

Inside Grayson Perry's sketchbook

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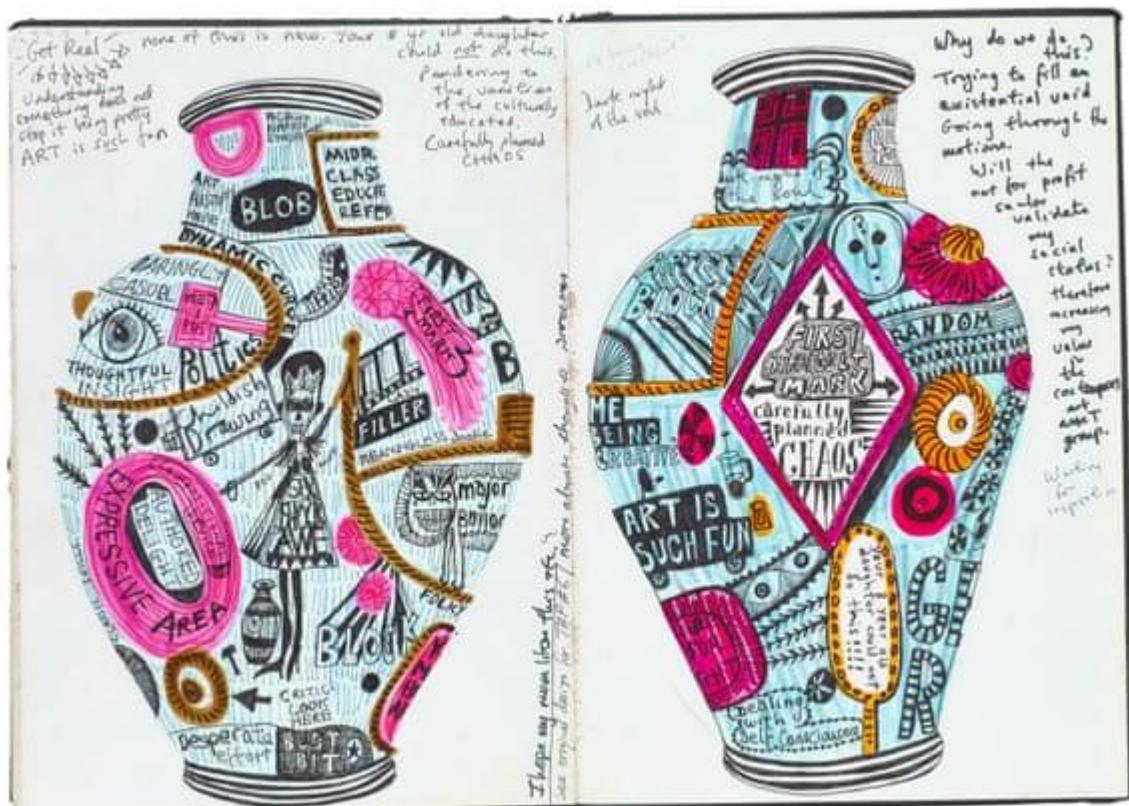
From treasured childhood notebooks to drawing with his daughter, Perry's sketchbooks are the place where the artist learns if an idea is 'a goer or a dud'

[Grayson Perry](#)



‘It all started when my grandmother gave me a little stack of very cheap notebooks’

My sketchbooks do not make up a smooth, continuous series, as at different times in my career the sketchbook has played different roles. I think my attitude towards the sketchbook originates from when my grandmother gave me a little stack of very cheap notebooks. I treasured them and filled them with diagrams of fantasy aircraft and plans of racing cars, adventure comics and war scenes. What I enjoyed was the density of the little tomes, the way I could fill each page with detail. My dedication made them precious, and this feeling has never left me.



‘Your eight-year-old daughter could *not* do this ... ’

At art college we were indoctrinated with the notion that sketchbooks were a central plank of being an artist. Tutors would pore over students’ sketchbooks, checking that there was no mismatch in imagination and energy between the scrawled doodles, taped-in scraps and drunken cartoons compared with more outward-facing work. They understood that students would often choke when laying out their ideas in a larger, more finished form. They used to call it “degree show-itis” – whereby a student would make art full of careless abandon and rough-hewn poetry, only for their creative sphincter to nip up when asked to present a group of resolved artworks on which to be judged.

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a bridge or the path is an art

‘My dedication made them precious ...’

