

A Futurist time capsule

Casa Balla: From the house to the universe and back | MAXXI National Museum of 21st Century Arts, Rome

17 June – 21 November 2021 | Reviewed by Ana Vukadin

When the artist Giacomo Balla and his family first moved to Via Oslavia in the white-collar neighbourhood of Prati in Rome in 1929, no one liked the apartment. It was dark and 'clerical' – as one of his daughters later described it – a far cry from their bright and colourful home in Via Porpora next to the Villa Borghese public park. Balla, his wife Elisa and daughters Luce and Elica set out to imbue the house with light and joy, creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) over time. They approached the home as a blank canvas: all walls, ceilings, doors, pipes, shutters, plates and glassware were painted with Balla's signature geometric patterns. Meanwhile, lamps, dishes, furniture, carpets, tiles and decorative objects were crafted with experimental flair. The house, in short, became a living example of the Futurist universe imagined by Balla and fellow artist Fortunato Depero in the *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*. This seminal manifesto, penned in 1915, called for a 'total fusion in order to reconstruct the universe by making it more joyful, in other words recreating it in its entirety'.

Now the apartment has been faithfully restored, thanks to a collaboration between MAXXI and Balla's heirs, and since this summer has been open to the public for the first time. The exhibition *Casa Balla: From the house to the universe and back* at MAXXI complements it, featuring Balla's influential creations, including experimental

studies for fabrics and tea sets, a bright yellow, wooden coat rack sprouting pink and orange flowers, and new works by contemporary artists and designers such as Alex Cecchetti and Patricia Urquiola, who were invited to respond to Casa Balla.

An early 20th-century Italian movement, Futurism argued for an overhaul of a seemingly static and decaying culture, urging instead for modernity and technology. Speed, disruption, violence and youth were extolled. What started out as a literary avant-garde movement soon encompassed the visual and performing arts. Its practitioners were concerned with conveying dynamic motion, using abstraction to capture that which was invisible: energy, the electromagnetic waves of light, dizzying perspectives. The written word remained integral to the movement, however, resulting in countless brash manifestos on everything from cooking to clothes. War was glorified as the ultimate tool for modernisation and erasure of the past, leading many Futurists, including Balla, to align with the Italian Fascist party. Balla eventually distanced himself from both the Fascist and Futurist movements in the late 1930s.

Despite this disavowal, it was Balla (1871-1958) who perhaps, more than any other Futurist, put into practice the notion that creative energy should pervade everything in life. Consequently, stepping into his home is one of the most all-encompassing domestic immersive art

experiences. The long, narrow entrance hall is covered, wall-to-ceiling, in a riot of abstract shapes of greens and yellows against a peach background. The tops of the walls are bedecked in dozens of vibrant square paintings to conceal pipes. Beside the entrance, a colourful wooden coat rack displays a man's suit, hat and bag – all Balla designs, sewn at home. The suit is like something from a Versace catwalk, with its asymmetrical lapels and bold purple and yellow geometric designs. Balla made the lights above from recycled cardboard tubes, in line with his radical philosophy of using recycled or 'poor' materials.

The living room, which overflows with paintings, sculptures and easels, holds one of the apartment's most beautiful objects: a smoking cabinet, made of trays connected by columns by Balla and an artisan, topped by a canvas, featuring smoke-like swirls of thread sewn by Luce. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, a small table is set with Balla's yellow dishes with blue arabesques, flanked by four of his wooden chairs painted in red, blue, yellow and pink. The kitchen shutters and cabinets are embellished with the traditional motifs preferred by Balla's daughters: fruits, flowers and birds. This room, as others, showcases a synthesis between the contrasting aesthetics of Balla, Luce and Elica: where he privileged abstraction, both daughters favoured figurative art. Their rooms feature Balla's wildly colourful abstract carpets and trademark plastic flower sculptures juxtaposed by their own paintings of clouds and landscapes.

