

Smoke & Mirrors





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Part 1: *Touching the Neoclassical and the Romantic*

Part 2: *Bad Seed*

A document of Michael Petry's artist in residency at
Sir John Soane's Museum
London
2010 – 2011

Sir John Soane's history of patronage amongst his contemporaries is well known, he purchased many paintings forming the basis of his challenge to the then National Gallery, which refused to collect or show British artists. So Soane did, and exhibited them in his Picture Room, at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields

“Soane was an avid collector and generous patron of the art of his contemporaries, and loved to display his new acquisitions amidst his antiquities and curiosities. The presence of Petry's rather sinister-looking glass forms in the museum continues this fine tradition and will doubtless create some thought-provoking juxtapositions.” Tim Knox, Director of Sir John Soane's Museum

In the spirit of Soane's invitation to contemporary artist's work into his home, the current museum administration asked me to be the first visual artist in residence and to develop two separate but linked exhibitions. The museum is such a world gem and its architecture and collections have long inspired me. It was one of the first museums I visited when I first came to London almost 30 years ago and the experience has always stayed with me. To be able to work in the museum was wonderful.

I use many materials including glass in my production. I design the works, as I am not a glass maker; which, like Soane, means that I have to have an understanding of materials and the ability to work with others to have my work realised (like constructing a building). My new pieces were blown at the Berengo Studio in Murano, Italy and at the Royal College of Art, London

Soane use of mirrors and coloured glass in the architecture of the house, and the effects of light on the quality of the ambience of the rooms can only truly be

experienced in his Museum. Photographs only give us some idea of the changing light throughout the day. What is less well known about the house is the gothic nature of Soane's relationships to his children and how they too influenced the museum. I wanted to explore all these elements in the residency and in the new work.

For *Touching the Neoclassical and the Romantic* I exhibited works from my *Bare Back Lovers* series of glass pieces which fuse, in an almost alchemical process, neo-classical silver forms with the organic, fluid qualities of molten glass. Hopefully this fusion complemented Sir John Soane's interest in neo-classical silver (as evidenced in his collection of Robert Adam drawings for silver designs) and his use of glass in his architecture.

“Using stained glass and plain coloured glass Soane ‘played’ with the qualities of light and shade throughout his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields to create the most evocative and appropriate moods to display his collections and sculptural arrangements. He also used light to manipulate architectural form. Today he is recognised as the English master of ‘lumière mystérieuse’, the almost mystical, mysterious atmosphere achieved through a variety of light effects, including skylights, mirrors, and concealed lamps.” Dr. Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, exhibitions curator

For *Bad Seed* I have designed a series of new works in response to my experience of the house. Each of the works in the series is called *Bad Seed*, followed by a number to indicate where it falls in the order of their making. This method of naming shadows the naming process from Part 1 when the *BB Lovers* were installed in the Museum. Each of those works is numbered as to its place in my production (i.e. *BB45*, *BB103*). This alludes to the nature of its origin as a mass-produced object (the silver plate) that aped craft work. Yet after the introduction of molten glass (a craft technique), each object became a unique sculptural artwork.

With the *Bad Seed* works I have tried to respond to the emotional space created by the intense, dark atmosphere created in the house at the time of Soane's inhabitation of it. His poor relations with his children, the death of his wife and favoured son and the eventual disinheritance of his surviving son, lead me to explore the narrative space of the Soane story. The works I have created are a series of bad seeds, each a bit creepy, each fantastically beautiful, and each calling the viewer to touch them, though this is forbidden. Their organic shapes ape the vapours said to inhabit haunted sites, the ectoplasm that solidifies into strange artefacts. While they respond to the physical architecture of the rooms they are placed in, they are not site specific installations. They are seeds for the imagination.



















Bad Seed

The second part of my residency features the installation of works I produced in response to the Museum and Soane's life within it. Whereas for the first installation of works, where we tried to make the BB series almost invisible, or at least seem as if they were a part of the original Soane objects and his installation of them, in the second part, I wanted the new works to stand out. I wanted them to be obviously foreign creatures. Both in terms of form and colour these works strike the view as very different objects.

