

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Anthea Hamilton: 'There is something quite liberating about knowing that you can't always resolve things because it gives you the freedom to go for it'

The Turner Prize-nominated artist talks about her experience of reimagining the Kettle's Yard collection at the University of Cambridge in a contemporary and collaborative fashion



Interested in choreographing space and objects and creating curious juxtapositions by, for example, using unexpected everyday objects as plinths, Anthea Hamilton (b1978, London) was the perfect invitee to reimagine the carefully ordered Kettle's Yard collection in a contemporary manner for the Hepworth Wakefield, during the renovation of the Cambridge house. Hamilton's approach, which involved collaborating with several British and international artists with whom she has either worked previously, or whose work is important to her, echoes the way that Jim Ede assembled the collection, with objects and artworks acquired through his friends and acquaintances.

Hamilton spoke to Studio International at the opening of the exhibition, explaining her methods, her affection for kimonos, and how this opportunity has fed into her practice as a whole, including influencing her installation *Lichen! Libido! Chastity!*, for which she has been nominated for the Turner Prize 2016.

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Anthea Hamilton. *Alabaster Leg*, 2015. Alabaster, brass, Lucite, steel fixings 100 x 84 x 84 cm. Courtesy the artist and Loewe Foundation. Photograph: Lewis Ronald.



Anthea Hamilton. *Wavy Walnut Boot*, 2015. Walnut wood with burr walnut veneer. Photograph: Sven Laurent

Anna McNay: How long have you been working on this project? Did you know the Kettle's Yard collection beforehand? How did it all come about?

Anthea Hamilton: The invitation came about 18 months ago, in May 2015. I knew of the house for its gallery programme, but I didn't necessarily know the full history of the house. I had learned about, and absorbed, British modernism and was very aware of Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson, but it was the first time that they were brought into focus as real people with interrelationships.

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AMc: How did you go about finding out about the history of the house?

AH: At first, I just visited the house, tried to understand what it was, whether it was just a home or also a display or an archive. I found it really overwhelmingly beautiful. Everything is so precise and so I knew that this couldn't be what I responded to. So I went to the archives. Normally, I really enjoy the idea of going into an archive where you get lost in trails, where you spiral off into many different things, but the Kettle's Yard archive, which was made by Jim Ede, offers the same experience as the house, in a way. They have the manuscript of Ede's book, *A Way of Life*, which is like a manual for the house, and he laid it out leaving no stone unturned. There is an exceptionally high degree of making sure that things are understood how he wants them to be understood.

AMc: So you didn't want to replicate that precision?

AH: I'm just not capable. It is not my character to be that way. I am more open and very interested in collaboration as a way of understanding and furthering my knowledge: the idea of working with craftspeople to make a glass table, for example, really appeals to me. It is not something that I necessarily think is paramount for me to know how to do, but the act of collaborating to do it is incredible.

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Anthea Hamilton. Handwoven grass mat, 2016.
Photograph © Darren O'Brien/Guzelian. Courtesy The
Henworth Wakefield

I participated in an exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, which paired artists with traditional artisans and I worked with artisan glassblowers based in Nantes. I proposed to remake an image from my archive, which is an image of unknown provenance. I can't find any background for it at all, there is just this big, red, flowing table, which is a desk for a businessman to make phone calls from. It is bright red with Ferrari-red pigment. The table is a bespoke craft object. I think the reason it works in the show, or my understanding of a parallel that I found in the house, is that when you go into Kettle's Yard, there is a bureau quite soon on your left-hand side, and, on top of that bureau, there is a glass with several feathers in it. When you go into Kettle's Yard, you are overwhelmed by the light and the beauty, and people studying things. I had this moment of understanding how much attention to detail had gone into every kind of decision. This dish was obviously never made for putting feathers into, but each feather was so immaculately placed. There was a sense of vision that suddenly leapt out, and then to see everything else in the house took on another perspective. You had another way of reading it.

I'm thrilled to be able to include my version of that writing desk in this exhibition. It was great to work with the glassblowers in France. They didn't speak English very well, and my French is minimal, so we had to communicate by diagrams. We had a series of letters, which are just images of how we were going to make a glass table.

AMc: The exhibition includes these collaborations between yourself and artisans,

but you have also collaborated with a number of artists as well. Did they make their works specifically for the exhibition?

