

Freud's Desk

Some years ago Susan Flavell stumbled across a photograph of Sigmund Freud's writing desk, an imposing Victorian object laden with carved and cast statuettes from Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia and Rome, tightly arranged in rows facing his chair, as if scrutinizing his work. The image resonated with the artist who (like Freud before her), is fascinated by dreams, fantasy and myth, and their potential to shed light upon our interior world. Several years later, this exhibition represents the culmination of that initial chance discovery.

In the meantime, Flavell herself visited the desk, as one in a group of artists who I invited to undertake research at the Freud Museum London in early 2013. Based in the house to which Freud and his family fled after escaping the Nazi occupation of Austria, the Museum building was Freud's home at the time of his death in 1939 and remained his daughter Anna's until hers in 1982. Freud's study, preserved by Anna, exists today as it did during his lifetime, replete with his substantial library, 'the' iconic psychoanalytical couch and, of course, his desk and astonishingly vast collections of antiquities, books, prints and textiles. During our time at the Museum we were given privileged access to Freud's collections, and allowed to – carefully – handle many of his treasured objects.

Freud disliked visual art (and music) and refused to think about his collections in artistic terms; rather they were tools of his practice and companions in his often-isolating work. His desk held his favourites, including the carving of Egyptian baboon god Thoth that he would caress while analyzing patients, a statuette of Athena whose gorgon-head breast plate inspired one of his key texts about the castration complex, and the Egyptian figure given to him by his infamous patient, Sergei Pankejeff, 'The Wolf Man', at the conclusion of his analysis. For Freud, archaeology was reflective of the analytical process: the discovery of buried antiquities could be compared to the unearthing of key events from his patients' pasts, and the insight they provided into past civilizations reminiscent of how such formerly-suppressed material functions to unlock a troubled psyche.

Flavell's exhibition applies this comparison to an art practice, the more than 100 new works she has created seemingly manifest directly from her unconscious. Like Freud's collections, they encompass bronze casting, ceramics, textiles and print mediums, to which Flavell has added her trademark use of paper and cardboard, in particular *papier mâché* (mixed with glitter and marble dust). As upon his desk, diverse cultures, AD and BC, classicism and the grotesque, jostle against each other, seemingly in no logical order. Direct references to Freud's objects can be found in miniature sphinxes, vultures, Venuses and Saint Sebastians, while numerous horses and canines reflect the recurrent appearance of these motifs in Flavell's own practice, as well as Freud's. Freudian symbols abound (crude, phallic/fecal lumps and decapitated figures sit alongside orchids delicately cast from metal and ceramic slip), as do Kleinian part-objects. The quantity of objects and the impressive range of techniques they incorporate represent an obsession comparable to Freud's. They echo his storytelling ability and his humour. As an art hater, it is difficult to know what Freud himself would have made of Flavell and her objects; I would like to think that his curious mind would have found in her a confidante, like the other brilliant (and dog loving) women he surrounded himself with.

Freud died in his study after an extended and agonizing illness, administered an overdose of morphine amongst the thousands of objects he had so obsessively acquired. His ashes were placed to rest in an ancient Greek urn that had been a prize of his collection. Mortality prowls this exhibition as it does our own unconscious, disruptively present in Flavell's fractured and headless bodies, and staring ashen faces. Freud worked up until the very end, and it is notable that Flavell was drawn to his desk, rather than his more iconic couch: rather than a clinic, her works transform Turner Galleries into an office, a studio, a museum and a tomb.