere poke of your finger, it is a reminder of a time when toys were for boys. Demanding, worthy and, quite possibly, a bit dull.

It all begins with Richter's Blocks, the basic brick construction kit, which its instruction booklets suggest is perfect for recreating a cemetery full of sombre mausolea – a look the authors link, delightfully, with the German tendency towards Romanticism. A more complex British version, Lott's Bricks, they associate with the emergent Arts and Crafts Movement, its church resembling a Lethaby, its houses evoking Arthur Mitchell's buildings in Hampstead Garden Suburb. As Mitchell designed the toys too, there may be something in it.

The authors appear desperate to find traces of a modernism in these toys that might confirm they'd encouraged architects and designers into the world of avant-garde design. They are disappointed to find that most toys recreated the early 20th century suburbanism which was always more characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture. There were, however, exceptions.

KETTLE IMAGE © NMM, LONDON

By far the best story is of Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke. Bassett-Lowke built an empire on models, founding Hornby and a shop in Holborn which became famous for its displays of engineering marvels. But he was also one of Britain's great patrons of architecture. He commissioned Charles Rennie Mackintosh to rework his house at 78 Derngate, Northampton, and later commissioned German architect and industrial designer Peter Behrens to build him a new house in the same city in 1923 (Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier had all at one time worked in the Behrens office). The house isn't much to look at today, a basic modernist white box relieved by some Deco-lite details, but it had a huge impact in Britain which had never seen anything like it.

The other exception to the suburban default was Meccano. It is well known that Lords Foster and Rogers both enjoyed Meccano as lads, and we see the evidence in their early buildings, in the Pompidou Centre as much as the Renault factory. But here the authors miss a trick. In a way the High Tech designers – and the architects who followed them in their international success – never moved beyond Meccano. Look at Neo Bankside, the new residential tower by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, or Riverlight in Nine Elms: they display the same dim details, the boyish enthusiasm for the aesthetic of engineering construction. These toys got the architects stuck on a look. The brightly coloured trusses and cross braces are there for decoration, an appliqué effort to make them look robust and engineered.

I think you could make an argument that more than just influencing the architects these toys actually became so embedded in their psyche that they became stuck in them, never moving on. Even the radicals, Cedric Price or Archigram, betray the influence of toys that are demountable.

In a way, what makes this book so entertaining is its deadpan demeanour. The Vales, themselves collectors of these toys, stroll through the most unlikely construction systems right up to Lego (though not Lego's latest homages to modernist masterpieces, curiously: executive toys that let you to build a Corb or Frank Lloyd Wright villa), draw straight-faced but slightly far-fetched parallels between the worlds of models and reality. I particularly like their crediting of both the Post-Modern aesthetic and green community self-build to Big Ears from Noddy, the illustrator of which (Harmsen van der Beek) also drew the instructions for Dutch construction set Mobaco. It beats architecture theory hands down. *Edwin Heathcoate is the architecture and design critic of the Financial Times*



From *The Esque Collection*, Laura White, mixed media, 2012

All a matter of taste and trade

Couriers of Taste
Danson House, Bexleyheath DA6 8HL
1 April – 31 October, 2013

Reviewed by Jessica Hemmings

Completed in 1766, Danson House was originally built for Sir John Boyd, sugar merchant and vice-chairman of the British East India Company. Sited across more than 180 acres of land, the Georgian villa is an evocative backdrop for the curatorial partnership of Day + Gluckman, this exhibition being part of their on-going Sinopticon project. But where Sinopticon's original focus was on contemporary interpretations of chinoiserie, *Couriers of Taste* expands the remit to include work that addresses global trade and the Exotic.

Danson House itself provides an important reference point here. Built to display the acquisitions of its first owner's travels, it offered evidence not only of his worldly experience but also of personal wealth accrued, in part from the labour of slaves. The curators confront this from the outset, acknowledging the 'contentious and often abhorrent implications of trade that spurs global commerce: from fashion and taste to darker nuances such as racism, production values and the contested territory of exoticism.'