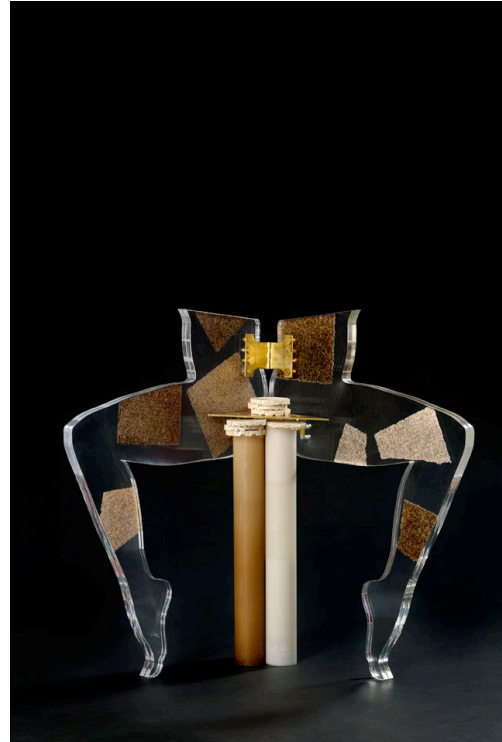
AH: The vase of flowers by Maria Loboda was an existing work. I first saw it in Kettle's Yard and, years later, became very good friends with the artist. The bouquet was first made in 2004 and the title is A Guide to Insults and Misanthropy. There is a list of flowers that Maria offers for inclusion each time the work is remade and each of those carries a negative meaning, from Victorian times. For example, nettles, which I guess are quite clear. Then you have yarrow, sunflowers, marigolds and hydrangea. The one that I understood best was allium. As they were on the list and in season, I bought some beautiful allium flowers for the studio, big bold purple ones, and they smelt just terrible – so I understood what that insult was! A bonus of the display being on for around six months is that, because the flowers have to be seasonal, the bouquet will keep changing, bringing a fresh cup of insults or negativity to the room.

The day bed was made by Laëtitia Badaut Haussmann, an artist I got to know during my time living in Paris. We have a close relationship, almost quite a romantic friendship, in the sense that we write letters to one another. There was a painting in the house that obliquely reminded me of Laëtitia and I offered her that image to respond to. It is about trusting that the other person, in turn, trusts your invitation to do something to great effect. Laëtitia did. She took the colour scheme of the painting and reincorporated it into the day bed, DB16. This is one in a series that she is making. They always have historical precedents. She thinks about them as artworks, and as beds, but also as a place to position other works, so we used it here as a base for the ornamental mask by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. The mask has never actually been shown in the house before. I can understand why because it is too theatrical. Maybe that is why I loved it straight away: there is something awkward about it. All the works in the exhibition in some way have had decisions made through conversation, about slotting things in and very much about correspondence.

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Anthea Hamilton. Spiral stair case, 2016.
Photograph © Darren O'Brien/Guzelian. Courtesy
The Hepworth Wakefield.



Anthea Hamilton, Leg Chair (SUSHI NORI),
2012. Acrylic, brass, plaster, wax, sushi nori,
rice cakes. Courtesy the artist and Firstsite.
Photograph: Doug Atfield.

AMc: A lot of your work seems to be about how to display things, not just in this instance with Laëtitia's work. In the past, you have used cut-outs of legs as plinths for objects, for example. Here, you have also created a cabinet as a display case. Where does this interest in displaying objects come from?

AH: I try to be pragmatic about things and to find quite common-sense ways of going about them. For example, if you have a space that is really full of very dynamic angles, how can you unify that? Maybe by making a really oversized statement or using these plaited grass mats on the wall and floor, as I have here, touching one another, tying the room together and also tying the works together. It creates a communal experience of the space. I went to great lengths to find a way to recreate the small mats photographed in *A Way of Life*, making them appropriate for this space and expanding them to create a 2016 supersize version. As soon as you put them down on the floor they become an alternative framework; they also incorporate visitors into the body of the exhibition, which is something that *Kettle's Yard* does as well. You are always aware of yourself within the space because it is so complete as an installation and the mats somehow do that: they frame your relationship with the objects on display.

AMc: The mats are 2D, which is another common thread in your work. What makes you restrict so much of your sculpture, almost paradoxically, to being 2D?

AH: I don't necessarily restrict, it is more that I have been very interested in the image for an extended period and trying to get to the root of how an image works. Whether that be what a photographic image is versus what a painted image is, or how a sculpture can be an image or a performance or a film. There is a fixed understanding of how to operate within an image. One of my favourite works, a very key work within my own practice, is the Robert Mapplethorpe piece, tucked away at the back of the room, of Lisa Lyon. She is nude, the image cropped in the photograph from the waist down, and her legs are open like a pair of scissors. That, to me, is complete perfection. You can feel it is about strength and nature and the humanness of inert nature [stone], but it is grey, flat and printed.