The house became a living example of the Futurist universe imagined by Balla



Photo: M3 Studio

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Displaying these contrasting styles was a conscious curatorial decision by the director of MAXXI, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, and Domitilla Dardi, MAXXI's design curator, who have succeeded in recontextualising the apartment as a lived-in space imbued with many stories – after Balla died in 1958, his daughters remained in the home until their own deaths in the early 1990s. While the rooms don't brim with as many paintings and plants as they do in the archival photos, the curators have instilled the apartment with the spirit of a home-workshop. In fact, during Balla's life the three worked as a creative, self-taught unit, making a number of ingenious objects, including plywood pieces such as a newspaper rack made entirely from interlocking sheets, and Luce's bed, made without using a single nail or screw.

In his catalogue essay for a MoMA show on Italian design in 1974, Futurism expert Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco astutely observed: 'The Futurist looked forward to a future dominated by the machine, but the present still belonged to the craftsman; Italy had not yet been affected to the slightest degree by a true technological modernisation.'

This rings true in the context of Casa Balla too, where the house is the direct result of extraordinary experimentation in often homemade handicraft, with joinery, sewing, decoration and colour being prized over luxurious materials and industrial execution. This dissolution of barriers between decorative and fine arts was unquestionably radical, propelling Balla firmly into the 21st century, where his designs remain influential today. *Ana Vukadin is a writer, translator and editor based in Italy*

Previous page: the living room at Casa Balla. Clockwise from top: the entrance hall, and the colourful coat rack; the kitchen



Photos: M3 Studio

Stitching memories together

Arrange Whatever Pieces Come Your Way | Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, Scotland

6 September – 31 October 2021; workshops ongoing | Reviewed by Tom Jeffreys

Below: *Gather and Arrange*, and bottom: *Quilts 27, 28 and 29* by *Arrange Whatever Pieces Come Your Way*, on display at Mount Stuart

For Sheelagh Boyce and Annabel Harty, every item of clothing is marked by the life it has lived. Some of these marks are material (a stubborn stain or a tear repaired); others are imbued with invisible reminders of a particular person, time or place. Harty, who lives in Glasgow, and London-based Boyce are long-term friends who, in addition to their own practices (Boyce is a teacher, Harty an architect), have been working together for the past few years as *Arrange Whatever Pieces Come Your Way*. The pair work with found fabrics, often clothing pieces together, carefully taking them apart and then recombining them in the form of hand-quilted textile artworks, displayed in their exhibition at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute.

The works are undeniably beautiful. Modernist architecture is a recurring inspiration, with nods to Chamberlain, Powell and Bon's Barbican Centre in London or Oscar Niemeyer's French Communist Party headquarters in Paris. Where pockets have been removed from items, traces remain – like an old window frame in the wall of an expanded church. Working almost exclusively in cotton –



from much-loved kimonos to Brooks Brothers shirts or prized pieces by Issey Miyake – the pair demonstrate an impeccable colour palette. White and myriad blue tones predominate, but vibrant accents bring unexpected life. *Quilt II* (2020) takes inspiration from lichen growing on a garden wall; the result is a gorgeous assemblage of whites and greys, blooming with mustard and muted pink.

Boyce and Harty's display at Mount Stuart provided an opportunity for them to showcase existing quilts, as well as to embark upon an ongoing participatory project with local communities and organisations across the island who were invited to make quilts from items of clothing that have a special resonance for them. Workshops in the conservatory, a beautiful light-filled space designed for star-gazing, offered opportunities for participants to share stories and skills while making their own quilts, inspired by particular places or landscapes. Participating local organisations include the Phoenix Centre, which provides services for adults with learning or physical disabilities or mental health problems. The resulting quilts, still works in progress, will be exhibited at Mount Stuart in spring 2022.

Participants also took inspiration from Boyce and Harty's work, in particular the pair's characteristic use of cherished materials and time-consuming techniques. Boyce studied quilting under master sewer Patricia Macindoe and the pair are influenced by both American and Japanese quilting techniques. Every aspect of the process is an act of care, both directly, in that the re-use of

clothing provides an ethical counterpoint to the disposability of fast fashion, and indirectly, with each piece of fabric embodying particular people, memories or relationships.

