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British museum adds medals of dishonour to its collection

Cristina Ruiz

LEADING British artists have created a series of "medals" to commemorate the worst aspects of modern life, including Asbos, the war in Iraq and the bank meltdown. The medals are to go on display at the British Museum and become part of its collection.

Philip Attwood, one of the curators of the exhibition that opens on June 25, entitled Medals of Dishonour, said artists were asked to design medals that "condemned" rather than "honoured" their subjects.

The artist Michael Landy chose Dean Rowbotham, the teenager from Hartlepool who was issued with an Asbo in December 2006 at the age of 17, as the subject for his medal.

"On the street the Asbo is seen as a badge of honour," said Landy, whose medal shows a portrait of Rowbotham on one side and explains on the reverse that the teenager is being presented with the medal for "breaking his Asbo on more than 20 occasions".

It states that he: "Issued threats of violence; was verbally abusive; harassed residents . . . caused a nuisance while under the influence of alcohol in public; damaged property [and] threw missiles."

The Turner-prize winning artist Grayson Perry has designed a medal that he describes as a critique of the "imperative to buy more and more stuff that we don't need".

The Virgin Mary is shown carrying bags of shopping and holding a mobile phone. An inscription beneath her feet reads "Our Lady of Bond Street". The reverse shows a grotesque parody of the Christ child presiding over the Last Judgment. The text below his feet reads "Born to Shop". "Most people now have enough clothes to last a lifetime," said Perry. "Even relatively poor people in this country are sucked into the endless shopping cycle."

The cartoonist Steve Bell has designed a medal that depicts the Queen with her head wrapped in bandages. The reverse shows a child killed in Baghdad under the words "Suffer little children".

Attwood said the medals cover a broad range of subjects such as "environmentalism, race and consumerism" and were not specifically intended as a criticism of British policies. "We left the subject matter completely up to the artists," he said.

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