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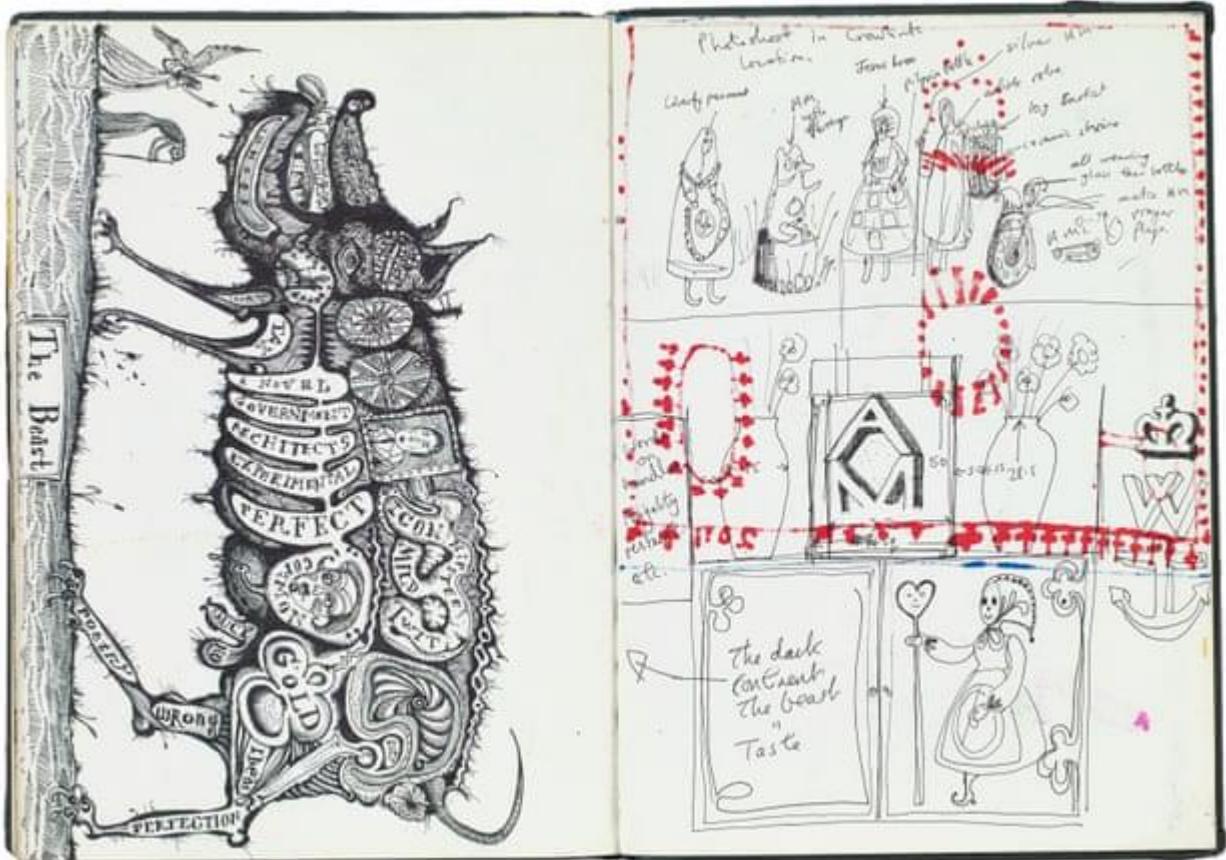
In the early years after college, sketchbooks were a way of keeping my practice going, as I had no other creative outlet; and I put several hours into each image, giving the books the obsessive, private quality of outsider art. Like one of my artistic heroes, [40:492](#)

[title="">40:492" title="">40:492" title="">Henry Darger](#), I often heavily worked both sides of each leaf, with no thought as to how I might display – let alone sell – these works.