Mount Stuart is absurdly lavish, built for the third Marquess of Bute in the 1870s. For Boyce and Harty's previous solo exhibition, quilts were hung within the conventional white-cube space of Glasgow Print Studio. Here, by contrast, they were not hung like paintings but folded proprietorially over the backs of chairs or draped louchely from bed to carpeted floor. From dining room to smoking room, sprawled across a chaise-longue in the wonderful library and throughout multiple bedrooms, the pair's minimalist elegance contrasted dramatically with the mansion's high-Victorian maximalism.

In one bedroom, quilts occupied the space like the fur coats placed on the backs of chairs in Nicole Wermers' *Infrastruktur* (2015), similarly alluding to relationships between (absent) bodies, clothing and architectural space. Exhibited like this, each piece not only embodied the character of the fabric's former owners but started to take on a personality of its own.

One drawback was that, with most rooms partially roped-off, visitors could not get close enough to see Boyce and Harty's painstaking lines of stitching, the subtle textural contrasts of twill against poplin, or even the backs of the quilts, which are as beautiful as the fronts. For it is the detail in these works that speaks most strongly of time and care. Hopefully this will be foregrounded in the community showcase next spring. *Tom Jeffreys is an independent writer and editor*



Photos: Gharem / Adili; © the artist | Badri: Alex Younger | Datta: Keegan Castro | Khan: Rafay Anwer Creative Studio

Material resistance

Jameel Prize: Poetry to Politics | The Porter Gallery, V&A, London

18 September – 28 November 2021 | Reviewed by Shehnaz Suterwalla

The sixth edition of the Jameel Prize is an intimate and haunting exhibition of contemporary designers' engagement with their lived political realities expressed through materials. The prize, which is for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition, was founded by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2009 in partnership with Art Jameel, which supports artists and creative communities in the Middle East. This year's open call focused, for the first time, solely on design, though its boundaries are porous. The eight finalists

explore marginalisation, exclusion, body politics, memory and protest through textiles, installation, graphic design, fashion, typography and activism. While the designers span Iran, UAE, India, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, UK and Pakistan, they are threaded together by the ways in which they deploy their own stories to expose the impacts of global political events and discrimination, and deconstruct legacies of language, architecture and craft. In this exhibition, craft processes and material manipulations are acts of resistance and refusal. These are

designs that bear witness, that memorialise.

Golnar Adili (Iran) interrogates her family history through a spatial installation of the Persian letter *ye*, drawn out from her father's private letters to a lover. She abstracts the sculptural form of the letter by transferring its shape onto Japanese paper and mounting it onto archival board. The result is a scaffolded, three-dimensional repetition of the letter, supported by delicate stands along a horizontal plinth. The looping motifs are suggestive of lineage and connection, yet at the same time they obscure the alphabetic shape from its scripted purpose. Her craft becomes a rewriting that pays homage to Adili's father, who was exiled from Iran. The performativity of language, its slipperiness as symbol, is a theme echoed in the

graphic designs of Farah Fayyad (Lebanon). Fascinated by Arabic calligraphy, Fayyad has designed a contemporary Arabic typeface, *Kufur*, based on the historic Kufic script, to reimagine the notation's visual character through digital transformation. Fayyad has given her typographies political agency by printing them on clothes, free of charge and on the spot, during protests in Lebanon.

Ajlan Gharem (Saudi Arabia), this year's Jameel prize-winner, also challenges power structures, this time through architecture. He has built a cage-like mosque using chicken wire. The construction, first displayed in Riyadh, is deliberately transparent to demystify religiosity in the cultural imaginary of non-Muslims. Meanwhile, the wire is a comment on exclusion and racism, also recalling border walls



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and refugee detention centres, an allegorical reminder of how Muslim bodies are being engaged.

The activist work by Sofia Karim (UK) addresses Islamophobia and human rights abuses, too. She aims to create collective protest through paper samosa packets that she emblazons with images of protests from across the Indian subcontinent, as well as poems and messages of resistance. Her cone-like shapes were conceived to fill Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, until COVID cancelled the show.

