



STEPHEN BIRD



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MY DAD WAS BORN ON THE MOON

2 AUGUST – 4 SEPTEMBER 2013

THE **SCOTTISH** GALLERY

CONTEMPORARY ART SINCE 1842

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Front cover: *Man with tree and dog*, 2012, clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 24 x 20 cms

Above: *Adam and Eve with eyes and spoon*, 2013, clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 23 x 5 cms

INTRODUCTION

Here in my Norfolk barn the mists highlighting the cobwebs in the woodpile I am cold and envious. Not just envious of Stephen Bird's joyfully dark and inventive talent but also because as I sit here feeling as if I am wrapped in a wet lettuce the talented one is probably slipping into his Speedos for a spot of surfing down under.

Stephen Bird arrived in Australia in 1999, the year I deported myself to that sunburnt country. I first met Stephen at Merran Esson's studio in the Queens Park suburb of Sydney. Merran is one of Australia's leading ceramic artists and runs the Ceramic Department of the National Art School. She was generous to both Stephen and I in those early days. Stephen worked from her studio and both of us spent time at the Art School – clay and kilns – what more could an immigrant artist want?

Stephen's work immediately caught my attention. Here was a ceramicist who did not throw pots but made comically tragic tableaux, which were quirky and poetically satirical. My first impression of him was of a somewhat dreamy Scot, fool that I was. Behind Bird's vague gaze is a steely determination. When Bird has something to say he will find a way to say it.

British artists who choose to live and work in Australia soon discover that they are liberated from the competitive self-promotion of the arts in the UK, which can sometimes lead to a highly professional form of repetition. Not so in Australia. Artists are free to fly as near to the sun as they dare or talent allows but are equally free to crash and burn. Both experiences can take the artist beyond what they thought was possible. And this exhibition is evidence that Stephen Bird is up and away.

His Australian experiences are not just observed and recorded in his work. His ceramics and watercolours radiate the feel of Australia, from the glitter of the Eucalypts to the strange and dramatic scenes that

bring Sidney Nolan to mind. Bird's work at first glance looks individualistic and eccentric but there is a well thought out direction driving his art and a breadth of technical skill that gives him an extraordinary freedom of expression.

I was not surprised to discover that Stephen was born in Stoke-on-Trent. Staffordshire pottery figures, Toby jugs and Commemorative plates seem to have migrated to Australia with Bird and taken up citizenship – murder and mayhem in the outback, shoot-outs in the Eucalypts, sex in the Pandanas.

Ray Hughes, the idiosyncratic Sydney art dealer with the eye and appetites of a Renaissance Pope, gave Bird his first exhibition. More recently his solo exhibitions in Australia have been shown at the blue-chip and more circumspect Rex Irwin Gallery, each exhibition more successful than the last.

When I returned to the UK from Australia in 2012 Stephen kindly helped me empty my Bondi studio and as a departing present he made a Toby jug replica of myself – forever in rude, elderly health. Vulgarly has to be done with wit and style and Bird has both.

Ian Fairweather, another immigrant artist from Scotland, left the old country behind and made a major contribution to Australian painting (1938-74). Forty years on Stephen Bird has established himself as more than a footnote in Australian ceramics.

Roger Law, 2013

Roger Law used to be famous. He was the evil genius behind the mocking caricature puppets for *Spitting Image*. The award winning TV series ran for twelve years, with Law masterminding the corruption of an entire generation's respect for authority and institutions. When the satire bubble burst... Law did what some people thought was the only thing he could do... he transported himself to Australia.



STEPHEN BIRD AND ROGER LAW, IN CONVERSATION



Stephen you were born in Stoke-on-Trent, which is also the birthplace of British manufactured pottery. Some of the work you have made for this exhibition recalls Staffordshire figures – I’m thinking of the Jesus shootout in the bush or the striding man with his dog – is this a childhood flashback or a more conscious nod to the UK’s ceramic past?

