

# MYTHS, MURDERS & OTHER MISADVENTURES

## The Works of Stephen Bird by Inga Walton

Since emigrating to Australia from Scotland in 2007, Stephen Bird has garnered considerable renown for his audacious and topical ceramic works, with their strong narrative content and pithy socio-political references.

Whether free-standing sculptures, vessels, or plates, Bird's consistent focus on the figure and its various permutations imbues his works with an immediacy that both engages and provokes viewers. "I think clay connects people with a primordial past, before 'the fall' and man's alienation from nature," Bird muses. "I see humanity as being very primitive really (just look at recent events in America) with this veneer of sophistication. I don't want my art to hide behind a veneer; I want it to be a bit scary and make people unsure of what they are really seeing."

As a result, Bird's works often deal with the body in a visceral and frank manner, including depictions of nudity, violence, sex, and abuse.

*It's a very old dilemma. An artist wants to paint or make a sculpture of a person. If the figure is clothed, then ninety per cent of the work is drapery. If they have no clothes, they are naked and that only works in certain environments: the bath, bed, and beach, maybe. So the artist clothes the figure in shadows, colour or mark-making, or facets, or primitive masks. If the figure is truly naked people blush and turn their gaze away. I think that's why I like erotic art so much, as then you get the chance to see the naked truth about people. Nobody looks at an erotic painting and asks, 'What is this one about then?'* Stephen Bird

The touring exhibition ***Bastard Son of Royal Doulton*** affords audiences the opportunity to observe the deft interplay between ceramics and painting that characterise Bird's output. For some years Bird has used the sedate and decorative form of traditional ornamental wares made by Staffordshire pottery manufacturers as the basis for satirical works.

"What I like about souvenir ceramics is their lack of pretention and sophistication. Their function is to return us to a place where we have felt the rapture of life and want something to touch and recall that

**Stephen Bird, *Saturn Eating a Man's Leg*, detail, 2016, glazed earthenware**  
h.67cm, w.35cm, d.28cm; photo: artist











feeling. It's the same reason why I make art works." As the exhibition demonstrates, Bird's influences range widely from the American cartoonists Robert Crumb and Charles Burns, to Outsider artists such as Nek Chand Saini (1924–2015).

Curated by Louise Brand, the exhibition premiered at Wollongong Art Gallery in 2015 and brings together eighty-four works, including fifty-four ceramic pieces as well as works on paper, mixed media constructions, and an animated film spanning the period 1992–2014.

*Bastard Son* reflects influences from Bird's childhood and the impact of peripatetic travel experiences on his practice: living and working between Scotland and Australia, exploring the outback, and journeying around India and the Himalayan region. A suite of works from 2004 engaged with the culture, tradition and belief structures of the Indian sub-continent, particularly Monkey and Ganesh, and the fearsome figure of Kali. Bird has an interest in the Kalighat Pats, paintings sold on the steps of the Kali Temple in Calcutta during the Raj. "As Joseph Campbell observed, 'God is a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought. It's as simple as that'. I once lay in bed in West Bengal, India. I had a fever and a storm raged outside. As I listened, I hallucinated that the goddess Kali was flying overhead and banging the ground with her fists. It was more real than the bed I was lying on," Bird contends.

Some of Bird's larger works suggest a totemic quality: the narrative is displaced along the length of the piece, with multiple faces grouped at intervals. These sculptures bear a resemblance to traditional poles and funerary markers common to indigenous cultures. Bird's father, a third-generation Queenslander, worked for the Michelin tyre company in Dundee, a position that also took the family to Africa. "My family lived in Nigeria when I was a teenager and West African tribal art and also African contemporary art has always fascinated me. When I lived in London I would spend a lot of time in the Museum of Mankind. Many of the works in there are functional things that were used and now have this other life as art. The carved enema pipes resonate with beauty and bodily function."

This fascination with myth and the darker impulses in human behaviour, frequently make their presence felt in Bird's work. In October 2016, Bird took out the Special Commendation Award at the Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize for *Saturn Eating A Man's Leg* (2016). One might assume this was simply a homage to other well-known representations of this violent incident from the Graeco-Roman canon, whereby the Titan Cronos so feared being overthrown by one of his children that he ate them. Sir Peter Paul Rubens and Francisco Goya both painted this subject, but for Bird the myth was another means by which he explored the decidedly human impulses of his great-great-grandfather Ralph Reid (1815–68), who emigrated from Scotland to Australia in 1842 and was a sheep farmer until he ran into financial difficulties. He committed suicide on 24 April 1868 and was buried in unconsecrated ground near the Queensland–New South Wales border.

**Stephen Bird, *What Is A Man*, 2016, glazed earthenware**  
h.52cm, w.43cm; photo: artist





Opposite: **Stephen Bird, *Delilah and Sampson***, 2016, glazed earthenware h.60cm, w.28cm, d.28cm; photo: artist

Bird's exhibition ***Once Upon A Time In New England*** (2014) explored this artistically fertile chapter of the family history.

*The works relating to Ralph's story were important to me because it enabled me to place the narrative in an alternative space, outside of present reality, and therefore I could tackle some of the more mythic aspects of humanity. Also there was the creation of a lost history and that really stimulated my imagination. When I was making "Saturn Eating A Man's Leg", I turned to this old myth as it was the only way I could explain Ralph's descent into madness and his eventual demise. He was a very large man and was losing his sight, power, and his home and land. After he took his own life, his children seemed to suffer terribly. One of his sons, also called Ralph, won some money thirty years after this and spent the lot on a huge fancy grave stone which now graces the corner of a field at Acacia Creek in NSW. The metaphor of the god Saturn was the only way I could tackle the subject, and show how these events turn the world upside down for generations. Stephen Bird*

Ralph Reid's story, as recreated by Bird, continues to resonate within his work.

*When I began to explore this myth, this lost family history, I made small watercolours to set the scene, then small ceramics to flesh out the forms and characters. Last year I made several larger sculptures and oil paintings where I explored the psychological aspects of Ralph's story. I was now looking at the son's grief and his love for the father. I guess in a way I am using this story to explore secular spirituality. Rapture in the face of death. I very consciously try to hang on to a story so I can re-enter it and explore it in more depth. There was never any sentimentality for my great-great grandfather, it just became a vehicle to investigate my own psyche. It was projecting onto this story. Stephen Bird*

Bird will participate in ***Story: Telling About Life***, at the Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale in Korea. He will show ***Saturn, Delilah and Samson***, and large porcelain dishes made during a residency in China last year.

*In previous years I had adopted the strategy of making very hard-hitting satirical sculptures, but in a very refined and seductive way. By 2014 this joke was wearing a bit thin for me. I had begun to spend much more time painting and I wanted to make ceramics that captured some of the spontaneity of these painted works. The large plates I have been making recently have an obvious link with the paintings, the sculptures; I am still working that out, one piece at a time. Stephen Bird*

***Story: Telling About Life*, 22 April to 28 May, 2017, Eighth Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale, Korea. Gallery 1 & 2, The Cerapia: Icheon World Ceramic Center, Gyeonggi-do Province.**

***Bastard Son of Royal Doulton* continues 24 June to 30 July 2017 at Cowra Regional Art Gallery, NSW, and from 28 April to 8 July 2018 at The National Centre for Craft & Design, Sleaford, UK.**

**Stephen Bird is represented by Olsen Irwin, Woollahra NSW; Gould Galleries, South Yarra VIC and The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh.**

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