STEPHEN BIRD
BASTARD SON OF ROYAL DOULTON

“One cannot look at THIS.”
STEPHEN BIRD
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Supported by

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www.stephenbird.net
Stephen Bird is represented at Olsen Irwin, Sydney and Gould Galleries, Melbourne
www.olsenirwin.com
www.gouldgalleries.com
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All works are collection of the artist unless otherwise stated
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STEPHEN BIRD
BASTARD SON OF ROYAL DOULTON
A WOLLONGONG ART GALLERY TOURING EXHIBITION
FOREWORD

JOHN MONTELEONE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Stephen Bird: the Bastard Son of Royal Doulton is an enticing exhibition. From its evocative and amusingly irreverent title to its bizarre often comically hybrid forms and images it lures the viewer into a strange, adult ‘Alice through the Looking Glass’ world which is sometimes shocking but always captivating. The artworks are replete with historical and personal references as well as political and social commentary. It is an exhibition packed so full of inventive imagery and ideas that it not only deserves but requires multiple viewings.

The exhibition has garnered much interest from other galleries and venues and will be Wollongong Art Gallery’s first major touring exhibition since 2012. Touring exhibitions require a significant commitment from galleries and in contemplating the catalogue foreword it reminded me how effective the Gallery’s professional staff has been in bringing their diverse knowledge and experience to this exhibition.

The Gallery team work in unison to ensure the successful public presentation of all our exhibitions and their related programs, and it struck me that for many gallery visitors the back stage work of bringing an exhibition to the public may be something of a mystery. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank the Gallery’s curatorial team for lending their expertise to help bring this exhibition to you. So thank you to the Gallery’s Vivian Vidulich who first suggested to artist Stephen Bird that he consider submitting an exhibition proposal to the Gallery and for her subsequent work on the exhibition catalogue and public programs. Thank you to Technical Officer Milly Hyde who has been busily devising display solutions for some of the works in the show and to Julie Danilov who is investigating and developing education opportunities related to the exhibition. I would especially like to acknowledge and thank Exhibition Curator Louise Brand who worked closely with the artist over many months to further develop and refine the exhibition rationale even taking time while she was on leave to work on the show.

Most importantly I would like to thank the artist Stephen Bird for sharing his work with us and with audiences around regional NSW. It is always a pleasure for us to work in close association with artists and assist them in presenting their work to the public. We hope you will be engaged, entertained and even surprised by this unique exhibition.

Eliza Day, 2011, clay, pigment, glaze, 16 x 22 x 18cm, private collection
THE IRRATIONAL, THE ABSURD AND THE RIDICULOUS

GRACE COCHRANE

Stephen Bird, the Bastard Son of Royal Doulton of this exhibition, describes himself as a storyteller who locates his work in ‘an invented world where dissonant cultural idioms come together’, saying:

I like to explore the fine line between what is comic and what is tragic, and to make art which examines society’s taboos and dogmas and reveals some of the parameters of human existence.¹

He has lived permanently in Australia from 2007, having travelled regularly between Sydney and Scotland since 1999. While some works in the exhibition have been lent from Australian collections, most have been brought from Bird’s personal collection stored in Scotland: he points out that ‘these are quite personal and private pieces which, rather than illustrating my professional career to date, exemplify my private life and personal achievements or events’.²

Bird is known for his modelled and painted ceramic forms which idiosyncratically re-interpret the 18th and 19th century ornamental and souvenir wares that were mass-produced in factories such as in Stoke-on-Trent, in Staffordshire in the British Midlands. While these pieces appear traditional at first glance, his subjects have always been subversive responses to contemporary aspects of popular culture, history, war, violence, politics and religion, within universal themes such as love, death, birth and life.