The narrative of redressing the historical record, of making injustices visible, is central to this show and prize, and one that is justly centred. Our age of populism has created an extremism that perhaps only

poetry can tend to. Kallol Datta (India) responds to Islamophobic rhetoric in India with his experimental pattern-cutting, mining the shapes and silhouettes of outfits – the abaya, manteau, hanbok and hijab – to create sculptural, layered shapes that present clothing as both defence and also relief.

Jana Traboulsi (Lebanon) intervenes into political discourse by playing with the marginalia in Arabic manuscript production. She explores the physicality of the book and the process of bookmaking, as well as diacritics, sura markers, the index, and catchwords, in order to decentre texts. Meanwhile, materiality and form are rigorously and delicately handled in miniature garments by



Bushra Waqas Khan (Pakistan). The source of her patterns is affidavit paper, or oath paper, decorated with national emblems such as the star or crescent embedded in Islamic motifs. She transfers these onto textiles, which she cuts up and embroiders to create her extraordinarily detailed dresses, in this instance only 50cm tall. Here, paper represents officialdom, power, patriarchy and coloniality, which she splices apart and reforms.

Remaking history through crafting the unresolved, the unfinished, is indeed a political act in itself, one that reminds us that stories do not necessarily have neat endings; that trauma can be long standing, that memories linger. Hadeyeh Badri (UAE) creates textiles in memoriam to her beloved late aunt, incorporating texts taken from her diaries. She uses her aunt's language and handwriting as a motif, threading it through the textiles as a way to reconnect, to say things back to her. In Badri's weaves, the threads hang loosely, as though unfinished. The work is a personal monument that remains deliberately partial and under construction – perhaps so that the dialogue can continue. For Badri, weaving is the closest form of embrace, involving the whole body to unite gesture, memory and touch.

Given the current crises in the news, intersecting the emotional with the political is urgent and timely. One hopes that the poetic charge and political will of the Jameel Prize might break the hermetic seal of the V&A's colonial legacies, so that the protest and activism inherent in this show lets the winds of decolonial change in. *Shehnaz Suterwalla is a writer, curator, critic and cultural theorist*

Opposite: Ajlan Gharem, Paradise Has Many Gates – Daytime, 2015. Clockwise from top: Hadeyeh Badri, Prayer is My Mail, 2019; Kallol Datta, Shroud Volume 1 Issue 2, 2018; Golnar Adili, Ye Harvest from the 11-page Letter, 2016; Bushra Waqas Khan, Untitled, 2019

Soul-stirring ceramics

Theaster Gates: *A Clay Sermon* | Whitechapel Gallery, London

29 September 2021 – 9 January 2022 | Reviewed by Isabella Smith

'O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.' These rousing words from the Bible (Isaiah 64:8) are an unexpected starting point for an exhibition in a white cube, but they set a suitably reverential tone for *A Clay Sermon* at the Whitechapel Gallery. Here, the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates – best-known for his boundary-defying work encompassing social practice, urban regeneration, installation, sound and performance – returns to the medium that first stirred his soul as a young man.

Gates took up pottery as an undergraduate at Iowa State University where he studied Urban Planning and Ceramics, beginning his career working in the latter. His focus later switched to urban regeneration – in 2009, he started the Rebuild Foundation to restore and convert derelict buildings into cultural spaces and homes for under-resourced communities in South Side Chicago. In a TED Talk titled *How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art*, Gates explained the connection he saw between potting and this

progressive social practice: 'I spent about 15 years making pots [...] you very quickly learn how to make great things out of nothing. I feel like as a potter, you also start to learn how to shape the world.'

The Whitechapel show is part of a multi-institution project by Gates in London called *The Question of Clay*, that will see him investigating the making, labour and production of ceramics through exhibitions and interventions in 2021-22 (also spanning the V&A and Serpentine Galleries). He begins this one – and, by extension, the series of collaborations – by creating context for his clay-based work.