It all started as a childhood flashback, then became a conscious nod which developed into an obsession. I thought I knew Staffordshire pottery. When I migrated to Sydney in 2007 I brought with me a humble collection of Toby Jugs which I began to reference in my work. I soon realized that most Australians just did not get this appropriation and I ended up having to explain the history and context over and over again. I began to question just how much I really understood about these early industrial ceramics and I decided to take a closer look. This research became the starting point for the Industrial Sabotage ceramics.

You grew up and were educated in Scotland at a time when Mrs. Thatcher seemed to have personal vendetta against the Scots. Was it these youthful experiences that politicized you and gave you a taste for satire?

You may be shocked Roger, but as a young and naive fool I actually used my first vote to elect Mrs. Thatcher for her first term. It was when I attended The Duncan of Jordanstone Art College in Dundee that I became aware that I had the only Tory Dad in Scotland. Over the next 10 years the Conservative party attacked many of those freedoms and opportunities available to a young aspiring artist trying to live in Scotland. What were the yuppie years in the south of England was, for Dundee, food hand outs from the European Union’s Milk Lakes and Butter Mountains. I became part of a generation which grew up on the Rock and Roll (dole). I learned to survive on less than £40 a week and the way you live on the bread line is to become part of a community. I did not become outwardly politicized until many years later when New Labour began to lose their way and I became outraged enough to use satire.

In Britain competition is relentless and potters who find a successful formula stick to it and grow reluctant to ring the changes. Australia seems to have had a liberating, almost hedonistic, effect on your work. What do you find are the differences of working in Oz as opposed to the UK?

The biggest difference for me, working in Australia as opposed to the UK, was that I was completely nocturnal in the UK. Moving to Sydney was extremely liberating for myself and my art. The lights were on, there was less rigidity in Australian art and I also found a liberating lack of censorship here. Sydney is a very hedonistic city. I think any artist who comes to Australia with a slight reputation in the UK is seen as an Exotic European. It's always interesting to step outside your culture and find that some things you thought were ubiquitous are highly prized elsewhere.

You have certainly captured the extraordinary light and the mystical feel of the Australian bush in these pieces. When I am in the bush I am never sure what I might encounter. It heightens the senses. Do you feel the same?

I have never intentionally turned to any landscape for inspiration, but in Australia the land is so vast and so invasive it just hijacks any venture you undertake. I recently drove into the outback to make a short film with artist Neil Irons and musician come architect Paul Smith. We left Sydney a few days after tropical cyclone Oswald hit the north eastern sea board. We had a fairly specific program but we were just so distracted by the landscape and nature in all its wildness. We drove past whole mountain sides destroyed by fire and rivers with nine meters of flood water. Then there was the wild life which was everywhere. We would get out of our tents each morning never really knowing what we might encounter out there.

I used to blame the shootings and murder in some of my works on some 3rd party. I used to say "my works are just reflecting the violence in the press or committed by armies and militia". Now I am beginning



to realize that this is just a real cop out. Maybe those images are welling up from my own unconscious violent, pack hunting, monkey brain. Now I have accepted this responsibility I am a lot more careful about what images I put out there. I think violence is best served up on a plate. As for the sex, I have always seen these works as a physical embodiment of love and an antidote to the bloodshed. It's interesting that these works have been shown and acknowledged far more in Australia than in the UK. I am told that the Art Gallery of South Australia regularly display my *Adam and Eve doing it doggy style* on the wall of their gallery with pride.

I really enjoy the visual jokes in your work – whether it is a tromp l'oeil pun or a scrawled home truth – *Art of Hatred is a Labour of Love* is my favourite from this show – are these quotes directly from Bird or seen and noted down for future use?

That's a really tough question. I do note down a lot of phrases which end up adjacent to images in my sketch pad. I also toy with words and create my own quotes, but the older I get the more puzzled I am by the delusion of the self. In my work I make a connection between images, words and the unconscious but I am only just beginning to realize just how powerful that relationship can be.

Your family and friends feature in this collection of work and the results show a commitment to Australia and its way of life – from going bush or perving on the beach. An Australian journalist friend of mine when asked why the Aussies had made such good desert rats in World War II replied it was because they were really good at camping. Stephen are you becoming 100% Australian?