Over 20 years of exhibiting ceramic figures and plates, Bird has not lost sight of where he started in drawing and painting. Nonetheless, alongside his clear understanding of the historical ceramic genres to which he refers, his knowledge of ceramic techniques is also extensive. Roger Law has said of his glazing, for example, that he can ‘replicate anything from a tin of paint to a fried egg or metal spoon’.³

Bird in the Scottish Highlands, 1992, Ruth Ogilvy

War on Pottery (detail), 2010, ceramic, 32 x 26 x 19cm, private collection

Crossing swords with death, 1996, ceramic, height 10cm
It is not only tempting to imagine that Bird’s Australian ancestry might contribute to his approach, but also fascinating to note that he was actually born (in 1964) in Stoke-on-Trent, home of many famous potteries including, eventually, Royal Doulton. He was brought up, however, as a Scot, after the family moved to Dundee in 1971. His father, a third-generation Queenslander and former coalminer, went to work for the Michelin tyre company in Dundee and also, for some time, in Nigeria. Bird trained at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and graduated in 1987, but disliked what he saw as the academic undertones of the art world. For this reason as well as that of his poverty as a young artist, he started making constructions from scrap materials.

A number of awards allowed Bird to travel, for example to Spain and Italy, as well as to a self-directed postgraduate course in Cyprus in 1988 where, among painting activities, he dug clay from a nearby beach and pit-fired it. His eventual shift to ceramics was serendipitous. After painting for some years in his farm-studio in Scotland, someone gave him a bag of clay and he spent the summer of 1996 working with it, firing pieces in his home fireplace. He subsequently spent three years from 1996 with a ‘skills-based’ training grant, doing an advanced certificate in ceramics at the Angus College for Further Education, where he realised he wanted to make ceramic vessels with figures:

- It was all very basic; we made earthenware cups and teapots, throwing and basic mould making. I felt that for me, ceramics carried no prejudice of expectation, as other media such as oil-painting did. Ceramics was not considered ‘art’. My idea was that what I made shouldn’t be part of the artistic establishment.4

This training was clearly a critical step. However, it had been impossible even as a child not to have been familiar with the history surrounding the Staffordshire Potteries, and to become aware that many of the traditional forms made there carried social and political messages. The ornamental figurines and vessels not only represented commemorative events and famous or notorious people of the day, but also stereotypes of class and occupation. As he points out:

- North Staffordshire has a history of producing ceramics stretching back to medieval times, largely of working-class people making the pottery
But they also made their end-of-day 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 – the Staffy bull-terrier was, after all, bred to fight bulls and bears.\(^5\)

He discovered that these controversial subjects became popular around the time when the Anti-Blood Sport Act of 1838 began to put such working-class sports under threat, while noting that the law which excluded the gentry’s pursuit of foxhunting was not amended until a month before the invasion of Iraq in 2002. Violence, murder, cultural imperialism and the global power struggle were to become part of his own visual language – as in fact, were love, lust, companionship and cross-cultural influences.

Some major public art commissions in Dundee, London and Aberdeen kept Bird working in ceramics. With his Australian heritage and now, money in his pocket, Australia was an obvious choice for travel. From 1999, Bird spent 10 years moving regularly between Dundee and Australia, meeting his future partner, Sarah, on the way. He also visited other Asian countries, one of which was India where Sarah was a volunteer in the orphanage, Familia Home, near Calcutta.

In 2006, Bird was invited to show a group of works at the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent, where there was an important historical collection. Here he began his Industrial Sabotage series where, in a ‘de-territorialised world’ he returned in his imagination to his place of origin and re-interpreted the production traditions of the potteries. In 2010 he wrote that he started to explore political messages, prohibition and violence as a way of using ceramics to comment on sensitive current issues, saying: ‘I am looking at the irrational, the absurd and the ridiculous and trying to drive my work towards some kind of disconcerting hiatus in order to re-examine the figurine, the figurative vessel, its context and its contemporary significance.\(^6\)

Over the last decade Bird has had solo exhibitions in several galleries in Australia. In 2010, using pun-titles such as War on Pottery at the Rex Irwin Gallery in Sydney, and Irony makes a country strong at the Gould Galleries in Melbourne, references to Toby jugs, commemorative wares, serving plates and figurines from industrial England, were tangled up with moulds of bits of children’s toys, images of surfing gangs, portraits of his Dad and a laughing Buddha. There were even shoot-outs in the Garden of Eden. He explained: ‘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. He has also consistently shown his work in Scotland and England. A recent exhibition in Scotland was My Dad Was Born on the Moon, at the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh, during the 2013 Edinburgh International Festival. It included figures, two-dimensional works and a wall of plates, following familiar themes as well as references to Bird’s life in Australia.

