

RICHARD SLEE

Sarah Dawood, *Somerset House exhibition set to 'blur boundaries between truth and fiction'*, Design Week, 3 July 2017

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Richard Slee, *Pinnocchio*, 2017. Courtesy of Richard Slee and Hales Gallery.

The Learned Society of Extra-Ordinary Objects will set up a fictitious world where ordinary objects are given intriguing stories by a host of artists and designers.

Somerset House is set to host an exhibition exploring the “rich, surprising and playful” stories behind ordinary, everyday objects.

The Learned Society of Extra-Ordinary Objects will see visitors delve into a fictional world, whereby “fellows” of a “society” – made up of 30 commissioned designers, artists and craftspeople – submit items which have a personal, but make-believe, story behind them.

Visitors asked to “suspend their disbelief”

Set within the gallery’s Terrace Rooms, the exhibition has been designed as a “grand club room”, says Claire Catterall, senior curator at Somerset House, with a central, fully-functioning gin bar, furniture and wall portraits of the society’s “fellows”, alongside parquet flooring and chandeliers. It has been curated and designed by furniture designer Carl Clerkin and artist Danny Clarke.

Visitors are asked to “suspend their disbelief”, says Catterall, and learn about the fictitious history of the 18th century Learned Society, where members would present everyday objects to each other and discuss the history behind them.

The made-up back-story continues that these objects were eventually sold after the Society went bankrupt, and so now the collection must be recreated for the 21st century.

Inspired by real history of Somerset House

This imaginary history has been inspired by Somerset House’s actual history as a host to resident organisations including the Royal Society and Royal Academy of Arts in the 18th and 19th centuries; the societies would come together to discuss advancements and discoveries in their various fields.

The exhibition aims to encourage “the same sense of discovery and inquisitiveness”, says Catterall, by “exploring different ways of engaging with commonplace objects”.

“Objects can have secret intrigue”

“The boundaries between truth and fiction are very blurred in this exhibition,” she says. “The point is to show that ordinary objects can have value and secret intrigue, through investigating the stories behind them. The most ordinary objects can be incredibly rich in meaning, and have emotional attachment.”

The show is split into two parts; the first will feature

existing objects submitted by the 30 designers and artists, and the second part will include newly-designed objects that draw on existing items.

Artists involved in the exhibition include furniture designer Max Frommeld, sculptor Richard Wentworth, ceramicist Richard Slee, artist Jasleen Kaur and jewellery-maker Hans Stofer.

New “surprising, playful” objects

Objects included in the exhibition include those as simple as a pair of clogs, a ball of string, a pencil, a rock, a jelly

mould and a tap, all with interesting, fantasy back-stories, which resonate with the artists in this pretend world.

Newly-invented objects include a lampshade that “crawls” up the wall, and a broom that functions with a wheel rather than a handle attached to it.

“We want to introduce the idea that objects might have a life of their own,” says Catterall. “Their functionality might include extraordinary possibilities you may not have thought of. The artists have drawn on the everyday to design new objects with surprising and playful narratives.”