Four vitrines showcase aspects of global ceramic history that have been important to Gates' wide-ranging practice. The first features historic pottery from Japan, Iran, China and Korea, loaned from the V&A, where he has been working as an Emeritus Fellow, researching eastern and western aesthetic practices and political histories within craft. Dotted among them, Gates' own early efforts blend in seamlessly. These are wonderfully rugged, high-fired stoneware pots in the vernacular of the anagama kiln – textured fly ash, coloured

flashing and all – that show the enduring influence of Japan's craft cultures on Gates' career. Here, it's *wabi-cha*: the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic of the tea ceremony. Wall texts explain that Gates, when beginning his work as a potter, 'lacked Black role models in ceramics' and found kinship instead in the Mingei folk craft tradition of Japan, spending a year studying pottery in Tokoname. Later, he was to term his hybrid style 'Afro-Mingei'. A delightful dresser transplanted from Gates' Chicago studio brims with *shibori* fabrics and antique tea bowls, giving us taste of this Japanophilia.

Nearby, another vitrine displays ceramics chosen for their links to colonialism and slavery. Most are vile knick-knacks – think racist figurines of Black children eating watermelon or Black 'mammy'-shaped cookie jars. An 1862 storage pot incised with the name of enslaved potter David Drake is made all the more moving when one considers that literacy was then illegal among enslaved people. Another vitrine shows the 20th-century western greats who influenced Gates – Bernard Leach, Ladi Kwali, Michael Cardew, Lucie Rie *et al* – while the final showcase, featuring work by artists such as Paul Soldner and Gates' former teachers Ingrid Lilligren and Nystrom, is more abstract and sculptural. Nearby, a huge pot by Peter Voulkos sits next to Gates' own Voulkos-inspired colossus.

Elsewhere, stacks of bricks form sculptures that give a twist to the stark visual language of minimalism: each brick was made by hand using a 1934 press, shown nearby. The use of bricks represents a nod back to his work in urban development. The son of a roofer, Gates has long harnessed workaday materials in his practice,



Gates has long harnessed workaday materials in his practice, most notably roofing tar, used on some vessels in place of glaze



Installation photos: Theo Christells, courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London

Clockwise from far left: a vitrine of ceramics related to slavery; the upstairs gallery; a scene from the film *A Clay Sermon*

most notably roofing tar, used on some vessels in place of glaze.

Upstairs, the titular film features that same brick press in use, glistening brown clay oozing out as each brick is formed. *A Clay Sermon* brings us back to religion: a recurring preoccupation for Gates, which he studied at MA level alongside fine art. This collage-like film sees the artist roaming an abandoned brick factory wearing a cassock-like coat, interspersed with archival footage of Black Americans singing gospel songs or speaking in tongues. Music plays a prominent role in much of his work, and is uppermost here. Old footage shows Gates throwing pots to the beat of a drummer, while a soundtrack by his band, the Black Monks, draws inspiration from blues and gospel traditions with lyrics that, improbably enough, span from faith to firings. Lines such as 'I went to Mino and got some oribe' and 'Got some oribe, shino – all those greens and yellows' pair with religious sentiments: 'Make me pure, I'm your humble vessel.' It could be – perhaps should be? – somewhat silly. Instead, it's downright beautiful.

In the final gallery, we see the full flourishing of Gates' Afro-Mingei style, as if the didactic displays in the lower gallery were preparing us for appreciation of his ceramic art. The space is filled by clay sculptures, chairs and vessels in a restrained palette of greys and browns. Most notable among them are experimental *Brick Reliquaries* (2020), in which he fired bricks with a high manganese content to over 1,200°C, causing them to slump and fuse. These ceramics are intriguing, though not nearly as memorable as the film, undoubtedly the star of this remarkable, must-see show.

'In the beginning was clay,' Gates intones over the soundtrack, 'and clay was without form.' Witnessing the worlds that he crafts is pure pleasure. *Isabella Smith is assistant editor of Crafts*