This theme was elaborated on in the exhibition Once upon a time in New England, at the Gould Galleries in 2014. In 2013 Bird and two friends had journeyed over 3000 kilometres through the Australian outback near the NSW/Queensland border, to visit the grave of his ancestor, Ralph Reid, who had migrated to Acacia Creek in 1842. Bird’s ceramic figures, plates, dioramas and watercolours on paper not only expressed the imagined presence of his great-great-grandfather, as well as his suicide in 1868 referred to in Acacia Creek Vase (2013), but also recorded many dramatic events, including a cyclone, floods and bushfires that the friends experienced along the way. A vase, Trip to the outback (2013) includes a blue and white cameo illustration of the trio in a boat at a place they named Shit Creek, and excerpts from Bird’s diary. As well as a recognisable Stephen Bird in the recurring image of a striding man in a hat, it is noticeable how many of the imagined portraits of his ancestor, as in the figure, Grandad Walking (2014), also look so much like Bird himself.

Bastard Son of Royal Doulton draws on many of these series of work. At the same time the exhibition brings attention to the conceptual and physical development of Bird’s way of working, over time. Some of the earliest drawings from around 1992 in his Scottish studio are complemented by recent paintings such as Ralph Reid was a Big Man (2014). Many ideas explored in two-dimensional works are further developed in ceramic form: the tea seller carrying a tray of teacups on his head in a watercolour, Char Wallah, in 2002, appears again in 2004 as a ceramic figure. And Australian travels by Bird and his partner may be represented by a watercolour, Camping in the Flinders ranges (2002), a diorama such as Tree with couple and fire (2004) or a brightly painted plate like Adam and Eve (2000).

Char Wallah, 2004, earthenware with pigment and glaze, 51 x 22 x 15cm
Loving Cup, 2009, ceramic, 40x31x20cm
Buddha and baked beans vases, 2010, ceramic, 69 x 27 x 27cm
Grandad walking, 2014, clay, pigment and glaze, 27 x 10 x 12cm
Many of Bird’s works are in the form of figures, or vessels such as tobacco jars, teapots or vases, some of which refer to Staffordshire archetypes like Toby jugs. Made from hand-formed or moulded elements, each usually represents an ambiguous story or message: *Man on a Horse* (2003), for example, the first work to be made and fired in Australia, then over-painted later in Scotland, is reminiscent of a bushranger but could also be a self-portrait of himself as a backpacker. Some of these constructions, built on bases with ‘flat backs’, he identifies as dioramas, noting the form was often used to educate the illiterate about religion and morality. Bird plans such pieces, often through selecting a title and making sketches, before developing scenes rather like familiar film sets, where ‘you think you recognise what you are looking at, then with a shock, find that something sinister is going on’. *Eliza Day* (2011), for example, takes the implicit murder in the song *Where the Wild Roses grow*, performed by Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue, to a more explicit conclusion.

The large collaged ceramic figures, such as *Dreamy do* (2009) and *Boxers* (2012) evolve from many moulded components, to ‘assemble fake histories’. Bird does not overly premeditate the content or form in these large works, so there are always surprises as the pieces come together. As well as making references to aspects of Staffordshire pottery, his interest in subverting what he sees as the expectations of sculpture draws him to use ‘objects that are really familiar, ubiquitous things: bric a brac, bits of toast, tins of beans, all elements of low-quality value’. The components are also responses to where he lives: some years ago he introduced Chinese elements, both for historical connections with ceramics but also in recognition of a Chinese presence in the cultural life of Sydney. Many works recall the influence of African art from when his father worked in Nigeria, as well as his own observations of Indian and Indigenous Australian cultures.

