

The colourful craft of Francis Upritchard

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Installation view of 'Wetwang Slack', Barbican Centre, London, 2018. Photo: Angus Mill

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The art world is, it's fair to say, increasingly preoccupied with craft. From Anni Albers'

exhibition of weaving at Tate Modern to ‘The most real thing: contemporary textiles and sculpture’ at the New Art Centre in Salisbury, exhibitions that reflect this interest are on the rise. As such, the Barbican’s latest commission for The Curve is a canny choice. New Zealand-born artist Francis Upritchard is renowned for drawing from **craft traditions**, and her installation ‘**Wetwang Slack**’ is **no exception**.

This is seen in the “Wetwang Slack” because as her work transgresses forward she changes her technique by using clay. Consequently, this makes her work seem to be aging backward. She may have differentiated her technique to show the regression in time.

Contrasting with the building’s Brutalist architecture, Upritchard has filled the curving space with dozens of handmade objects in a **rainbow palette of hues**.

Young, vibrant- hippy – reference to the 1960’s

Visitors are met by a procession of figures sculpted in **polymer clay** and clad in **colourful textiles**.

There’s a **blue-skinned man with three arms** and **four legs**, and figures of **uncertain gender**.

sculptures suggest a combination of the living and the unknown because these sculptures which I assume are creatures are not boxed as being human. They contain human characteristics and dress as if they were humans but if they were to be humans would it not have a gender but at the same time being human suggests there is a spectrum, so she could be using her figures to touch on sexuality, sex and gender.

and showcasing how a being or sculpture could be genderless. This is also, shown as her

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and ethnicity bedecked in ornamented tunics. It's a cross-cultural smorgasbord of hippyish

Her work is open minded, leaving the audience to guess where the sculpture is from, where by it India(many hands- in relation to Hindu god's) or New Zealand due to the clothing(Aztec signs?).

characters; one, titled New Life (2018), wears a badge on its mustard-coloured garments that reads 'The Museum of Cosmic Consciousness, Fenberger House Visitor'. Some sneer cynically, others smile beatifically – it's unclear if this is celebration or satire. Paul Thek's sculptural effigy The Tomb – Death of a Hippie (1967) is a clear precedent, but the tragicomic tone of Thek's death-knell for counterculture is missing in Upritchard's more decorative works.

Because of the emotion they portray



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Uses skin colour to make them appear human.
Reference to the word "tone" as if to say they have been sunbathing on the beach.

The influence of Thek continues with a parade of deformed, brown-toned hands and fingers akin to his grisly wax sculptures of body parts. Laid out on a table like archaeological finds, Upritchard's are reminiscent of ancient remains discovered in peat bogs or the relics of saints.

As her piece progresses, you can see the clay is sandy and dusty. To make them appear ancient and old—as if they have been dug up and been preserved to maintain their aesthetic.

Combining beliefs in religions? These are objects said to be "left" behind and this notion form an important aspect in religions such as: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Shamanism and other religions.



May be preserving them so they do not rot or wither away. Ironic because they are actually not old but the material makes it appear as if it is old and worn out. Ready to decay.

Nearby is a wall-mounted **glass cabinet** that recalls a musty museum display. Rather than faded fragments, however, it is filled with cod-historical bangles, chalices and **absurd opaque sunglasses**, all rendered in **neon polymer clay**. Next comes shelving filled with undersized hats and some vitrines filled with wobbly glassware – **tangerine-coloured bottles painted**

Contrast in colour may symbolise a contrast in time.

with **sea life** and centaurs, which recall **Graeco-Roman** finds – and pots that borrow from various ceramic traditions. Tall Brown Urn (2018) is **reminiscent of 16th-century** German salt-glaze Bartmann jugs, for instance, while **Tenmoku Jar (2018)** uses a glaze key to the **Japanese pottery tradition**. These would be serious pots, if it weren't for the incised and modelled face on each. It's like visiting the **British Museum** on acid: both **hallucinatory** and **museological**.



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That the installation's name is borrowed from an archaeological site in Yorkshire indicates Upritchard's fascination with how **societies** explore their **histories**.

Interesting because she is focusing on more than one culture

But if there's a response here to our **relationship** with **artefacts**, it's little more than a playful, **David Shrigley-esque** smile. Unlike Upritchard's early **grotesque** sculptures of the **shrunk heads** of **white colonials**, which through an **antagonistic reversal** of roles

contributed to debates around the return of Māori preserved heads (mokomokai) to New Zealand, there's nothing critical to be found. Instead, 'Wetwang Slack' feels like a joyful celebration of the comparatively non-hierarchical nature of craft, open to experts and have-a-go hobbyists alike. Take for instance Upritchard's choice of polymer clay, which she sculpts over wire armatures and then paints. They are skilfully modelled, bearing realistic details such as lined eyes and chipped nails.

However, the material is one scorned by professional ceramic artists – it is in fact a plastic, and contains no clay at all. There's a gleefully liberal use of appliquéd patches with diamanté eyes, the Do-It-Yourself ornaments covering clothing and hats alike. A cushion-strewn nook titled Cosy Spot (2018) features naïve watercolours of motifs seen elsewhere. Wobbly yet confident, they resemble the offerings of a proud amateur. But if Upritchard here is aiming to blur the lines between contemporary art and craft, then why is no acknowledgement made, in the exhibition texts, of her collaborations with craftspeople? These skilled fabricators include the furniture

designer (and Upritchard's husband) Martino Gamper, responsible for the shelving and plinths, and glassmaker Jochen Holz.



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The exception is Darlindo José de Oliveira Pinto, the master of balata (Brazilian wild rubber) who taught Upritchard his craft. Upritchard uses the skin-like material for relief sculptures of centaurs inspired by the Parthenon friezes, and impressive **free-standing sculptures** of the Japanese folklore characters Ashinaga-tenaga. Of this pair, the myth goes, one had very long legs and the other long arms: with teamwork,

they were able to thrive. Theirs is a story celebrating mutually beneficial working relationships. It's not too far a stretch to say there's a similarly rewarding exchange taking place between the worlds of contemporary art and craft. In the future, let's hope we'll get see the exchange explored even further.