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Anthea Hamilton. British Grasses Kimono, 2015. Digitally printed silk, cotton, wicker, cotton rope, stainless steel frame. Courtesy the artist and Loewe Foundation. Photograph: Lewis Ronald.

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AMc: What about the mobile of stones? What is that made in response to?

AH: I am really grateful to Kettle's Yard for letting me go for it with this piece. It is actually a work that sits on one of the low tables in the house. It is a set of 76 stones, which go round from largest to smallest, positioned very carefully. It felt important to have it in the show, but it didn't seem to fit anywhere. I didn't have a surface where we could put it, where it wouldn't get kicked over. As I say, you have to be pragmatic. So the work is here in essence, just not in form. I wouldn't say it's completely destroyed! Turning something into a mobile requires it to be finely balanced. It is free form, each of the stones hand-sewn into a little net.

AMc: Several works in the exhibition reference kimonos. Was this something specific to Kettle's Yard, or a part of your own oeuvre?

AH: I often find that the kimono is a way to be very logical with all the *stuff* that maybe wouldn't come together otherwise. I studied painting for postgraduate level because I truly wanted to learn about composition. I wanted to know how to make a narrative across time, and this I can't do. I learned how to formally arrange things like in an allegorical painting, but then I didn't want to paint. I found that the kimono is the closest I can come to a way to bring things together. If you think about the T-shape, it is almost like a cookie cutter, not quite a sculpture, not quite a painting, it is a very in-between object. I wanted to study Kabuki theatre and I had this bodily reaction to the fact that I couldn't understand anything. I had an intense experience of the detail and drama, but none of it was penetrable because I didn't have the education or experience to make it so. It is almost like being in front of a wave. There is something quite liberating about knowing that you can't always resolve things because it gives you the freedom to go for it. The kimono offers me a way to put things together logically.

AMc: Do you see the exhibition as a whole as a work in itself? As a form of narrative?

AH: Not a narrative, no. Maybe the sensation that you get after reading a text. Like how you feel when you have ingested something and it is all moving around within you, but it is not necessarily visual. Even though it is describing things that can be very visual, very textural, but it is more about receiving that sensation. One thing I didn't want to do – and would have found it arrogant – was to use other people's works as my own works. I really admire it in some people's practices, but that is not what I was interested in doing here. It is a new sensation. It is not as though I have curated a show either. It slips in and out between things that I have made, and I think that is an interesting space to inhabit. It is quite exhausting. You are testing your morals all the time about whether or not you are doing the right thing with someone else's work. That is why it is great to collaborate or speak to other people you are working with.

AMc: Bringing the piano here was obviously your idea, too.

AH: Yes, I think it was just a case of why not? It was such a wonderful invitation and surely it was part of Jim Ede's own wonderful invitation that you could come across and hear a piano in a house. Grand pianos are such striking instruments, such exquisite lacquering. As objects, they are just amazing. Even if they are not being played, sculpturally they really are so beautiful. Normally in the house, Brancusi's Prometheus, a cast concrete head, sits on the closed piano, so it becomes this crazy plinth for a sculpture. The head is currently in another show, but it is coming here later on. I like the idea that the show will change over time.

AMc: Finally, just briefly, you are one of the nominees for this year's Turner Prize, alongside Michael Dean, Helen Marten and Josephine Pryde. You were nominated for the exhibition Lichen! Libido! Chastity! at SculptureCenter, New York. Can you say a bit about the concept behind this installation, because it is quite different from what we have got here?

AH: Visually, yes, it is very different, but, ultimately, a lot of the materials, or understanding of the materials, for that show very much came from one of the first research visits I did for this exhibition to Kettle's Yard. The centrepiece of the show is a remake of an unrealised model by an Italian designer, Gaetano Pesce, whose work I deeply admire. He is part of a radical group of Italian designers from the 70s, when there was a delicately timed moment for everyone to express themselves with different materials due to the political and technological innovations at the time in Italy. The works include a brick suit; a line of art nouveau-inspired "chastity belts"; a painted blue sky and fused-glass rice cakes. Somehow the delicacy of all of those things in Kettle's Yard seemed like a beautiful way to understand a potentially quite aggressive statement that the work as a whole could make. I love the idea that two things can actually be the same. You can be a different person in a different relationship. Actually, you are always different, wherever you are, even if you are quite a fixed character.

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- *Anthea Hamilton Reimagines Kettle's Yard* is at the *Hepworth Wakefield* until 19 March 2017.
- *Turner Prize 2016* is at *Tate Britain* until 2 January 2017.

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/anthea-hamilton-interview-turner-prize-nominee-2016>