

‘We create an experience’

Nissen Richards co-founder Pippa Nissen reveals the practice’s approach to techniques and materials in its exhibition designs





Hut 11a: The Bombe Breakthrough at Bletchley Park

GARETH GARDNER



Great Exhibition of the North, Newcastle

DAN DUNKLEY



Facing page and above; You Say You Want a Revolution? Records and Rebels 1966-1970 at the V&A

JIM STEPHENSON

What has been your design approach with recent exhibitions?

We really enjoy taking a theatrical approach. Having a background in theatre, I enjoy how exhibition design sits between the two disciplines of architecture and theatre design. We create an experience for people to move through, where design is used to communicate ideas and enable people to connect emotionally with objects, art and ideas. I find it interesting when a material or texture can mean more than one thing, when visitors can make their own associations. We try to ask questions, rather than answer them all.

For the 2016-17 V&A show *You Say You Want A Revolution?* (currently on a world tour in Melbourne) we created a journey, where visitors wear headphones in which music is triggered as they move around the spaces looking at different objects.

We wanted to create a feeling of another time, but also an abstracted version of it, full of objects, moving graphic surfaces, and information. The exhibition is paced to have moments of more intense theatre, followed by brighter and lighter periods to look at the objects and for interpretation.

For Hut 11a: *The Bombe Breakthrough*, a permanent exhibition at Bletchley Park, we tell the story of the bombe decryption device, the lead-up to its invention, and then its legacy. It is sited within the wartime hut at Bletchley where it happened. There is a fascinating friction between the installation and the room itself. We made a framework that allows one to see the room behind. The room is divided by an immersive film that acts as a gateway to a separate space behind containing a replica of the bombe. It creates a moment of reveal, before taking

the visitor into the second part of the story about the machine itself.

Thirdly, last year's *Great Exhibition of the North* was a temporary exhibition at the Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle, where we performed a sort of takeover. It was a counter-narrative, a different 'voice' to that of the museum, and lots of fun to pull off. We used an aesthetic of 'temporary' materials: scaffolding, clamps, bungee cords, large fabric banners, and wallpapers, while building over existing objects with stages and plinths.

What inspires your work?

I am really influenced by contemporary theatre, in particular the materials and digital changes that enable artists to tell a story through gestures. Artists that have been very influential to our work

include American theatre director and designer Robert Wilson. He has made some interesting exhibitions, always with a theatrical twist, such as his moving portraits of Lady Gaga mounted for the Louvre in Paris. Other groundbreaking curatorial choices are the seasons of contemporary art at Versailles, where artists such as Olafur Eliasson or Anish Kapoor create installations using landscape and buildings.

Some of my early work in theatre, alongside the theatre director Tim Hopkins, were really formative projects for me. They include the opera *The Rake's Progress* at Staatsoper Hannover, and the *Elephant and Castle* production for Aldeburgh Festival. Both played with the idea of layering and used different media to tell the story – film, graphics, printing – all collaged together.

Describe the process of exhibition design at Nissen Richards

At the beginning of a project we spend some time planning the narrative journey through the exhibition. We think about the visitors' pacing and what they feel, see and hear at any one moment. We usually begin the design with a workshop involving all the relevant people: client, specialists and stakeholders. We plot out every moment like a musical score.

This is an opportunity to get the phrasing through the exhibition right, and carefully orchestrates our emotions to best engage with an often complex and difficult subject matter. The resulting document often becomes quite large: learning outcomes, quotes, props, objects, images, feelings and characters are all charted on a timeline.

How do you arrive at decisions about wayfinding, use of colour, graphics and branding in exhibition projects?

We are currently doing the branding, graphics, wayfinding, exhibition and interpretation design at the new Wordsworth Museum in Cumbria, which encompasses landscape, Dove Cottage and a new extended museum. We really enjoy projects like this, where the branding, wayfinding and graphics all become part of the design. It is a chance for the message and visual language to be combined.

We approach branding in the same way as exhibition design. With the Wordsworth Museum we became fascinated by how Wordsworth wrote about the landscape, and how his poetry often referred to both detail in the foreground, and far-distant landmarks. He also thinks about specific moments from his past, something he calls 'spots

of time' becoming metaphors for larger themes. Many of his manuscripts are on display there and full of life – in some instances his children had splattered ink across a page. The character of ink on the page became central to understanding his work. Inspired by this, we began to paint in ink in our studio, illustrating both landscape forms, and qualities of textures and light in Wordsworth's written depictions of Grasmere. We settled on a texture somewhere between nature and lyric for our wayfinding, which made from patinated metal panels and etched concrete.

Are there particular suppliers, products and collaborators that you return to in your exhibition projects?

We are very dependent on collaborators and suppliers to help us achieve quality and to push us conceptually. One collaborator we return to over and over again is lighting designer Studio ZNA. I first met Zerlina Hughes, ZNA's director, while working in theatre 20 years ago. She designs with light the same way a sculptor would, rather than just through the physical fittings that are visible. On the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia at the British Museum, we worked together to create bespoke light fittings, as we wanted to mark each



Above; Interior view of Hut 11: The Bombe Breakthrough at Bletchley Park

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bay within the long gallery space. Specific lighting for the objects – linear strips and small spot fittings – was hidden within the showcases, while the hanging lights were a key architectural move that created a more intimate space. Studio ZNA created a new fitting with a stone-like surface texture that worked with our patinated metal wayfinding panels.

Finn Ross and his video design studio, FRAY, is another collaborator we really enjoy working with. They are fantastic at creating 'moving' surfaces. Finn treats video like light or a graphic. We enjoy how he paces film so that it becomes a texture, with a quality of playfulness. He understands completely how technology should only be used when it works hard to communicate something, and not just as a gimmick or 'easy win'.

Factory Settings is a fabricator we have worked with since our first exhibition and we enjoy experimenting with build techniques with them. On a project in Norway we booked in three days in their workshop, created a series of 3D computer models, and then tested how what we wanted to create could be manufactured, exploring laser-cutting, etching and hand-cutting. The process led us to a place we couldn't have foreseen without their expertise and knowledge of materials.

Printing is a technique we enjoy employing to create a unique texture that can be used for branding and making backdrops to objects. We recently wanted to create an identity for an exhibition about the history of bookmaking. We photographed different types of print, etched magnified versions of these into a metal plate and then printed this onto different papers. Again, the texture and craft of the technique itself fed into the final graphics that we produced for the exhibition.

In terms of materials, we enjoy using anything that moves away from painted MDF, which has become the default of exhibition design. Richlite is a beautiful material made of compressed paper and has a wonderful mottled texture that takes printing really well. Similarly, Valchromat – an alternative compacted board with a surface texture – takes print well, although sealing the surface is essential to keep it looking fresh.

Veneers and birch ply are useful surfaces for printing large-scale images or embedding LED strips. Spot varnish is also great for type interpretation in situations where you can only see the text when light hits it.

Prepatinated metal panels are our go-to material for wayfinding and interpretation panels in permanent galleries. Etching into the metal and finishing with an enamel fill of a bright, contrasting colour is a favourite technique at the moment.



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Clockwise from top:
Wayfinding for Hut
11a: The Bombe
Breakthrough;
lighting strategy
for the Sir Joseph
Hotung Gallery;
Arrangement
of exhibition at
the Sir Joseph
Hotung Gallery



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