The new works reference the Romantic elements of Soane's collections (paintings by Henry Fuseli and Maria Cosway), as much as the architecture of rooms like the Monk's Parlour. The new works "evoke the presence of the incubus and succubus - two favourite themes of Romantic artists and writers of the Regency period. Appropriately, Petry's installations coincide with the restoration of the Museum's significant holdings of historical, figurative stained glass panels which will be returned to their original locations as Soane intended. Petry's work is a contemporary continuation of the skills and artistry of earlier glass craftsmen and this exhibition echoes and continues Sir John Soane's ambition to support British artists and crafts." Dr. Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski, exhibitions curator

The new works are also a dialogue across time with the personal, with the family history of the Soanes. This was a difficult history, and it led directly to the Soane becoming Britain's smallest national museum, and the world's first museum of architecture.

"Sir John Soane's collection was initially amassed to inspire his sons' understanding of art and architecture. A self-made man from humble origins (he was born the son of a bricklayer in 1753) Soane wanted both his elder son – John Soane Junior – to become an architect. When John junior died at the age of 37, Soane looked to his younger son George. Unfortunately, George was a great disappointment preferring literature and the theatre. Their relationship became so fraught that at one stage Soane considered his George to be a 'changeling', a child substituted for his real son. Soane blamed his son for his wife's death in 1815 following George's imprisonment in Debtor's Gaol and George's subsequent publication of two anonymous articles vilifying Sir John Soane's architecture in the London paper *The Champion*. As his surviving, younger, son had proved to be a disappointment, Soane hoped his grandson Frederick would become an architect and continue the family tradition. Again, as with his father, Frederick proved to be a disappointment. Bullied by his father the young Frederick sought the friendship

of a certain Captain Westwood whose army career had been overshadowed by the suicide of a fellow officer and friend who had been standing trial. Sir John Soane was so concerned about this 'inappropriate' relationship between his grandson and the army captain that he sent one of his clerks to follow the young Frederick's movements with Captain Westwood. Following the discovery of an illegitimate child – Manfred – whom George had fathered with his brother's wife, Sir John Soane, in 1833, left the Museum, by Act of Parliament, to the British Nation as a national museum." Dr. Jerzy Kierkuc-Bielinski

My coloured-glass sculptures installed within the Regency interiors of No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields engage Soane's careful arrangements of classical antiquities and paintings. Soane even gave orders for pieces to be moved right up to his death, so obsessed was he by the interiors. My biomorphic forms insinuate themselves into odd spaces in the Museum seeming to seep from corners of rooms, or from the fireplace, or appear as if they had dropped from the ceiling or crept in from outside. Some works have been placed upon items of furniture where their incongruous presence confronts the viewer, disrupts the peace, severs the seeming calm. The works contain an inherent tension between the beauty of their materials and their disquieting, almost abject forms. These works like so much of my practice, speak of the body, in a conceptual language, and aim to be at once beautiful and terrifying, abstract and figurative.

Perhaps the sculptures appear to have materialised from the strife and tension of Soane's family history. All of those difficult, if not sensational events led Sir John to leave everything, his carefully arranged collections, his remarkable house, his drawings, and paintings, and models, all of it, to the British nation, and those of us lucky enough to see them now, and in the future.