Certainly camping in Australia is a very different beast to camping in the UK! I still like to retain some of the simplicity of camping and getting hungry, wet and grubby is all part of the experience for me. I don't have nearly enough camping gear or a big enough tent to be 100% Australian yet.

Now... how did you become so good at ceramic glazes? You can replicate anything from a tin of paint to a fried egg or metal spoon.

Potters are incredibly generous with technical information especially if you show them an example of your huge failing. My training as a painter taught me to build up images in layers, and to keep looking and adjusting all the time. I have simply applied the same technique to my ceramics.

What aspect of Australian art has influenced the work you are doing now?

It's impossible to work in Australia without noticing the huge influence Asian art has here. Certainly the 'Writing Mind' or Xie Yi tradition has had some effect on the way I use a brush now. Australian potters have a great deal of knowledge and understanding of high fired traditional Chinese glazes and also their eccentricities in using the potter's wheel. Joseph Purtle, my studio assistant for the summer is the embodiment of this fusion between east and west, and we set about making a series of vases. Throwing leaves me with the frustration of being a machine operator. Joe sees it all so differently and he feels the Zen in the appliance where I feel like I am driving a bus around a muddy field.

What's next?

Next year Wollongong City Art Gallery is curating a mid career survey show of my works which will show paintings, films and ceramics from the past three decades.



Pair of pugilists, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 66 x 26 x 19 cms (left), 73 x 30 x 20 cms (right)



'Rex' Ernest Battarbee (1893–1973) was an Australian artist notable for painting landscapes of Central Australia, and for teaching Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira to paint. The representation of places familiar to the local Aranda (Arunta) people made a great impact on Albert Namatjira, known simply as Albert, who asked Rex for materials in order to do his own painting. Rex undertook his third visit to Central Australia in 1936 where he employed Albert as camel-boy during excursions. Rex taught Albert basic watercolour painting, and was delighted and inspired by his pupil's aptitude. He included three of Albert's works in his 1937 Royal South Australian Society of Arts showing in Adelaide and next year arranged a solo exhibition for him at the Fine Art Society Gallery, Melbourne.

Albert and Rex out painting
clay, pigment, glaze, 41 x 22 x 22 cms



Kangaroo Fight
clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 33 cms





Kangaroo and Joey, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms



Kangaroos at Erlanda Point
etching, 22 x 29 cms

RALPH REID

In 1842, Ralph Reid emigrated with his wife Emily from Scotland to Australia. He was a sheep farmer and a father to 12 children. He committed suicide on April 24, 1868 and was buried in unconsecrated ground in a single grave near the Queensland New South Wales borders overlooking Acacia Creek. This grave was discovered in 2009. Ralph Reid is Stephen Bird's great great grandfather.

In 1853 Mr Ralph Reid, a big man, some 6 feet and 7 inches in height and weighing 20 stone, was superintendent of Maryland, Australia. Ralph Reid continued as superintendent at Maryland until 1859 when he wished to start out on his own account. Matthew Marsh gave him a flock of sheep and he went into partnership with Charles Marsh on the Acacia run in early 1860. By January 30, 1861 the Acacia Station ran 11,905 sheep.

By April 1868, Ralph declared that the land was unsuitable for sheep. He was in despair at seeing the lambs dying and explained that his healthy lambs were pining away. He seemed at a loss to know the cause and his own vision was failing. It was a time of financial hardship.

It seems trouble started when Alfred Greenup, Matthew March's son-in-law, became manager of Maryland in July, 1868, and claimed Acacia Ridge for the March family. His claiming of Acacia Ridge meant Ralph Reid had no residence or means of support and it is thought this is what drove him to suicide.

This was apparently very upsetting for the family and led to them purchasing the plot of land where he could be buried without a Minister of Religion present and in un-consecrated ground.

After the burial, Emily Reid moved to Warwick with the children where she passed away in November, 1872 leaving the children orphans.





