

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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# ArtReview

## Anthea Hamilton

The English artist discusses sampling, collaborating, choreographing and deadpanning her way through three quintessentially British shows with Helen Sumpter

By **Helen Sumpter**



Anthea Hamilton, *Guimard Chastity Belt*, 2016. Turner Prize Exhibition 2016, 2016 installation view. Photo: Joe Humphrys. Courtesy © Tate Photography

Perhaps it's a sign of the times that visitors to this year's Turner Prize at Tate Britain were queuing to take photographs of each other in front of a 5m-high sculpture of a man's bare bottom and thighs, hands gently pulling his cheeks apart. Anthea Hamilton's *Project for Door (After Gaetano Pesce)* (2016) is part of the reworking of the London-born artist's 2015 show *Lichen! Libido! Chastity!* at Sculpture Center in New York, for which she received her Turner nomination. The absurdist sculpture, which wouldn't look out of place on a carnival float, provides the perfect backdrop against which to stand, point up at the crack, highlight the punning observation that this is not only a door

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## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

but a 'backdoor', and smile for the camera. It's fun and flippant, not to mention a gift for tabloid-headline writers – 'The Turner Prize really is the butt of jokes now', ran one headline. Hamilton works across video, installation, sculpture and performance, but there's more to her work than bottom humour: there's a playful and often ambiguously dead-pan exploration of our shifting physical relationships with the feminine, with objects and with images.

*Project for Door...* originates in a photograph from the early 1970s of a silicone rubber model of an unrealised project for an actual doorway for a New York skyscraper by Italian artist, architect and designer Gaetano Pesce, whose surreal approach to design – which includes chairs moulded from strands of extruded polyurethane that look like spaghetti, and sofas covered in fake grass, decked with cushions in the form of huge fabric flowers – Hamilton admires. "I'm drawn to the theatricality in both the way he makes and photographs his objects and his noncompromising commitment to materials," she explains when I visit her in October at the Gasworks studio complex, in South London. "There's also a directness with the body in his work that I felt I understood."

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Hamilton's early work experience, between studies for a BA at Leeds University and then an MA at the Royal College of Art (London, from where she graduated in 2005), includes a stint in set design for film and TV. She also worked for the Arts Council and co-ran a gallery for a year in Shoreditch, but it's the creation of ambiguous theatrical environments, in which objects and images, as well as people, perform, that has been a constant in Hamilton's output. For her 2012 exhibition *Sorry I'm Late*, at Firstsite gallery in Colchester, one room, painted in blue screen as if in preparation for another reality to be projected onto it, contained MDF cutouts of female legs. G-clamped together in cavorting arrangements and embellished with sprigs of flowers or with vegetables pendulously suspended between them, they managed to be as much about proportion and balance as they were about associations with hosiery ads or suggestive vegetables. Recent exhibitions include the 2015 Biennale de Lyon and the 2014 Gwangju Biennale, a project for this year's Frieze New York, a show at the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (with partner Nicholas Byrne), the still-touring *British Art Show 8* and an ongoing UK exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield in Yorkshire. Her considered combinations of objects and images often play with scale and materials, the relationship between 2D and 3D surfaces, and reality and artifice, in a manner that articulates the ambiguous experience of images and objects in a digital age.

Hamilton's references are drawn from diverse and sometimes perverse sources in fashion, design, film, advertising, pop culture, kimono design, Kabuki theatre and mime. But key images (as well as motifs and titles) recur, printed at huge scale on buildings or featured in short animations and as freestanding cutouts like props on a stage. One of these images is a black-and-white photograph of a man in skimpy trunks, sitting on a cube with his arms outstretched, holding on to a long, thin bar that rests across his shoulders. Hamilton used it in *Aquarius* (2010), printed onto a 7m-high scaffolding support and shown on the roof of a multistorey car park. The effect of the crisscross of scaffolding visible behind the image gave the model's moody macho pose a more classical association with Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490), an association that Hamilton then literally cuts into by creating an opening between the figure's legs, making the walk between them an absurdly silly act. "I'm interested in strong images like that because you can do a lot with them; because they have their own internal strength. In *Aquarius* the image becomes both comic and sexual."