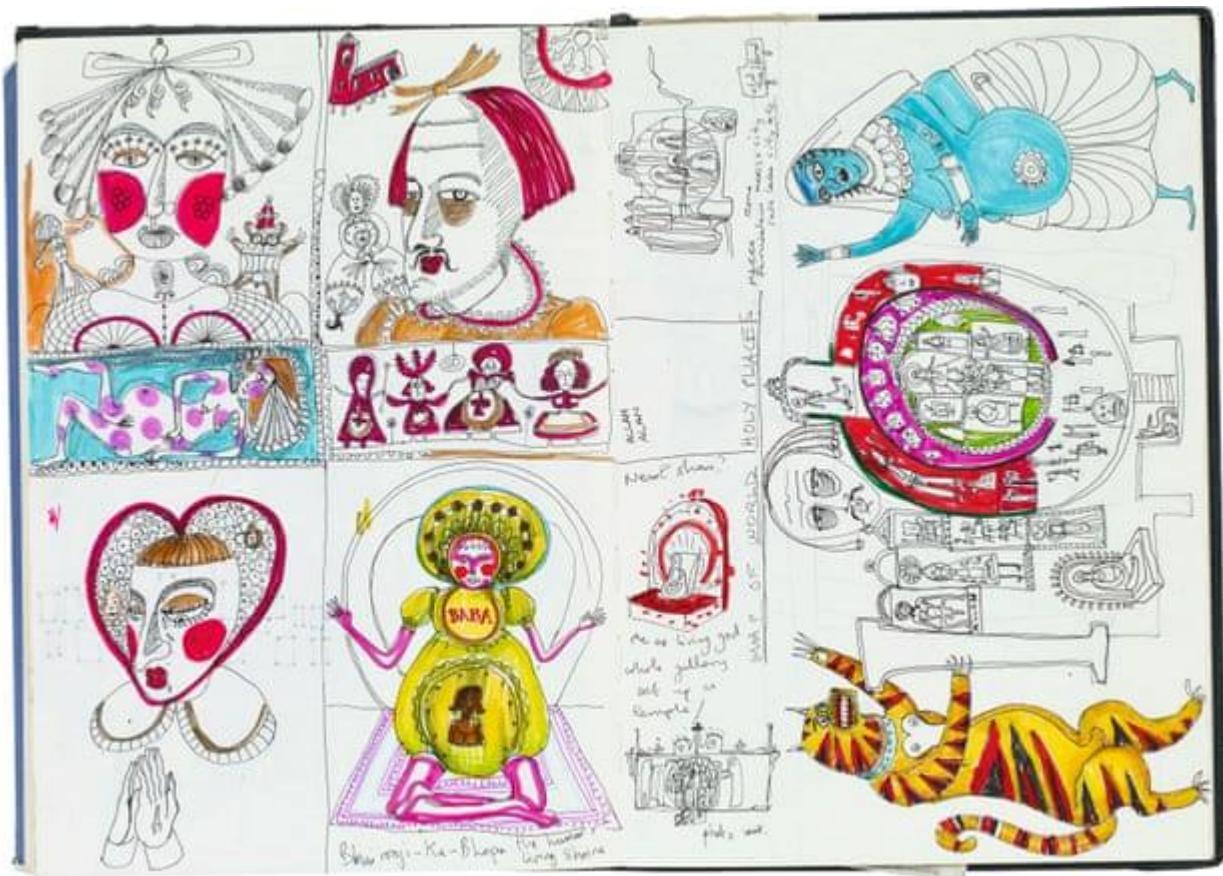
‘I often heavily worked both sides of each leaf’

When I managed to set up my first ceramic studio, in 1986, all my creative energy became focused on clay. I drew less and less on paper – I usually worked directly onto the pots, with no preparatory drawings at all. I used sketchbooks in a much more cursory and utilitarian way – just to remind me what to do and in what order.



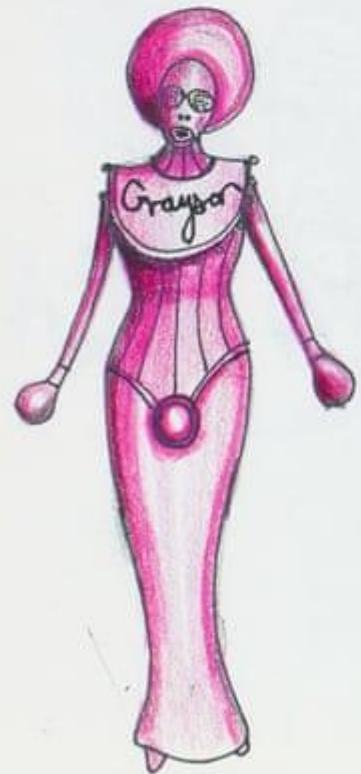
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I became a father in 1992, and when my young daughter Flo and I started drawing together for fun it rekindled my enthusiasm for sketching, reminding me that not every artwork had to count towards my slowly developing “career”. We would draw for hours, filling sheet after sheet of photocopier paper. Ironically, I can trace some career-defining artworks directly back to those afternoons, scribbling with Flo. One game we often played involved inventing a character, then drawing their family, then their house, car, holiday destination, etc. One of those drawings evolved years later into the first conception of [A House for Essex](#). With Flo I had learned to play on paper again.



Map of world holy places

Since the late 90s, sketchbooks have become increasingly important to me. I carry one with me most of the time, and if I can't do that I usually stuff a pen and a few sheets of paper into a pocket or handbag, just in case.



