

STEPHEN BIRD'S CERAMIC FANTASIES



GRACE COCHRANE explores the work of a ceramicist who embraces the colourful, the irrational and the subversive.



Stephen Bird's modelled and painted ceramic works appear to reinterpret eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ceramic wares which were mass-produced in factories in Stoke-on-Trent, in the English Midlands. But the subjects are subversive: investigations of contemporary suburban life, popular culture, war, violence, politics and religion, within universal themes of love, death, birth and life. He explains: "My ceramic works locate themselves in an invented world where dissonant cultural idioms come together to form a language or style I have coined 'Industrial Sabotage'."

Within this series, references to Toby jugs, commemorative wares, serving platters, dinner ware and figurines from industrial England are tangled up with moulds of bits of children's toys, images of surfing gangs and portraits of his dad, his dealer and a laughing Buddha. There are even shootouts in the Garden of Eden! But why? He explains, "I use humour, propaganda, trompe l'oeil and meaningless violence to retell archetypal myths and make observations about complex collective issues including politics, cultural imperialism and the global power struggle."

It is as tempting to imagine that Bird's Queensland ancestry contributes to his approach as it is to note that he was actually born in Stoke-on-Trent (in 1964). But no, he grew up in Dundee, Scotland, and trained at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art. He graduated in drawing and painting with a BA (Hons) in 1987, then started making three-dimensional forms using cardboard, cereal packets and found bits of wood. A number of awards as a student had allowed him to travel, for example, to Spain and Italy, as well as to the Cyprus College of Art in 1988.

His shift to ceramics was serendipitous. Someone gave him a bag of clay and he spent a summer firing pieces in his domestic fireplace. After working independently in ceramics from the early 1990s, he then spent three years from 1996 doing an advanced certificate in ceramics at the Angus College of Further Education. "It was all very basic, but I straight away knew what I wanted to do; to make vessels with figures. I felt that for me, ceramics carried no prejudice of expectation; my idea was that what I made shouldn't be seen as 'part of the art establishment'."



Opposite: Stephen Bird, *War on Pottery*, 2010, clay, pigment, glaze, 32 x 26 x 19 cm.

Top left: Stephen Bird, *Irony makes a country strong*, 2005, clay, pigment, glaze, 46 x 34cm.

Top right: Stephen Bird, *Dual platter*, 2008, tin-glazed earthenware with cobalt, 44 x 54cm.

Above: Stephen Bird, *Dreamy do* and *Breakfast Hero*, 2009, clay, pigment, glaze, 65 x 27 x 28cm and 69 x 20 x 15cm.



Bird had been around eight years of age when the family left Stoke-on-Trent, but for him it was impossible not to have been familiar with the ceramics history surrounding these pottery villages, and to become aware that many of the traditional forms also carried social and political messages. "North Staffordshire has a 400-year-old art history, largely of working-class people, making the pottery for which it is known around the world today. But they also made their special wares that were not mass-produced: the betrothal or loving-cups, tobacco jars decorated with bear-baiting imagery and figure groups showing bull-baiting scenes."

A couple of major art commissions in Dundee and London had kept Bird working with ceramics; he realised he need not rely on the facilities of the technical college. With an Australian heritage and money in his pocket, Australia was an obvious choice for travel. From 1999, he spent ten years moving between Dundee and Australia, becoming an Australian citizen in 2000, moving to Sydney permanently in 2007. He currently teaches at the National Art School, Sydney.

In 2006, he was invited to take part in an exhibition at the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent. As an artist-in-residence, he began the Industrial Sabotage series there. "Initially I looked at the emotional aspects of the figurines and then went on to explore political messages, prohibition and violence as a way of using ceramics to comment on sensitive current issues." Bird's current works fall into three broad categories: large constructed or collaged works, smaller

dioramas or figurative groups, and decorated platters. He has exhibited these in solo exhibitions at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, and in the UK, and most recently, in 2010, at The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh; the Gould Gallery, Melbourne; and the Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney.

Large constructions, *Eggs, baked beans and Buddha vase* (2010) and *Dreamy do* (2009) are collaged from many moulded components in their raw clay state, to "assemble fake histories". Bird likes to subvert what he sees as the expectations of sculpture, by using "objects that are really common, ubiquitous things: bric-a-brac, bits of toast, tins of beans — all objects of low status, associated with a low socioeconomic lifestyle".

In contrast, the dioramas, or figure groups, such as *What is he doing in there?* (2010), and *War on pottery* (2010) are more considered. As he says, dioramas were often used to educate the illiterate about, for example, religion and morality. Bird often develops scenes rather like freeze-frame action shots from film sets, where "you think you recognise what you are looking at, then with a shock find that something sinister is going on". His ceramic platters are equally subversive. The title *Irony Makes a Country Strong* (2005), for example, comes from John Heartfield's photo montage from the 1930s which mocks Hitler's slogan, 'Iron Makes a Country Strong'. On Bird's platter, Adam and Eve enjoy themselves in the Garden of Eden observed by both English fox-hunters and a squadron of jet fighters.

Given Bird's way of piecing together narratives, it is not surprising that he should be interested in extending his ideas into animated films, assisted

by an Australia Council New Work grant in 2010. For the exhibition *Laughter*, at the CAST gallery in Hobart in 2010, he used stop-frame and digital animation to make *What are you laughing at?* saying: " ... the creation of man from clay is rationalised here to take into account our post-industrial world on the brink of nuclear meltdown, environmental collapse and increasing violence. Rather than the clay figures becoming fired and permanent in the kiln, they seem to laugh, dance, melt and box their way to oblivion.

In early 2011, Bird is completing an animated film using Adobe Flash (used to create interactivity on websites, and which has been described as 'digital clay') to generate moving images and patterns which will be projected onto plates. True to form, he has selected technology that is not normally used for 'art'. Rather, he describes himself as "a storyteller who uses the irrational, the absurd and the ridiculous to sweeten the bitter pill of a somewhat tragic and ruthless world".

Stephen Bird is represented by Gould Galleries, Melbourne, and Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney. □

Above left: Stephen Bird, *What is he doing in there?* 2010, clay, pigment, glaze, 30 x 24 x 19cm.

Above right: Stephen Bird, *Eggs, baked beans and laughing Buddha vase*, 2010. CAST gallery Hobart. Photo courtesy Contemporary Art Services Tasmania.