

“Shopping Trolleys Are Great Metaphors”: Susan Stockwell Unpacks the Hidden Histories of Warrington Museum

INTRODUCTION

Museums have long told the story of Britain’s rapid industrialisation, which transformed places like Warrington. Until now few have looked in-depth at the links between that industrialisation and our colonisation of vast parts of the world.

Susan Stockwell is a Manchester-born, London-based artist who grew up surrounded by the legacy of the North East of England’s wealth - and poverty - created in the 19th century. As an artist with a long-standing interest in history, she asks questions about our past rather than point a finger of blame.

Susan, a graduate of the Royal College of Art, has created new works in response to the world of objects on display at the Warrington Museum. She calls them a “world of worlds,” featuring shopping trolleys crammed with globes, cotton reels and an array of merchandise. She was also drawn in particular to the wealth of Native American artefacts in the museum’s ethnography room, asking how did they end up in Warrington and what stories can they tell?

Many artists are interested in materials, but you’re particularly interested in the history behind them. Warrington became wealthy making all sorts of things in after the Industrial Revolution, including wire. How did its past shape your work at the museum?

The fascinating thing for me about the Warrington Museum, apart from the fact that it’s still a cabinet-of-curiosities museum, almost as it was in Victorian times, is that it features many materials of the Empire, things that passed through Warrington, because of its geographical position on the Mersey between Liverpool and Manchester. It is famous for its pin making, wire, soap, chemicals, leather, textiles and glass. It was a small sleepy town that grew massively during industrialisation.

To go back a step, how did your exhibition come about?

The show, which is called “Hidden Histories, Untold Stories,” evolved out of a project Arts and Heritage set up called “Meeting Point”. Their raison d’être is to bring artists and heritage sites together to create fresh perspectives and enable audiences to find their own stories. As an artist I can bring my imagination and a fresh view to the collection, helping viewers to make imaginative connections and to see different perspectives on the objects and their stories. For example, Warrington’s ethnographic room is quite problematic. It still has a very Eurocentric, almost colonial presentation, which is outdated now. The museum has made changes, but it hasn’t had the funds or the staff to fully reframe its collection, or to decolonise it.

Museums across Britain and in Europe are wrestling with how to do that. How to redisplay objects with dark histories. The British Museum has a new trail linking imperialism with its collections, for example. What can artists bring to this change?

I think that a lot of museums have to accept that they have to change. We all do. We all have to accept and address our past and we need to take responsibility for it before we can move forward. Museums in particular seem to find that difficult. You can understand it because they are the gatekeepers of all these possessions, some of which, you could argue, have been stolen in very brutal and violent ways.

I see Warrington has got among its African art a Benin bronze, which was plundered by the British in 1897.

The British Empire has a brutal history. We are very good at keeping it offshore. Museums here are just beginning to acknowledge that. I worked on a commission with [Amsterdam's] Tropenmuseum, which was really fascinating. Dutch museums seem to be ahead of us in some respects.

An increasing number of curators are interested in this, but how did members of the public react when you raised the darker sides of our national history?

Not many members of the public came to the talk and tour we organised but the ones that did were really engaged and had great takes on it. The thing that came out of it was that the stories of the objects and the people who made, originally owned and used the objects, particularly in the ethnography gallery, are often missing.

It's difficult, because it takes an enormous amount of time to research the stories. The curators probably haven't got the funding to do it on a big scale. I can't do that in my moment as an artist with Warrington, but I can take a few objects out of the cabinets in the ethnography gallery and put them in the art gallery and other rooms and then tell something more of their untold stories.

Museums are typically collections of collections. Is that why you are adding your own as well as co-opting things in Warrington's glass cabinets?

The thing that struck me when I was thinking how I could deal with this delicate and difficult subject was that I'm not a historian. I'm not a curator. I'm an artist, so I can only come with my imagination, and a fascination with history and politics. I started to question the whole idea of collections. There were guys going off to far flung corners of the globe, intrepid explorers, bringing stuff back from the colonies. The objects often didn't speak for themselves. There is a big gap. I can't fill it but maybe I can question it, and challenge it, or draw attention to it, so hopefully the visitors can ask questions and make imaginative connections of their own and go deeper.

How do the shopping trolleys filled with stuff fit help with this story?

I had an old shopping trolley knocking around the studio, which I filled with cotton bobbins that I found in an old mill called Quarry Bank Mill, just outside Manchester. I brought 600 of them, really beautiful objects with the cotton still on them.

I was thinking about what I could do with them, possibly a string piece going across the gallery, but it was over complicated. There were restrictions, it's not a white-cube space. So, I thought what can I do that isn't going to be too disruptive. Thankfully, I chose a simpler solution as now with Covid restrictions the use of the space is more

restricted. I decided to simply place the bobbins in the shopping trolley and that worked.

This solution also tells the story of the history of cotton, it's part in the triangle with slavery, and links to India. There was a quote I remembered that inspired me: "Britain's bread hangs by Lancashire's Thread." A huge amount of money was made by the cotton industry, including in Warrington. I thought if I put those two materials together, the shopping trolley and the bobbins, it tells a more contemporary story about fast fashion. Now cotton is made in whatever country has the cheapest labour, China more recently. That behaviour can be traced back to colonial behaviour. It's capitalism that's even more extreme than the circumstances in Manchester that led to Das Kapital by Marx and Engel, creating the foundation of 20th century Communism.

The show will open during a pandemic. How has that affected your work?

