

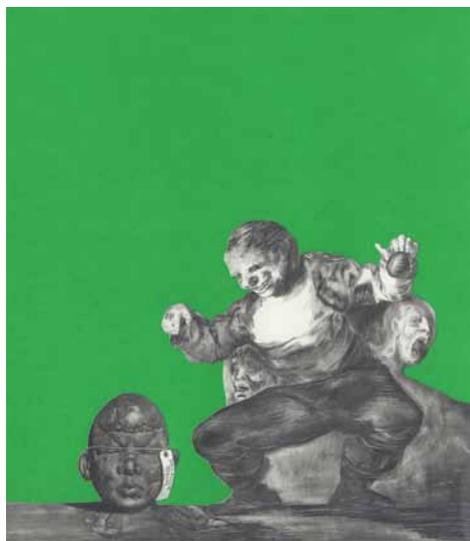
# Peace at last!

## A response by Kate Davis to Glasgow Museums' Collection

*'We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically. As active participants and real subjects, we can make history only when we are continually critical of our very lives.'*

Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, 1985

The exhibition *Peace at last!* was created specially for the Gallery of Modern Art, taking a personal response to Glasgow Museums' Collection as the starting point for a new body of artwork. Etchings by Francisco de Goya, photographs by Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, and commercially printed material related to Christabel Pankhurst and other suffragettes were among the museum objects and artworks that were influential in this process, and I have chosen to exhibit some of them alongside my own work.



The works on display were made over a period of almost 200 years and differ greatly in their content – and museum classification – but they all share a commitment to challenging the contentious politics of their time. In my own work and particularly through this installation, I am seeking to readdress those historical turning points and offer alternative readings of them.

The exhibition title *Peace at last!* refers to the text on an anti-suffrage postcard included in this exhibition and alludes to readings of the museum as a resting place or cemetery for objects. I am interested in the contradiction that the exclamation mark could imply. How can we rethink and reactivate the archive? And unpick assumed histories? *Peace at last!* is the first time that such critical but contrasting works have been viewed together. Significantly, here in the context of this exhibition, they become part of a contemporary conversation which they have inspired and continue to nurture.

Working across a range of media, including drawing, printmaking, installation and film, my practice is informed by feminist art and theory, and focuses on questioning the politics of representation in 20th-century art and literature. In this exhibition I am asking how we can operate as the 'subjects of history' that Paulo Freire proposes above, by claiming the past, and our readings of it, as an ongoing process of imagining and re-remembering. *Peace at last!* invites us to encounter the museum as an agency for change and to reconstruct new narratives and understandings of history today.

Kate Davis, 2011

*Peace at last! (Bobalicon)*, Kate Davis, 2011.  
Courtesy of Sorcha Dallas and the artist.

## Works in Room 1

**The Disparates** by Francisco de Goya

The earliest works in this exhibition are by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and are part of his last great series of etchings, *The Disparates*. At his death, Goya left no completed edition of these prints to indicate intended titles or sequence, though a few working proofs survive, some with captions beginning with the word 'disparate' ('folly'). The unsettling scenes in this series are suggestive of anarchic emotional and psychological states, teetering between a macabre deathliness and absurd animation. Goya created these etchings in about 1816, when he was in his seventies, following deafness and several serious illnesses. These prints were published posthumously: it is thought that their satirical nature made them unsafe for publication earlier.

**Strange Folly (Disparate Ridiculo)** by Francisco de Goya

This work depicts a group of cloaked figures perched on the branches of a dead tree, presided over by one of their company who appears to be lecturing them. The fantastical scene could be viewed as a satire on the aristocracy and their need to cling to a family tree.

**People in Sacks** by Francisco de Goya

This work has also been titled 'Aristocrats' in some museum collections. It presents an awkward queue of wrapped figures. Only their heads are visible above elaborate ruffs, suggesting, perhaps, the vanity and ineffectiveness of the aristocrats of Goya's day.

**No Vote, No Census**, photographer unknown

The shrouded figures on this postcard bear a visual similarity to the community of tree dwellers illustrated in the print *Strange Folly*. Yet, unlike Goya's troubled imagining, this photographic print captures a real historical moment: a gathering of women who were supporting the suffragettes' campaign by refusing to participate in the 1911 census. However, as with Goya's *The Disparates*, little definitive information about the image exists: it

is unclear who was responsible for publishing it, why they chose to do so, or even where this gathering took place.

**Peace at last!**, artist unknown

During the campaign for votes for women in the early 20th century, postcards were utilised to encourage anti-suffrage views. Aggressive anti-suffrage iconography reflected a deep-seated hatred of women who dared to speak out; a nail through the tongue was a recurring theme. This postcard is one of many caricatures intended to demean and ridicule the suffragettes and their cause. Again, little contextual information about this piece remains.

