

# ART REVIEW

## Authenticity, Craftsmanship, and Character in the Artworks of Grayson Perry

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In this review, we use the experience of visiting leading artist Grayson Perry's retrospective *Smash Hits* exhibition, at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh, UK, as a moment for reflection and as a challenge to the disenchantment of the world, narrowed by a definition of rationality that we can "master all things by calculation," and that "there are no incalculable mysterious forces" (Weber 1981, 141). *Smash Hits* enacts a coming together to marvel at a rare blend of craftsmanship, design, imagination, the unconscious, and echoes of spirituality through the ages. It challenges us to think about how we let these elements into our own ways of thinking, doing and being, if indeed we do. And if not, what might be the price of excluding them?

### AUTHENTICITY, CRAFTSMANSHIP, AND CHARACTER

Walking through Perry's exhibition is a form of pilgrimage, and an invitation to reflect on his different versions of what it means to be human, expressed through the artist's delight in craftsmanship, and his celebration of work as joyful creation. Central to this overarching theme is *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (see Figure 1), representing all the anonymous individuals, stretching back to the beginnings of time, who have expressed their humanity through the objects that they have made. Here, Perry's imagination brings into existence "an imaginary civilization that offers a mirror to the world, and hints in various ways at the links that bind humanity together" (Perry 2011, 7). He celebrates technical skill, whilst reminding us that we do not have to choose between rationality and humanity. In relation to business ethics, this gives us pause for thought about the effects of business, too often portrayed as a vision of a world of isolated individuals and corporations in competition with each other, driving humanity apart, rather than collaborating to address wicked problems.

Perry's vision is both synoptic and inclusive, playfully engaging with the profound themes of capitalism, gender, sexuality, social class, and religion, whilst at the same time "preaching the virtues of education and tolerance" (Perry 2011, 15). It is



**Figure 1:** *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, 2011

*Note.* Photograph used with permission of the artist and Victoria Miro.

done via Perry's personal artistic journey that probes personal, social, cultural identity, and meaning. He investigates what matters to people (Sayer 2011), juxtaposing the aspirations of art against a contemporary morality of consumerism, greed, and conspicuous consumption, embracing the theme of social justice (Figure 2) in a stratified class system, and where social mobility can only work materially (*We Are What We Buy*, Figure 3), and not culturally. Perry depicts a world out of balance, fueled by "casino capitalism" (Perry et al. 2023, 93) (Figure 4). The etching of *Our Town* is a map of Little England, "hooked on social media," with the district of Sincerity as an innocent, and vulnerable small island. Yet, he emphasizes the importance of authenticity and character, declaring "I am an artist first, not an activist," and "I never question my sincerity. I believe in everything that I make" (Perry et al. 2023, 21, 16). This sense of an authentic moral character through craftsmanship, and not corner-cutting in order to make a quick profit, is central to the contribution that can be made by business ethics, and business ethics research, in



**Figure 2: Selfie with Political Causes, 2018**

*Note.* Photograph used with permission of the artist and Victoria Miro.

a higher education system where a reported 15.7 percent of UK higher education graduates admitted to cheating using essay mills, presenting others' work as their own (BBC 2021).

Perry's own dedication to his craftsmanship is reflected in his espoused values of "tradition, mischief and learning on the job" (Perry et al. 2023, 116). The mischief element is apparent in his iconoclasm and humor, through which Perry encourages the viewer to challenge their experiences. But it is also connected to his transvestism, which is key to Perry's own sense of his authenticity, and personal identity. Through his art, and presentation of himself, Perry is arguing against what he regards as a dearth of authenticity in our contemporary world of artifice, and in so doing, he makes a case for the acceptance of diversity. We are reminded that art, according to Taylor (1991: 89) in his analysis of the ethics of authenticity, "is trying to tell us something about our predicament, about the relation of the living to the dead, about human frailty, and the power of transfiguration." It also helps us challenge "illusory and fictitious claims" (MacIntyre 1985: 73). Perry's work is a prime, contemporary example of this.

#### REFLECTING ON IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS ETHICS AND BUSINESS ETHICS RESEARCH

We have seen a growing call for a reinvention of management education (Casey 2012), and for the inclusion of liberal arts teaching and learning, within business schools (Parker, Stoborod, and Swann 2020; Stayaert, Beyes, and Parker 2016).



**Figure 3:** *We Are What We Buy*, 2000

*Note.* Photograph used with permission of the artist and Victoria Miro.

