

## The House of Words / Reviews / Crafts Magazine / Crafts Council

Work by Jane Prophet

**The House of Words  
Dr Johnson's House  
17 Gough Square  
London, EC4  
Until 29 August**

**Reviewed by Maeve  
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'When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.' That well-known opinion of bon viveur, man of letters and influential father of the modern English dictionary

Dr Johnson, reverberates in the inner ear as you step over the threshold of his house. Gough Square, now the preserve of corporate London, was in Johnson's time, situated conveniently near the printing presses of Fleet Street.



He believed language could 'fix meanings' and over a period of nine years, with the help of six amanuenses, carried out the feat of completing his celebrated work 'A dictionary of the English Language'.

300 years on from his birth in 1709, the exhibition *House of Words* highlights the interplay of words and meanings. A group of contemporary artists has been inspired by his cultural legacy, charisma, wit and the space in which he compiled the work for publication in 1755.

The title of the show refers to the house as the location for the compilation of the dictionary and Clare Twomey has evoked the process. Located in the attic, her piece entitled *Scribe* is an installation comprising books, paper and quill pens. Presented in a vitrine, they are simply the tools of his trade but when the viewer looks more closely at the blue dust that covers the objects it takes on a poignant, ghostly quality.

Jason Cleverly reaches out to the spectator through his *Interactive Dictionary Project*. On first glance the beautiful hard wood table does not look out of place in the Georgian interior. Then the game of the piece becomes clear, etched onto the table are a series of definitions and the viewer is invited to take the 'quill pen' from the centre of the table to create one's own piece of a dictionary which is then displayed on a screen behind.

Tables as works of art are a recurrent motif, objects that literally become part of the furniture. Ceramic artist Robert Dawson's *Parlour Table* breathes a modern air into an old fashioned room with a work coated in crisp blue and white geometric patterns. The references to Willow Pattern recall to us Johnson's use of this space to receive a varied collection of guests including bankers, artists, prostitutes and murderers, stimulated by fashionable tea drinking.

Era Vati's multi-media time-based video installation adds an eerie dimension to the visit. Leaning on a mantle piece is a flickering portrait of a black man dressed in period costume. This man, who we know to be Johnson's servant Francis Barber, lingers a few moments before dissolving and being replaced by a swirling vision of fragmented letters.

Words and the books that hold them are playfully examined by Jane Prophet in a series of pieces that use a laser cutting technique to tamper with the venerable tomes. The word 'ignivomous', meaning vomiting fire leaps out of the page as a tumble of laser cut flames. If Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, itself a homage to learning, humour and eccentricities, is a true picture of the man himself, Prophet's combines them via his profile cut into a dictionary.

The seven commissioned artists have responded to the physical environment of the house as much as the character of the man to produce works that reflect different perspectives on Johnson and his world. Though Johnson's lexical achievement was generally admired, his idiosyncratic definitions were criticised, as were a handful of celebrated inaccuracies, which on occasion he wittily defended as 'ignorance, pure ignorance'. Wandering casually through the great man's house, the viewer is provoked to think how language, meaning and context are inextricably bound.

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