Interview with Sir Peter Blake

Lauren Barnes

Sir Peter Blake, *Everybody Razzle Dazzle,* 2015. Photo: Mark McNulty

Sir Peter Blake is the third contemporary artist to be invited to dazzle a ship in a co-commission by Liverpool Biennial, 14-18 NOW: WW1 Centenary Art Commissions and Tate Liverpool, in partnership with Merseytravel and National Museums Liverpool. 'Everybody Razzle Dazzle' is his design for the Mersey Ferry 'Snowdrop', which will remain in active service until December 2016. Blake is a seminal Pop artist, whose early ambition was to make works of art with which people could engage on the level of pop music. He initially trained as a designer, and is also an inveterate collector, who has amassed folk art, celebrity memorabilia, toys, circus paraphernalia and many other types of objects over decades. His fascination with amateur crafts and untrained making govern many aspects of his artistic practice and his collecting. Here he talks about 'Everybody Razzle Dazzle' and his own collection of maritime objects.

The thing was to do a dazzle ship and also for it to be a memorial to the First World War – the two things tied in. So it started off being quite grey, dour and serious, much more of a memorial. The initial design had a big stencil of 1914–18 to commemorate the war. As we went on that slipped away a bit – we'd moved into 2015, so we were a year away from the centenary of the beginning of the First World War. I researched the historic dazzle ships that were done, and made a version of that using very bright colours, and introducing a Pop art element as well.

Sir Peter Blake, *Love Wall* 1961. Collage construction, 125.7 x 205.7 cm, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. © Peter Blake. All rights reserved, DACS 2015.

There's a range of symbols I use again and again: a star, a heart, a target and a rainbow. Somehow the heart didn't seem appropriate, but the star, the target and the rainbow had a kind of link. There isn't a rainbow in rainbow colours, but there's a black and white rainbow. The symbols were in some of my very early pictures, for example a picture called *Love Wall* from 1961. Later on, about ten years ago, I reclaimed them as 'Peter Blake Pop Art Incorporated', and started using them almost in a corporate way. I did a logo containing the four elements. I've done variations of that in different works. *Love Wall* was all about love: the work incorporated a door and a window, and it was full of references to love, so the heart was appropriate.

I was using fairground imagery at that time as well, so stars come up again and again. The red and yellow diagonal comes from the warning sign that you get on the back of lorries telling you not to come too close. If you're driving behind a lorry, you're driving behind a piece of Pop art. When I saw it first, it just seemed a very beautiful image. The elements of the design came from sources like that. It connects to sign writing, and the fact that I was partly trained as a graphic designer. I've always been interested in sign writing, fun-fair lettering and things like that, and that came into the design.

There's also an element of Op art in there too – it's almost like a Bridget Riley painting. She'd be a great one to commission to dazzle a ship – except it would drive everyone mad, because you'd start falling over. It would probably be very successful as dazzle. Some of those early black and white paintings you can hardly look at, because of the optical tricks they perform; that was the point.

I certainly took the original dazzle designs as an influence. The black and white diagonal picks up on the diagonals I did before, and the way the dazzle ships were done. With the harlequin patterns, perhaps the original dazzle painters were trying to bring a light element to the designs. And the harlequin image comes up again and again. It goes back to Picasso. The dazzle painters probably had fun. The camouflage squad in the Second World War were all commissioned by Sir Robin Darwin, who was head of camouflage, and they were his mates. It was people like Ken Rowntree, Ruskin Spear – they all moved on to the RCA with him when he took over there.

Dan Faine and I worked on the design on the computer. We were working from side elevations, which

of course were flat. When we came to Liverpool to look at the ferry, I was quite shocked by how wide it is, compared to its length. When you're looking at its back, it's very wide. So anything on its back actually goes round a long distance. From the bumper rail that goes round it, the side of the boat tucks away at a very deep angle into the water. So something like checkerboard becomes quite different when it's going at an angle. When we'd actually seen the ship, the checkerboard was something that changed the design quite a bit. I designated that to the painters, and trusted them as professional boat painters to figure it out. I think they had fun doing it. Then there was the second stage, when we looked at the interior colours. We made a change on the funnel, because it looked like a German flag: the wrong colour was next to the black.

I never thought I had a maritime collection, but it's interesting that of the first three objects I collected, one was maritime. The very first piece I bought was a painting of the *Queen Mary*, so that is important and really started the whole thing. At one point, I thought we might buy a house by the sea, and I put together a vague collection – if I saw anything maritime, I tended to buy it. So there is quite a nice collection of model boats and things.

Anonymous painting of the Queen Mary in the collection of Sir Peter Blake, oil on board, 460 × 590 mm. Photo © Hydar Dewachi 2015.

I found the painting of the *Queen Mary* in a junkshop when I was at Gravesend School of Art. By then, I'd been taught by Enid Marx, who had a folk-art collection, which is now at Compton Verney, and she instilled a love of folk art into me then. She would have been teaching lettering, or something like that. She took over teaching from someone for a year, and she knew that in Gravesend an old sea captain had a collection of figureheads, and she arranged a private visit. It wasn't a museum, as such. He had this collection of about thirty figureheads. Gravesend is opposite Tilbury, so the Orient Line left from Tilbury to go to Australia and China, and all these long journeys. So any time an Orient Line ship sailed, he let off a hooter to wish it *bon voyage*. After we visited the sea captain, Enid Marx asked me to design a letter that we would send from the class to thank him. This would have been the late 1940s. I was still a designer at that point, before I went to the Royal College of Art.

Anonymous ship model in the collection of Sir Peter Blake, c.1950. Wood, paint and wire, 42.5 x 92 x19 mm. Photo © Hydar Dewachi 2015.

The shell collection came about when I was asked to do a residency at the National Gallery in 1994. Walking to the station, I would pass two or three charity shops, and they always had a shell item, such as a box covered in shells. So I bought the first one, and I bought the next one, and then of course that's a collection, and from then on, anything with a shell I bought. I have these little model boats where the sails are made of shells, and seaside souvenirs. You can still get these. Some of the modern seaside ones are awful. Dogs covered in shells are pushing it a bit. These are pretty awful, the crinoline ladies. The first person who made one must have just thought 'That would be a good idea.' Someone must have thought, 'That would be nice, lots of little shells on a box.'

Maritime objects from the collection of Sir Peter Blake. Photo © Hydar Dewachi 2015.

I've got scrimshaw, quilted cushions made by sailors to send home to their wives, and model ships made to various degrees of amateurism, through to very professional ones made by shipping lines. I tend to collect the amateur ones, but I've got some nice models, and tin toys. The model of the *Bournemouth* came from a junkshop. These models are usually quite naïve in their style, the sort usually made by old blokes to take to sail on ponds, like the nice man who made a model of Snowdrop. The Dreadnought is a German tin toy that would have been to push around. The *Rose Belt* is African. The person who made it would only have seen these big boats going past on the very horizon, so their information about what they were like wasn't very clear. It has these odd differences in scale, like this huge ladder that runs down the side of the ship, where one link of the ladder would be the size of a man.

The quilted cushions tell you so much about the lives of sailors, what they made in their time off. I suppose all those old blokes are watching television now; they're not making cathedrals out of matchsticks.

Sir Peter Blake in conversation with Lauren Barnes, 25 September 2015

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