Acacia Creek Vase, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 32 x 26 x 14 cms



Pink plate with ink and eyes, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 6 x 29 x 21 cms



Paint tray with jug, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 15 x 30 x 19 cms

Remorse, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 44 x 53 cms



Man with tree and dog, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 24 x 20 cms





Man with dog and dog poo, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms



Hexagonal plate with man with stick and dog III
clay, pigment, glaze, 25 x 26 cms



Roger Law Toby, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 35 x 18 x 24 cms



Self portrait, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 36 x 16 x 20 cms

Adam and Eve with eyes, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 35 x 43 cms





Adam and Eve with eyes and spoon
clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 23 x 5 cms



Petrol, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 40 x 33 cms

Artist talking to his children, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 38 cms



Shattered vase, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 39 x 19 x 19 cms





Jumpers at Wattamolla
etching, 50.5 x 40 cms



Self portrait drawing a palm tree, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 38 cms



Silly wee bastard, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms



You are a waste of space, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms

Man with insects, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 53 x 43 cms





Black plate with egg, eye and biscuit, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 20 x 29 cms



Daily bread, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 40 x 50 cms

STEPHEN BIRD

BIOGRAPHY

- 1964 Born Stoke on Trent, UK
1987 B.A. (Hons) Fine Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee
1988 Post Graduate, Cyprus College of Art, Lemba, Paphos
1998 Higher National Certificate, Ceramics, Angus College of Further Education
Lives and works Sydney (AUS) and Dundee (UK)
Nationality: British/Australian.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Where the wild roses grow*. Rex Irwin Art Dealer. Sydney, Australia
2011 *Staffordshire Psycho*. Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane, Australia
2010 *War on pottery*. Rex Irwin Art Dealer. Sydney, Australia
Irony makes a country strong. Gould gallery. Melbourne. Australia
Industrial Sabotage Phase-3. Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
2009 *New work*, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
Windows show, Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool, UK
2008 *Industrial Sabotage*, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
The view from here, paintings from Australia. Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh
2007 Compass Gallery, Glasgow
Figure this, The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke on Trent
2006 Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2005 Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
2004 England & Co, London
One Five Two Gallery, Dundee Contemporary Arts
2003 *A journey to Australia through India, S.E. Asia*. Open Eye Gallery
England & Co, London (concurrent show with David Larwill)
2001 Compass Gallery, Glasgow
2000 England & Co, London
1998 *Works on paper*, Wysing Arts, Cambridge
1994 Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh
1994 Psychology Institute, Edinburgh
1989 Tower Gallery, Dundee University

AWARDS

- 2012 New work grant, established artist, Australia Council for the Arts
Vitrify. The Vitrify Alcorso Ceramic Award. (Shortlisted artist)
2011 Deakin University Contemporary Small Sculpture Award
2010 New work grant, established artist, Australia Council for the Arts
Woollahra Small sculpture Prize, Special Commendation



One cannot look at this
clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 18 cms

- 2006 Dundee Visual Arts Award
Aberdeen artists design award
Shell Expo Award, Aberdeen
- 2005 Engage Scotland Visual Arts Education Award
- 2004 Professional Development Award. Scottish Arts Council Lottery Grant
Creative Development Award. Scottish Arts Council
- 2000 Dundee Visual Arts Award
- 1997 Mott McDonald Painting Prize, Aberdeen Artists Society, Travelled to N.Y
- 1987 Elizabeth Greenshields Memorial Award
- 1986 Duncan of Drunfaulk Travel Award, Italy
- 1985 Ian Eadie Memorial Award. Travelled to Holland and Belgium
- 1984 Mitchell Painting Prize. Travelled to Barcelona, Spain