**Reversibility (clocks)** by Kate Davis

This work utilises an image of faceless grandfather clocks in storage at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC). The line-up of clock cases strapped to the wall reminded the artist of the procession of bound figures in Goya's *People in Sacks*. Davis was also drawn to the dysfunctional clock shells as a striking metaphor for timelessness, in which our mechanisms for linear or chronological readings of history are rendered redundant. The holes in the image provided a way for the artist to exaggerate that futility and point to a puncturing of time. Her use of the term 'reversibility' is derived from a conversation with Stephanie de Roemer, Glasgow Museums' Assistant Conservator for Sculpture. De Roemer described her conservation work as needing to employ reversibility so that any object she works on could be returned to previous conditions in its history, according to the context in which it is to be viewed.

**Reversibility (Welliflex Camera with HB versions)** by Kate Davis

This is Davis's response to an image of a home-made camera that the British artist Terry Dennett (born 1938) created as part of a series of Children's Photo Workshops that he ran at the South Island Workshop, Lambeth, London, in 1975. The project was continued

with the help of Jo Spence (1934–92), as part of the Photography Workshop Mobile Photo Darkroom Project, which was carried out at adventure playgrounds. Davis is interested in the way in which Dennett and Spence recognised that all images carry ideological messages (which cumulatively help shape people's ideas, values and attitudes), and were committed to questioning who controls the means of production and reproduction of

## Works in Room 2

**Reversibility (It is the body and Excised)** by Kate Davis

Davis's *Reversibility (It is the body and Excised)* presents us with a steel structure that intersects the gallery space and acts as a support for a large framed photograph. The photograph is an enlarged image of an intensively worked photorealist drawing by Davis, which in turn depicts two photographic works by Jo Spence (in collaboration with Terry Dennett and Dr Tim Sheard respectively). Spence's works are shown as Davis found them, suspended on a metal rack in a store at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre; the steel support here is reminiscent of the metal storage structures seen in the drawing.

The two works by Spence are *It is the body* (made with Terry Dennett in 1981) and *Excised* (made with Dr Tim Sheard in 1990). *It is the body* presents us with the text 'The Body is the Hero' printed across Spence's breasts as she looks directly forwards towards the viewer. This photograph was made one year before Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer, which gives an added poignancy to our reading of the work and its discussion of the body today. *Excised* is from a group of five photographs that form the *Narratives of Dis-ease* series. These works were made following Spence's hospitalisation with breast cancer and during her *Remodelling Medical History* project. Both *It is the body* and *Excised* demonstrate Spence's courageous

images. By enabling people to take images of their personal world – through cameras in utilitarian objects, such as a wellington boot – that which is often absent or customarily ignored could be recorded and reassessed. By trading Dennett's camera lens for a pencil Davis asks how drawing could be a relevant means of helping us understand and appreciate that which may be marginalised or overlooked today.

ability to treat herself as the 'subject of history' that Paulo Freire describes, and to articulate and visualise painful experiences, problems and feelings of shame that previously had no place in personal (and often public) photography.

*'If we train ourselves to 'see' differently, visual markers of various rites of passage which are socially tabooed within the family album can be made: for example, divorce, illness and death; undervalued everyday events such as signing on for the dole, childcare, schooling, housework, visiting the doctor.'*

Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, 1995

In this work, as elsewhere in the exhibition, photography and drawing are brought into close relation, and both are questioned as techniques for representing, and caring for, the past. Spence often asked who owned images, and especially images of the body. Davis reinstates such questioning here by treating Spence's work as the subject or body, and Glasgow Museums' store as the subject's stage. By rendering this scene meticulously in pencil, Davis makes us acutely aware of the labour invested in the creation of this image; we are invited to reconsider the significance of this subject in a context which is normally hidden from view. How might the museum's public and private framework continue to inform Spence's work and vice versa?

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The drawing is returned to Spence's own idiom of photography, and just as the fine detail of Goya's etchings require us to closely inspect his exquisitely delicate and inventive use of line, *Reversibility (It is the body and Excised)* magnifies the tender intricacy of Davis's drawing. By highlighting the transition from photography to drawing and back to photography, Davis emphasises this scene as a new 'visual marker' and we are invited to look closely and 'see' the subject again and anew.