Some components are used in multiples to build up a form rather in the manner of playing with Lego or building a brick wall. In 2009 for example, during a residency at the University of South Australia, Bird’s solution for constructing large-scale works was to make a small mould of a doll’s head, which he ‘tessellated’ in layers, as for *Orange Death Toby* (2010) and the vase, *Lola and Lawrence* (2011), which refers to his children. Similarly, eyeballs are currently a prominent feature, sometimes attached to figures or served in multiples as in the plate, *Eye pie* (2010). Bird points out that metaphorically, eyes reveal all our basic fears: ‘there

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I just don’t believe in ceramics, 2010, WMV file projected onto ceramic plates

Steve & Me, Great Keppel Island, 2000, acrylic on paper, 51 x 63.5cm

What are you laughing at, 2010, still from animation
are all those stories of people who never had insight until they lost their eyesight.'9 In contrast, working within the context of visual disability, he made White huggable vase (2004) for blind people to touch.

While referring in his own work to both traditional serving dishes and commemorative wares, Bird also says that ‘violence is best served up on a plate’.10 Ceramic plates and platters such as Shoot the freak (2006) sometimes include adapted or invented titles or slogans that may be presented as a pun or parody. Heal me Ronald refers to the Big Mac charity clown mascot, Ronald McDonald. Other titles include Cruel Britannia (2001) to celebrate the Queen’s birthday, while In the Restaurant (2012) shows a peaceful blue on white portrait of Bird’s family eating from bowls around a table.

Given Bird’s way of piecing together narratives, it is not surprising that he should be interested in extending his ideas into animated films. For the exhibition, Laughter, at the CAST gallery in Hobart in 2010, he made What are you laughing at? using stop-frame and digital animation to re-tell the creation story through documenting the origin of two constructed ceramic figures.

He explains:

A recurring premise in many belief systems around the world, 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.11

Then in early 2011 Bird completed I just don’t believe in ceramics, for the group exhibition, Hyperclay, at Object Gallery, using Adobe Flash and algorithms to generate movement and patterns to be projected onto plates. The projected animations using vector images were intended to resemble plates he’d painted.

In bringing together this survey of works made over more than 20 years of Stephen Bird’s career to date, Bastard Son of Royal Doulton offers special insights into the evolution of his personal journey of exploring and commenting on the world around him or, as he says: ‘of equal or even more importance … has been the act of monumentalising or mythologising the domestic and the trivial achievements and failures of my own life’.12

ENDNOTES

1 Stephen Bird, artist statement, 2011
2 Stephen Bird, correspondence with author, 2015
3 Roger Law, ‘Stephen Bird, My Dad was Born on the Moon’, Craft Arts International 88, 2013, p105
4 Stephen Bird, discussion with author, 2011
5 ibid, 2011
6 Industrial Sabotage Phase-3, The Scottish Gallery, June 2010
7 Gould Galleries, Sept 2010; Rex Irwin Gallery, 2010
8 Stephen Bird, artist statement 2010
9 Stephen Bird, ibid, 2015
10 Roger law, ibid, p105
11 Stephen Bird, artist statement, Laughter, CAST Gallery, 2010
12 Stephen Bird, correspondence with author, 2015

GRACE COCHRANE

Grace Cochrane is an independent writer and curator who has been an advocate for the crafts for 40 years and a former museum curator. She wrote The Crafts Movement in Australia: a History (UNSW Press, 1992), has written and contributed to many other publications, served on a range of Boards and committees and continues to work on exhibitions. She has an MFA and PhD from the University of Tasmania and a D. Litt. from the University of NSW.
CERAMICS AND WORKS ON PAPER
1992 - 2014

Girl on a bike with dog and house, 1992, oil on wood and tin, 50 x 33cm

Study for Woodmill farm, 1996, charcoal on paper, 60 x 84cm
Transvestite and friends, 1996, terracotta with slip and clear glaze, approx 29 x 17 x 17cm

Death in the Hilltown, 1992, oil on cardboard, 60 x 48 x 11cm

Dundee I love you but you’re bringing me down, 1992, oil on cardboard, tin and perspex, 55.5 x 84 x 10cm
Man, woman and dog teapot, 1998, terracotta with slip and clear glaze, 19 x 24 x 15cm