Michael Petry
2011









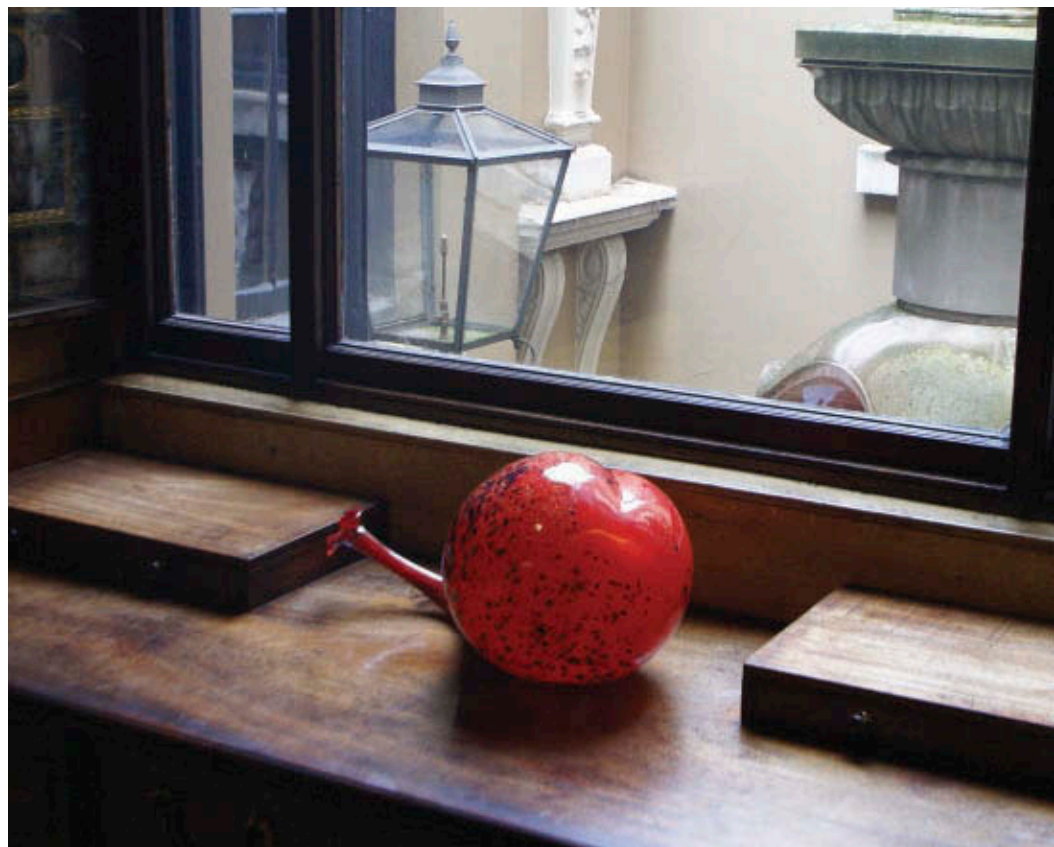
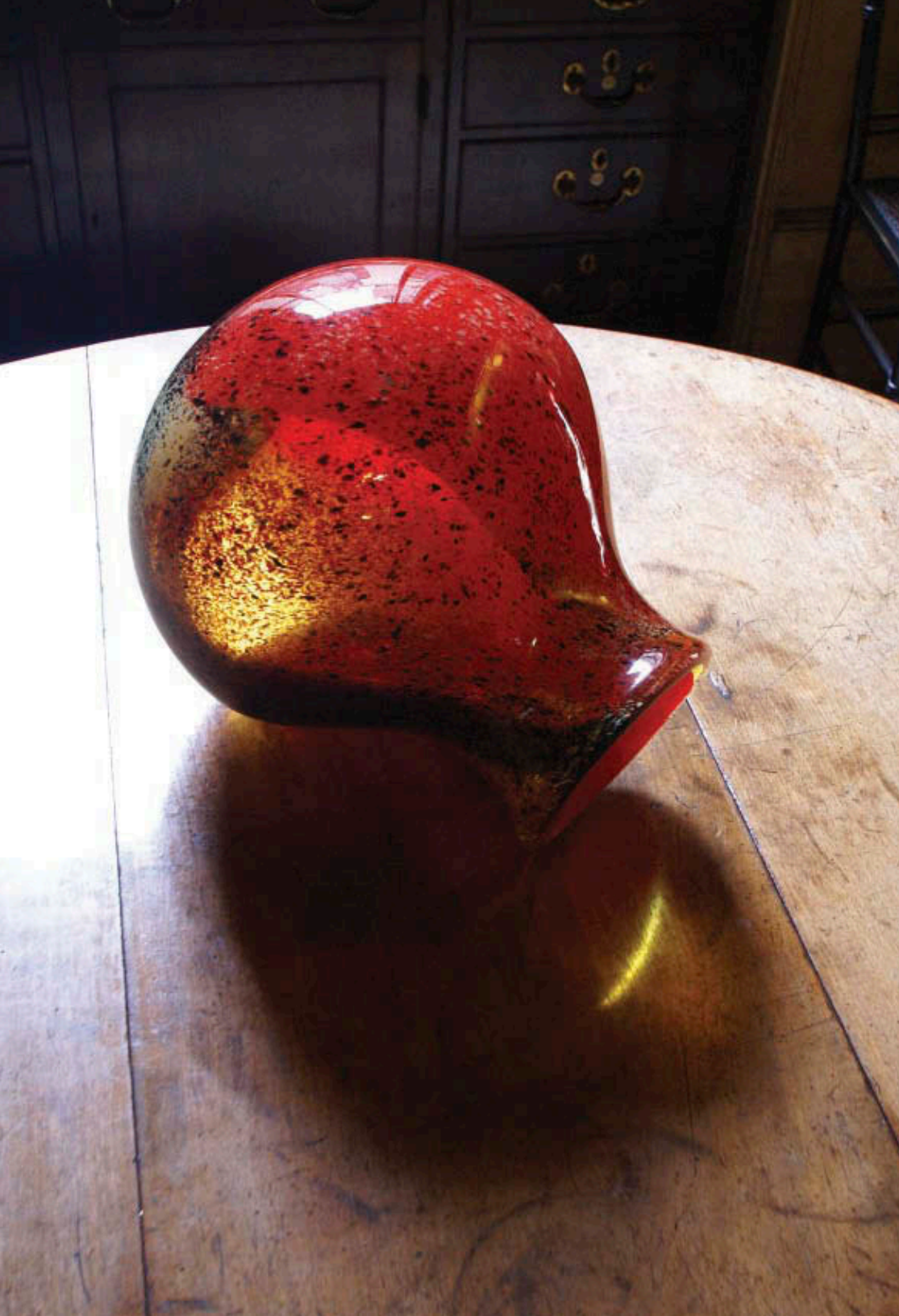