## **Feminine Foolishness (Disparate Feminino)** by Francisco de Goya

*Feminine Foolishness* portrays a circle of women tossing two small figures – which could be dolls, babies or mannequins – in a blanket on which we can just perceive the outline of a donkey. Davis was drawn to the ambiguous merriment of the female participants, their blithe expressions implying a complicity in their perverse action and echoing the portrayal of woman as fool or liability that we see in the anti-suffrage postcard *Peace at last!*

## The Women's Suffrage Movement

In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) and her daughters Christabel (1880–1958) and Sylvia (1882–1960) founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The campaign for women's suffrage – the right to vote in parliamentary elections – was a critical social issue in the early 20th century. Getting the vote was key to having a say in the government of the country, developing policy and changing domestic and public life for women.

WSPU tactics, and especially those of the succeeding National Women's Social and Political Union (NWSPU), were vocal and visible: disrupting political meetings, creating public disorder and even sometimes attacking property. Some women did not support these militant tactics and groups such as the Women's Freedom League used civil disobedience, such as not paying taxes, to get their message across.

## Works in Room 3

### **The Militant Methods of the NWSPU** by Christabel Pankhurst and **Reversibility (Militant Methods)** by Kate Davis

*The Militant Methods of the NWSPU* is a transcription of a speech made by Christabel Pankhurst in 1908, which detailed the NWSPU's need for, and use of, a militant approach to their endeavours. Davis discovered this small pamphlet in one of Glasgow Museums' archives and was startled by its damaged state and the fact that the portrait of Christabel Pankhurst printed on its cover had been defaced and her features somewhat eradicated.

The pamphlet is displayed here open at the first page, its damaged cover concealed from view.

The vandalism of the pamphlet can only be detected through a hole that has penetrated both sides of the cover, and through Davis's work *Reversibility (Militant Methods)*, which presents us with an enlarged version of the pamphlet's cover. Here we can see the artist's attempt to capture in a drawing every detail of Christabel Pankhurst's defaced portrait. This tender yet disturbing reclamation is framed by the text from the pamphlet's cover (in its original font and layout) and displayed as a large-scale poster. Again, we are invited to review a historical point of conflict and to reassess the complexities of our understanding of that history today, through the object that has born witness to that history and continues to do so.

## **Metamorphosis** by Jo Spence in collaboration with Terry Dennett

This is an incredibly moving and poignant portrait using photographs of Jo Spence taken by Terry Dennett shortly after Spence's death in 1992. To create the work, Dennett followed the detailed instructions Spence had given him before she died. Powerfully illustrating the work's title, Spence's mirrored face begins to merge and create the impression of returning to a womb-like form, emphasising our sense of the cycle of life and death and pointing to the fact that Spence's work and image will continue to 'live' beyond her own death. Dennett is the curator of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive. It was founded after Spence died, to promote her work and ideas worldwide.

## Acknowledgements

Robert Ferguson (Group Manager, Glasgow & West, for the National Trust for Scotland), provided the basis for the commentary on Goya's *The Disparates*.

Fiona Hayes, Social History Curator, Glasgow Museums, provided the basis for the description of the women's suffrage movement.

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Text © Kate Davis and Culture and Sport Glasgow (Glasgow Museums) 2011



Front cover: Detail of *Reversibility (Welliflex Camera with HB versions)*, Kate Davis, 2011. Courtesy Sorcha Dallas and the artist. Photo © Kendall Koppe

## **Peace at last! (Bobalicon)** by Kate Davis

The final work in the exhibition, *Peace at last! (Bobalicon)*, brings together an image of a sculptural bust in storage at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre and a foreboding figure taken from an etching in Goya's *The Disparates* series, *Big Booby (Bobalicon)*. Returning us to the title of the exhibition, we witness the imagined meeting of two works from Glasgow Museums' Collection and the suggestion of two points in time converging. Animated in an ambiguous landscape, they appear haunted by each other and allude to a ghostly preservation. Could this in-between space represent a 'living archive'? *Peace at last!*?

## Events

Book on 0141 287 3050 or [GoMAbookings@glasgowlife.org.uk](mailto:GoMAbookings@glasgowlife.org.uk)

Thursday 28 July  
**Artist's talk from Kate Davis**  
6.15pm, FREE, please book

Thursday 11 August  
**Conservation/Conversation: Working with Witnesses from the Past**  
6.15pm, FREE, please book  
A talk from Stephanie de Roemer, Glasgow Museums' Assistant Conservator for Sculpture.

Saturday 20 August  
**Workshop with Terry Dennett**  
11.00am–4.00pm, FREE, please book  
*Peace at last!* includes work by Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, who collaborated for a number of years. In this event Dennett leads a photography-based workshop using a range of the techniques that they pioneered.

Sorcha Dallas