What I've realised over the years of researching colonial history and then making work about it is that we keep insisting on behaving in this way. It's led to global warming, to mass migrations, and also you can argue, to the Covid pandemic. We've basically stripped our rainforest and depleted so many animal species that viruses are being forced to find new hosts. Humans are the strongest animal in the pack at the moment, so the viruses think we are a great host. I think this is an old, destructive, yet repetitive behaviour that we seem incapable of addressing. If we don't change this, it will lead to our own demise. For some who have died of Covid it has led to a very brutal and tragic demise. A brutal history leads to a brutal life and future. That's what I'm talking about in a nutshell, but I seem to do it in a complicated way!

Warrington has an unusually rich collection of Native American artefacts. Why are you especially interested in them?

When I was a kid my favourite toy was a doll called Chief Cherokee. He was a Native American. I didn't have Cindy dolls or Action Man, I had Chief Cherokee and his horse Thunderbolt and all the accoutrements. That was my fantasy land. I have kept them all. I remember buying them. We were on holiday in Sevenoaks on my birthday and I had a ten shilling note in about 1970. I saw Chief Cherokee and Thunderbolt in the window of a toy shop, and I thought, I have got to have that.

I thought I would tell the story of Native Americans in as true a way as I can because it's a story that we all know, and are familiar with through Hollywood, where the story has been completely re-told in an inaccurate way. Their story was re-invented by the Europeans who went there and basically annihilated them, stole their lands and their livelihoods, their health and their culture. I have visited lots of parts of America where there are native tribes still living in reservations where the conditions are absolutely appalling. It is another one of these horrible histories that we need to address and be honest about.

So I'll have a scenario in the cabinets featuring Chief Cherokee and cowboy figures and also some bronze horses and animals that I've made over the years, which gives it a twist. Some have two heads, so there is a push-me-pull-you and they are

on different scales. I will also use maps to illustrate the stories. I can only realistically do that with one story, but by doing that hopefully I'm drawing attention to the fact that these stories are missing and that there are many similar stories about the conquering of many indigenous peoples in many lands through time.

Can we talk a bit about the contents of the shopping trolleys?

There will be four or five trolleys. I've got an old 50s one that I bought on eBay, an old 70s one. It's Tesco's one that I remember because I used to work in Tesco as a teenager. The piece is about collecting commodities and consuming, which is part of the behaviour I'm talking about. Shopping trolleys are great metaphors to hang my ideas on. They are also ready-made containers to put found objects into. I collected many globes and put them into another shopping trolley. They are bulging out of the trolley. I had one of the illuminated globes at home and thought it could be lit in the shopping trolley alongside other light globes and that would demonstrate how we consume many worlds although we've only got one world. The cables are spilling out like entrails all over the floor. I can move the globes around depending on which country is worse affected by Covid. It suggests that we've consumed or are burning many planets, many earths.

The next shopping trolley is full of ornaments and objects that look old or have something to do with colonialism and Empire. There's Bernardine Everisto's book "Girl, Woman, Other," and Sam Selvon's "The Lonely Londoners." It's full of the kinds of things we all collect, including objects, ideas and culture.

It's about over consumption, which is not very good for us, the planet, for our future. It's short-sighted. There will be another trolley full of sugar, spice, and all things nice. I'll probably have packs of Tate and Lyle sugar piled up in the trolley. It goes back to what Henry Hobhouse called "The Seeds of Change." He described how sugar, tea, cotton, the potato, quinine, cocoa and rubber have shaped our past and other European nations' empires. I might add a sail to this trolley suggesting a boat or raft, navigating its way through history.

We take the materials that are all around us for granted, yet they all have fascinating histories. Apart from their political histories, I love working with materials and making things and manipulating and transforming objects. It's only more recently that I have understood the narrative around them. I think the narrative was always there even back when I was working with rubber inner-tubes and with toilet paper in the 1980s and 90s.

The narrative was there but it wasn't in the forefront as much. At the beginning I didn't understand how, I just knew in the subconscious part of my brain that I was doing something good and important, but I hadn't quite articulated it in a conscious way. It's only as I've got older and wiser that I have understood what I'm doing.

I think a lot of artists work in that way. There is a sort of antenna at work all the time and it's fascinating and I learn a lot through it. If I relied on just my thinking brain, it would be illustration, or the translation of one idea. When I've tried to make work like that it has become flat and one-dimensional. When I let this other process take place, it is much more interesting, three-dimensional, multifaceted and able to be

read on different levels. So, I've learnt to trust that part of my brain, and a process that enables me to make more interesting work.

We are in the midst of what some people want to see as a "Culture War." So, any challenge to a celebratory view of British history is condemned as "colonial guilt". Are you braced for outrage?

If people think that it says more about their views than mine. That is what they think. I'm not putting any trip on anybody. The work is multifaceted. I am asking a question. I'm doing it subtly, perhaps too subtly. If someone sees a colonial guilt trip, they will see that anyway. Maybe they are on their colonial guilt trip. We should all have colonial guilt, surely. If we don't, I'd be worried. There might be a lot of politicians who don't have any guilt, but just nostalgia!

At the root of these works is an anger about injustice and inequality. I grew up in a political household in the North of England. If I hadn't been an artist, I'd have done history at university. I was fortunate to go to a very liberal comprehensive school where we acted out history in the drama theatre. I stormed the Bastille. I was a Tolpuddle Martyr. It is a great way to learn history. It animated history in an exciting way. We looked at the urban jungle as opposed to the natural jungle. We looked at the history of cotton mills. We had trips to all these places. It was all about storytelling and being able to empathise with other people and people from the past.

Susan Stockwell was speaking to Javier Pes, a freelance writer who is a former editor of The Art Newspaper.

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