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Hot work *BB1 – BB69*: Anthony Harris
Hot work *BB70 – BB128*: Liam Reeves
All images: Michael Petry

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Exhibition List Part 2: *Bad Seed*

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Bad Seed 12 – Bad Seed 13, hot/cold work: Anthony Harris

Bad Seed 14 – Bad Seed 18, hot work: Liam Reeves with James Devereux, cold work: Anthony Harris

All images: Michael Petry

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Michael Petry is an alumnus of Rice University (BA), London Guildhall University (MA) and recently finished his Doctorate of Arts at Middlesex University. He guest teaches at the Royal Academy where he is Curator of the Royal Academy Schools Gallery. Petry is author of *Hidden Histories: 20th century male same-sex lovers in the visual arts*, and co-author of *Installation Art* and *Installation Art in the New Millennium*. His work is represented in public collections including at The Museum of Arts and Design New York, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Toledo Museum of Art, and The Government Art Collections, UK. His work will be included in *Glasstress* as part of the 2011 Venice Biennale, and his one-man exhibition *The Touch of the Oracle* will be shown at the Palm Springs Art Museum in 2012. His new book *The Art of Not Making: the new artist/artisan relationship*, is published by Thames & Hudson April 2011.

The architect Sir John Soane's house, museum and library at No 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields has been a public museum since the early 19th century. On his appointment to the Royal Academy in 1806 Soane (1753-1837) began to arrange his collected books, classical antiquities casts and models so that students of architecture might benefit from access to them. In 1833 he negotiated an Act of Parliament to preserve the house and collection after his death for the benefit of 'amateurs and students' in architecture, painting and sculpture. Today Sir John Soane's Museum is one of the country's most unusual and significant museums with a continuing and developing commitment to education and creative inspiration. <http://www.soane.org>

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