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Conversation and collaboration are also key to how Hamilton works, from her ongoing series of giant printed inflatables, *LOVE* (2012–), also created with Byrne, to working with fellow artists including Julie Verhoeven, as well as mime artists and choreographers. She has an ongoing relationship with choreographer Kostas Tsioukas, who most recently created performances in response to her work in the *British Art Show 8*. "I always think about the walk that someone makes through a space," she says. Hamilton views her interpretation of Pesce's door as a form of

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

collaboration, not only with the originator, with whom she discussed how she was going to realise her version of the work, but with the architecture of Sculpture Center itself, for which it was conceived. “When you work by yourself, you’re refining and editing yourself all the time. In collaboration I love this idea of how in improv theatre you can’t say ‘no’.”

Where Hamilton’s ideas of collaboration come together perfectly are in her ongoing Hepworth Wakefield exhibition, *Anthea Hamilton Reimagines Kettle’s Yard*, a reworking (in the Hepworth galleries) of the very particular domestic arrangement of art and objects put together by British collector Jim Ede (1895–1990) at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge. The collection of cottages that form Kettle’s Yard (currently under renovation) were converted by Ede to display his collection during the 1950s. Hamilton’s skill lies in the seamless way that she has combined selected objects from the collection with both existing works of her own, new works made in response to the collection and works by invited contemporary artists. Images of British grasses printed onto a kimono by Hamilton and displayed on a stand (*British Grasses Kimono*, 2015) are taken from photographs by botanist-photographer Roger Phillips from a book Hamilton found in the collection; a vase of flowers – Kettle’s Yard always has flowers on display – is an ongoing artwork by artist Maria Loboda titled *A Guide to Insults and Misanthropy* (2004–), the seemingly innocent blooms each having been selected for their negative symbolic connotations. While the aesthetic feel of the display coheres around the story of one discrete period collection remaining intact, the theme of theatrical artifice is introduced as if by stealth.

A work that’s easy to overlook at the Hepworth is a mobile comprising 76 small stones encased in delicate knitting, Hamilton’s reworking of Ede’s selection of stones, which, at Kettle’s Yard, are arranged in a spiral according to size. “There is a logic and a system to what I do,” she says, “but whether it’s visual or linguistic, it has to work through a twist or a flip.”

*Project for Door...*, surrounded by brick-patterned wallpaper at Tate, a reference to Sculpture Center’s brick walls, doesn’t get prime position in her Turner display; that’s given to a second space, wallpapered with a print of a blue sky, complete with fluffy white clouds (bricks and cloudy sky both bringing to mind the surrealist works of Magritte). In this space, among other works, hang five metal and mixed-media sculptures that take the nominal form of knickers but are also reminiscent of toddlers’ swings in a park, all slightly different in their decoration and all titled *Guimard Chastity Belt* (2016). Hamilton cites her references as a series of art nouveau-style filigree padlocks made by Paris Metro entrances designer Hector Guimard, and King Henry VIII’s heavy-duty battlefield armour, both designed to protect against contact with the body (and both of which she spotted on visits to New York museums). The contrast between the delicate locks, triangular-shaped like a pubic bone, and the armour, made for the entire body, but impossibly heavy and weighty, become, when Hamilton had worked through their dualities of protection and restriction, *Chastity Belts*. For the female body there’s only one area that’s important; for the male, it’s all of it. Decorated with flowers, leaves and other small objects, and with no actual lock or means of wearing them, these are chastity belts in name and shape only. “For me, works like these are almost more abstract the more direct they are,” Hamilton says, “like the statement of putting a big bottom on a wall and saying it’s a doorway. It’s so blunt that it can be an expansive thing.” I can see her point. When an object appears so obvious in the context of art, we, as viewers, are conditioned to think that there must also be a wider meaning and to search for what that is; in this case we are trained to ignore the obvious absurdity of what’s in front of us. But that’s exactly what deadpan seeks to achieve.

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