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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50 things collectors need to know, Art Collector, Prue Gibson, issue 63, Jan-March.
Quinticentennial Australia, Sydney Morning Herald, 26th January
- 2012 *Stephen Bird*. Profile by Leslie Chow. Artist Profile Magazine. Issue 19
Tough Landscape. Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum. Review by John McDonald. 24th Feb.
Melbourne Art Fair 2012, exhibition catalogue. Melbourne Art Foundation.
HYPERCLAY. Review by Altair Roelants. The Journal of Australian ceramics. Vol 51/1 April 2012.
HYPERCLAY. Review by Kerry-Anne Cousins. The Canberra Times. 3rd April, 2012.
Where the wild roses grow. Exhibition catalogue. Published through Blurb Books.
The Best Of 500 Ceramics. Lark Books, Sterling Publishing Co, New York/London. ISBN 13:978-1-4547-0141-5
- 2011 *Dark days, Bright Nights*. WRAP Magazine, issue 3. Published by The Wrap Paper Ltd, UK.
Placement. Published by Oriel Davies and Fife Contemporary Arts. ISBN 978-1-907346-03-3
The Midas Touch. Australian art Market Report. Issue 38 first quarter 2011
Stephen Bird. Profiled by Grace Cochrane. Australian Arts Review. Issue 27, May-June, 2011
Gold Coast International Ceramic Award. Exhibition review. Craft Arts International. Autumn.



Pottery, 2013

clay, pigment, glaze, 19 x 19 cms

Art of hatred, 2012

clay, pigment, glaze, 16.5 x 16.5 cms

- 2010 *Laughter*. Exhibition catalogue. Contemporary Art Space Tasmania
Laughter. Exhibition review. Artlink, Australia and Asia-Pacific Vol 30 no 4
Ceramics Today. Jeffrey B. Snyder. Published by Schiffer Ltd
Collect @ Saatchi Gallery, Catalogue. Crafts Council of Great Britain
- 2009 *Contemporary Ceramics, international perspective*. By Emmanuel Cooper, Thames and Hudson
 Ceramic Art and Perception, issue 77, *Stop motion ceramics*, by Toni Warburton
- 2008 *500 Tiles*, Lark Books, Sterling Publishing Co, New York/ London.
 ISBN-10:1-57990-714-8
500 Plates, Lark Books, Sterling Publishing Co, New York/ London
Indie travel guide, UK and Europa. Rockbuch, Hamburg.
 ISBN 978-3-927638-46-4
- 2007 Ceramic Review. Review of Solo show at Scottish Gallery. Issue CR 224
- 2006 Dundee Visual Arts Award Scheme, Catalogue
 Australian Contemporary at SOFA Chicago, catalogue
 The Sunday Times, Inside Out magazine. Dec 2006 issue
 SOFA Chicago, catalogue. Sculptural Objects & Functional Art
- 2005 Ceramic Art and Perception, issue 62, *No Place Like Home*, by Gregor White
 The Australian News Paper, arts review, Dec 2nd 2005, by Sebastian Smee
 The Journal of Australian Ceramics, 44#3. *Collective Journeys* by Stephen Bird
- 2004 *Recent Ceramics at England & Co*, exhibition catalogue. Text by Jane England
- 2003 *New Wave, Wales-Scotland II* Exhibition catalogue. Written by Amanda Game
- 2002 *Sydney Myer International Ceramics Award*. LaTrobe University, Victoria
 Artesian Magazine. Review of Compass Gallery show. Summer edition
- 2001 Ceramic Review. *Souvenirs From The Outside*. By Gregor White. Issue CR190
Obsessive visions, Art Outside the Mainstream, England & Co, London
- 1999 *The Plate Show*, catalogue. Collins Gallery, Strathclyde University, Glasgow

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia
 National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
 Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
 Artbank Sydney, Australia
 Deakin University Art Gallery, Melbourne,
 Aberdeen Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland
 Paisley Art Gallery and Museum, Renfrewshire, Scotland
 Dundee Art Gallery and Museum, Scotland
 Dundee District Council, Scotland
 Hackney Borough Council, England
 Mexican Consulate, Blairgowrie, Scotland
 Arizona State University Art Museum. USA
 The Grainer Collection, Washington, D.C. USA



More British eggs, 2013
 clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
Andy Murray, 2013
 clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms



My dad was born on the moon, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 28 x 29 cms

Published by The Scottish Gallery to coincide with the exhibition
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Exhibition can be viewed online at
www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/XXXXXXX



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Right: *Sydney Dandy*, 2013, clay, pigment, glaze, 27 x 27 cms

Back cover: *Plate with eggs and spaghetti*, 2013, clay, pigment, glaze, 6 x 22 x 22 cms





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