

# Toying with convention

*Bastard Son of Royal Doulton* is a touring exhibition of Stephen Bird's evocative work. Inga Walton reviews the launch of the show in Australia before it heads to the UK



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** *War On Pottery*, 2010, clay, pigment and glaze, 32 x 26 x 19cm  
**THIS PAGE LEFT:** *Acacia Creek Vase*, 2013, clay, pigment and glaze, 32 x 26 x 14cm  
**ABOVE:** *Long Live Cruel Utopias*, 2003, stoneware, pigment and glaze, 28 x 29 x 20cm

Bringing together 84 works, including 54 ceramic pieces, items on paper, mixed media constructions, and an animated film spanning the period 1992-2014, the touring exhibition *Bastard Son of Royal Doulton* represents the wry, irreverent and sometimes pugnacious output of Stephen Bird. The title alludes to his reputation for subverting the tropes of traditional English ceramic ware, while maintaining the greatest respect for its artistry and the vital role it has played in the development of local industries. More broadly, it also acknowledges those famous potteries associated with Bird's birthplace of Stoke-on-Trent, and the path by which he came to find his artistic métier.

Curated by Louise Brand at Wollongong Art Gallery (in the Illawarra region of New South Wales), the exhibition took three years to plan and ship from the UK. Bird's solo show *My Dad Was Born On The Moon* (2013) at the Scottish Gallery, as part of the *Edinburgh International Festival*, gave him the opportunity to photograph all the works at his studio in Dundee. Brand made her selection from these pieces, most of which have never been exhibited in Australia before. These vessels, particularly *Paint Tray* (2013), serve to emphasise the emergence of sculpture and painting that drives Bird's practice, alongside his interest in experimentation, glazes and the transformative capacities of the firing process.

## AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE

Many of the works reflect the artist's personal narrative of journeying to and from Australia over a decade, and his eventual settlement there in 2007. Bird, who is a lecturer in ceramics at the National Art School in Sydney, continues to split his time between the UK and Australia. Works such as *Cruel Britannia* (2001), *Long Live Cruel Utopias* (2003), pictured far right, *How I Became an Australian* (2005), and *Self-portrait as a Toby Jug* (2010) are imbued with (sometimes ambivalent) references to both countries. *Acacia Creek Vase* (2013), pictured right, forms part of a semi-autobiographical discourse about colonial Australia inspired by the life story of Bird's great-great grandfather Ralph Reid (1815-68), who emigrated from Scotland in 1842. Reid committed suicide on 24 April 1868 and was buried in unconsecrated ground near the Queensland/New South Wales border.

In 2013, Bird and two friends undertook the arduous 3,245km journey into the outback to visit Reid's grave, which is tended by Bird's cousin Lyn Spain. The suite of works produced in tribute allowed Bird to explore the myths surrounding his ancestor, and trace the disparate branches of his family's history within Australia.


Bird is well known for his vibrant plates and platters that echo traditional serving dishes, but which invariably depict an unexpected scenario, proclaim some pithy

observation, or follow the cadence of his philosophical musings. In this, he joins a growing number of contemporary artists whose work challenges the assumption that ceramics are not a viable medium for political or social commentary. Religious conflict is the focus of *Shoot Out Plate* (2010), where two apostle-like figures engage in a gun battle above the subtitle 'A darker heartlessness'. Random urban violence is the theme of *Shoot the Freak* (2006), while the corporate culture of McDonald's is the subject matter for *Heal Me Ronald* (2007). *Good News For Bald Heads* (2005) declares 'Our swords are thriving for the necks of barbers', in reference to Taliban strictures regarding men's beards and head coverings.

## TRAGIC SCENES

Bird's ceramic tableaux do not shy away from unsettling scenes of tragedy, cruelty and desperation – in fact they predominantly feature the criminal, the vulgar and the lewd. *Eliza Day* (2011), based on the Nick Cave ballad *Where the Wild Roses Grow* (1995), depicts the grisly reality of domestic violence as the titular victim lies inert by the riverbank, bludgeoned with a stone by her lover. Similarly, in *The Executioner Makes a Cup* (2014) a defenceless woman has been decapitated with an axe in a forest by a hooded figure who pauses for a refreshing break. *Transvestite and Friends* (1996) signals Bird's support for

marginalised groups within the wider community. *War On Pottery* (2010), left, sees a man in military fatigues brandishing a rifle as he takes aim at multiple vessels lined up in a row. We are reminded that cultural vandalism, of the type recently seen in Palmyra, Syria, is still a terrorist act. Other works depict Bird's travel experiences in the Himalayas and India, and an ongoing series is devoted to documenting domestic scenes and his family life.

Sometimes shocking but always captivating, this unique exhibition will no doubt engage, entertain and certainly surprise those who have never experienced Bird's thought-provoking work before. 

*Bastard Son of Royal Doulton* continues to Cowra Regional Art Gallery, New South Wales, Australia, from 24 June to 30 July 2017; [cowraartgallery.com.au](http://cowraartgallery.com.au), and The National Centre for Craft & Design (NCCD), Sleaford, UK, from 28 April to 8 July 2018; [nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk](http://nationalcraftanddesign.org.uk). Stephen Bird is represented by The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, [scottish-gallery.co.uk](http://scottish-gallery.co.uk); Olsen Irwin, Woollahra, New South Wales, [olsenirwin.com](http://olsenirwin.com); and Gould Galleries, South Yarra, Victoria, [gouldgalleries.com](http://gouldgalleries.com). For more on his work visit [stephenbird.net](http://stephenbird.net)