Sullivan et al. (2011) posed the question: “What is the nature of management, and what do we want it to be?,” arguing that management education needs to become more interdisciplinary, to open up spaces for students: “to engage with questions of personal meaning, value, and commitment,” if they are to become better leaders (Sullivan et al. 2011, 79). The main barrier to this is the dominant technical model of business, oversimplifying a world that is characterized by “complexity ... uncertainty, moral ambiguities, and conflicts of values” (Sullivan et al. 2011, 47). Five years later, and following the financial crash of 2007/8, these researchers argued more fervently for liberal learning, in the cultivation of deliberation and critical thinking; calling for “the development of humanistic education to engage the problems of our time” (Sullivan, Ehrlich, and Colby 2016, 34). This would entail learning in the service of “an empathetic understanding of others” (Sullivan, Ehrlich, and Colby 2016, 33), and a personal ethical concern, that is based upon accepting responsibility for the impact of workplace decision making (Sullivan, Ehrlich, and





**Figure 4:** *The American Dream*, 2020

*Note.* Photograph used with permission of the artist and Victoria Miro.

Colby 2016, 32). Moreover, research into “transformative management education” (Landfester and Metelmann 2019) found a wide range of exemplary approaches, but also a common concern regarding the necessity for business engagement with the humanities and the social sciences, to help tackle “the wicked problem of how to create public value” (Landfester and Metelmann 2019, 19). We agree, and Perry’s work helps us to see that research and teaching in the service of moral character is still in very short supply.

Indeed, Perry’s art forcefully reminded us that “the concept of morals is still conspicuously missing from academic discourse” (Landfester and Metelmann 2019, 5), with business ethics remaining marginalized in many business schools. And whilst *Smash Hits* demonstrates that authenticity and sincerity have their roots in our sense of who we are as individuals, for us, it underscored the necessity for a wider understanding of virtue ethics and virtuous character, beginning with self-awareness and self-understanding (Hartman 1998)—in the development of a stable and enduring character—as opposed to occasional, or even artificial virtue (Alzola 2012).<sup>1</sup> Even though being “authentically virtuous” is “not easily achievable ... in liquid modernity” (Strahovnik 2011, 75), an enduring sense of personal responsibility represents the moral compass that is so vital in navigating the “moral mazes” prevalent in organizational decision-making (Jackall 1988), and it enables the “entrepreneurial discretion” to make moral choices within structural constraints (Hemingway and MacLagan 2004, 39; see also, Hemingway 2013, chapter 8).

Art, and the humanities more broadly, challenge us to ask “What is virtuous?” So, in designing virtue ethics (MacIntyre 1985) into the practice of management, and management education, we could reimagine the business school as more than “a machine whose activities are to be understood as transforming input into measurable

<sup>1</sup> “Situational factors explain aggregate behaviors. Individual differences explain variations within the aggregate” (Alzola 2012, 393).

output” (Dunne 2002, 4). But business ethics is too often seen as a curriculum bolt-on approach (Hemingway 2019), rather than something integral to thinking about management, in a context where “disciplinary boundaries are closely protected” (see Hemingway 2019; Landfester and Metelmann 2019, 21). Now, it seems to us, that there is an even more pressing need for foregrounding business ethics, and business ethics research, as mainstream. Not least, because instrumentalism within universities has become more extreme (the exponential growth of business schools is a graphic illustration of this), and far too many students have become alienated from their study, to the point where we suggest that the psychological contract (Rousseau 1998) between universities, and many of their students, is broken (see also Itzkovich 2021).

Perry’s *Smash Hits* shines as a beacon of hope and optimism: intellectually, socially, and economically, in a world experiencing an “age of fracture” (Rodgers 2011). Perry makes us think about what is relevant, speaking to our moral conscience, and to questions of our common humanity. His work also questions our history. For example, in the form of the fruits of empire, to stimulate reflection on the relationship between the now, and what might be. It shows how past and future are inextricably interconnected, and what deserves to last in our consciousness and in our artefacts. *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (Figure 1) is a visual pun: a ship that celebrates the contributions of unknown artisans, the pleasure of creation, and self-expression through authentic craft, and the heritage of those who have built our physical world. It is also a critical, ironic statement about the journey the West has made, from craft to the offshoring of production, to low wage countries with—too often—dubious working practices. But, for all its subtle ironies, and playful deconstruction of the accepted narratives of the past; *Smash Hits* provides an exemplary, as well as critical, expression of what it means to embrace ethics, and the art of being together. As business ethicists, it pushes us to focus on virtue and good character, in the overdue resetting of business schools.

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