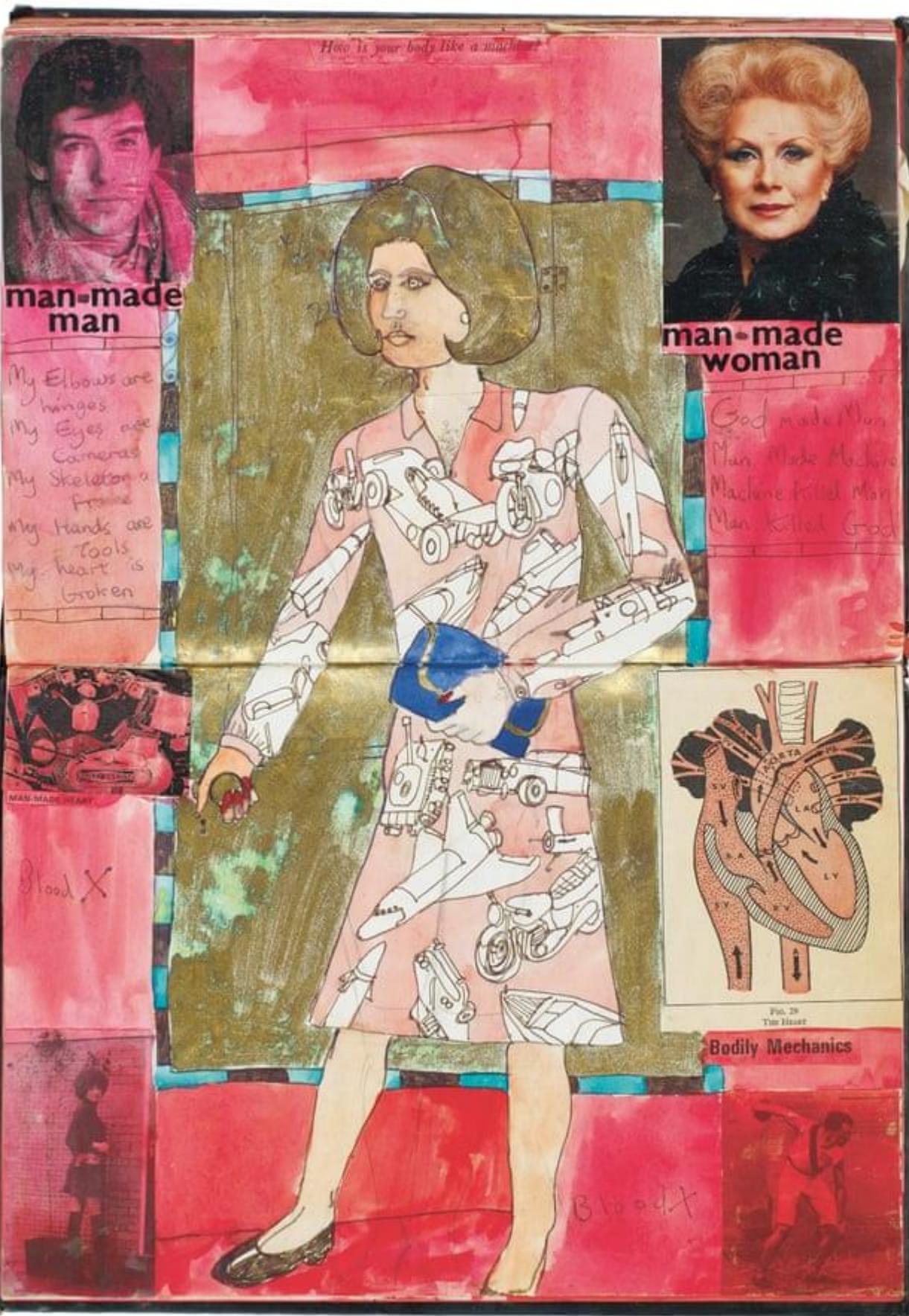
'A sketchbook is an airlock for visual thoughts'
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A sketchbook is a place where I can discuss ideas with myself, a place I work through and refine an idea for a good while before I will let it run around the studio, and then the world. A sketchbook is an airlock for visual thoughts. I have to feel I have developed an idea enough before committing to the labour-intensive version – beginning with postage stamp-size doodles, through to double page full-colour layouts that may take several hours. It is the place to make mistakes – they are cheap in time and materials; those initial marks often tell me in a few strokes whether an idea is a goer or a dud.



'It can be an archive of daft notions that later become art'

I regularly flick through old sketchbooks, as I have a habit of jotting down a few words or a tiny doodle of an idea at the very first glimmer. I may dismiss them or forget them, so I go back to see if a silly squiggle needs to be taken more seriously. So a sketchbook can be an archive of daft notions that later become art.



Man-made man and man-made woman. Illustration: Particular Books, 2016
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A sketchbook for me is a sacred artefact, more so than many of my finished works. The density of thought, the love of art and the sheer number of man-hours in each one load them with huge meaning and memory for me. I know I could never sell them. Consequently, the drawings inside are financially worthless. Curiously, this is one of the reasons sketchbooks have become so vital to me today. As I have become more successful and my prices have