Nine artists are exhibited: Gayle Chong Kwan, Stephanie Douet, Ed Pien, Meekyoung Shin, Susan Stockwell, Karen Tam, Laura White, WESSIELING and Ai Weiwei. There are peaks and troughs, with excellent work alongside less remarkable padding. Highlights include a modest cabinet on the ground floor, containing some of the hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds Ai Weiwei showed at Tate Modern three years ago, temporarily reclaimed via the curators' social media campaign. Diplomatically described as 'stolen/acquired/disseminated', the seeds are exhibited (this time safely under glass)

with Paddington Bear-like luggage labels noting where they will return after the show. Poignantly, as the curators remind us, they are freer to roam the world than the artist who conceived their making.

The bulk of the exhibition occupies the upper floor, organised around themed rooms: Territories, Contemporary Chinoiserie, Opium Den, the Trader, and Consumerism. Early on we see two maps by Susan Stockwell, of the African continent made from Chinese money, and of China made from US dollars. Both maps remind us that economic power, and the cultural influence that comes with it, is now experiencing something of a shift away from Europe and the US towards China and the continent of Africa.

Laura White's installation of several dozen sculptures fashioned from eBay and charity shop ephemera – the *Esque Collection* – is a high point. No effort is made to blend into the space. Instead, a sea of sculptures on raised plinths injects the entire room with a visual cacophony of resurrected and eclectically grouped junk. One wall is painted fuchsia and contains *Face the Elements*, a collection of quotes from fashion magazines by WESSIELING, who has several works here. The suggestion is perhaps that fashion drives the material consumption responsible for the discarded content of White's work, though when set against the visual clamour of the sculptures, the connection the texts make feels somewhat tenuous.

Meekyoung Shin truly steals this show, with *Translation*, a collection of pots made from soap displayed on packing crates conspicuously stamped *fragile*. Shin's museum collection replicas are visually deceptive: the transience of soap as a



material is not immediately obvious, nor is the fact that the objects here are not as valuable as first glance might suggest. Shin also made the soap Duke of Cumberland in London's Cavendish Square, until this June (recreating an equine statue that formerly stood there). This was literally exposed to the elements, disintegrating over time. While disintegration is not yet apparent in the pieces inside Danson House, a sense that the identity of an object – and by extension its maker – is both fluid and fragile is a poetic response to the exhibition's theme.

The same magic and subtlety isn't present throughout the whole exhibition, but other highlights – in particular Ai Weiwei's seeds and White's boisterous combinations – are well worth the visit. *Professor Jessica Hemmings is Head of the Faculty of Visual Culture at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin*

Above: *National Dress*, WESSIELING, 2013
Left: *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai Weiwei, 2013



Margate's new pleasure palace

Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing
Turner Contemporary, Margate CT9 1HG
24 May – 16 September, 2013
Catalogue: £22.99 hb
Reviewed by Teleri Lloyd-Jones

An exhibition map helps you keep going in the right direction, or it can act as a memory aid or – in those really long shows – it lets you know when it will all end. But in this show, the map is an exhibit in itself. A large pen-and-ink drawing by Pablo Bronstein depicts a cross-section of an imaginary museum, that's a grand, historical affair, all columns and cupolas, and worlds away from the Chipperfield-designed venue that it actually hangs in. But study the contents of the rooms and you'll spot a narwhal tusk, a meteorite, some Blaschka models and the Horniman walrus – and all these await you, in the rooms to come.

Bronstein's drawing provides a fitting introduction to this idiosyncratic exhibition. Like many things here, it is a half-truth, part-dream part-reality. Inspired by the 17th century *wunderkammer*, the so-called Cabinet of Curiosities, the exhibition mixes time periods and disciplines as well as the made or the found: so the small, beautiful glass models of sea creatures by the Blaschkas, father and son, are next to Richard Wentworth's photographs, called *Making Do and Getting By*, that capture everyday encounters, a plastic cup caught in a fence or the shadow of a hanging basket. The amount of taxidermy here is a nod to the *wunderkammers'* original predilection for nature's curios. Animals on show include such naturalist's specimens as a show-stopping overstuffed walrus and a king penguin sent back by Shackleton, up to the contemporary taxidermy sculpture *Misfits* constructed by Thomas Grünfeld.

When they're not a collection in their entirety, many of the exhibits come from collections, suggesting that the curious among us like to accumulate, and to order the world around us. We are treated to one of John Evelyn's cabinets, in which the 17th century polymath kept his collection of prints, and also to Tacita Dean's film of Claes Oldenburg cleaning his shelves. One revelation was Corinne May Botz's series of photographs of

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