Woman with butterfly and bugs, 2000, terracotta with slip and oxides, 42 x 34cm

Man with cup and dog, 2001, earthenware with pigment and glaze, 40 x 22 x 17cm
Man and woman, 2000, gouache and oil pastel on paper, 56 x 38cm

Man descending a mountain, 2003, watercolour on paper, 41.5 x 29.5cm

Christmas papa's sock, 2004, watercolour and collage on paper, 76 x 56cm
Adam and Eve, 2000, terracotta with slip and clear glaze and on glaze enamel, 32 x 38cm
Head of a woman, 2000, terracotta with slip and clear glaze, 37 x 26 x 19cm
Man by a river, 2000, terracotta with slip and clear glaze, 41 x 34cm
Malaise, 1997, etching, 15 x 22cm

Sarah doing yoga at Trephina Gorge, East Macdonald ranges, 2002, watercolour on paper, 21 x 30cm (far left)

Study for Cancer country II, 1997, ink on paper, 60 x 84cm (left)

Sarah, 2000, ink on paper, 56 x 38cm (above)
Strawberry eaters, 1997, pastel on paper, 76 x 56cm

Fire starter, 1997, etching, 16.5 x 13cm
Familia 25 years, 2004, earthenware with pigment and glaze, 43 x 36cm

Tree with couple and fire, 2004, terracotta with slip, pigment and glaze, 49 x 29 x 24cm

Kali, 2004, stoneware with pigment and glaze, 37 x 25 x 16cm

Monkey and Ganesh, 2004, earthenware with pigment, glaze and on glaze, 41 x 18 x 16cm
Shoot the freak, 2006, tin glazed earthenware with cobalt, 39 x 30cm

Trek in the Himalayas, 2004, ceramic on wood with mixed media, 60 x 32 x 15cm

Good news for bald heads, 2005, earthenware with slip, pigment, glaze and decals, 36 x 43cm

Souvenir of Scotland, 2007, earthenware with slip, pigment and glaze, 18 x 18 x 18cm
Lovers in the bush, 2006, earthenware with pigment, glaze and on glaze, 28 x 28 x 24cm

Heal me Ronald, 2007, earthenware with slip, pigment, glaze and lustre, 45 x 37cm

Land of cakes, 2004, earthenware with pigment, glaze, on glaze and decals, 20 x 30 x 12cm
Long Live Cruel Utopias, 2003, stoneware with pigment and glaze, 28 x 29 x 20cm

Poor Jenny, poor Kookaburra, 2006, tin glazed earthenware with cobalt and decals, 17 x 23cm
The Amazing Great Barrier Reef, 2000, stoneware with pigment and glaze, 36 x 24 x 17cm

Man on a horse, 2003, ceramic, 50 x 40 x 17cm approx
Camping in the Flinders ranges, 2002, watercolour on card, 10 x 15cm

Gt Keppel Island Backpackers, 1999, pencil on paper, 21 x 27cm

Great Keppel Island ferry, 1999, pencil on paper, 21 x 27cm

Two men in a boat, 2000, oil on canvas, 120 x 120cm
Adam and Eve against a tree, 2010, tin glazed earthenware with cobalt, 33 x 33cm

The executioner makes a cup, 2014, clay, pigment and glaze, 28 x 30 x 18cm

Eye pie, 2010, clay, pigment and glaze, 4 x 29 x 20cm, private collection

War on pottery, 2010, clay, pigment and glaze, 32 x 26 x 19cm, private collection
Ralph Reid was a big man, 2014, watercolour on paper, 38 x 28cm (left)

Not too big, 2013, watercolour on paper, 27.5 x 35.5cm

The artist and his children in the woods, 2012, watercolour on paper, 57 x 76cm
Boxers, 2012, clay, pigment and glaze, 70 x 37 x 32cm, Deakin University Collection

Full English breakfast, 2010, earthenware with slip, pigment and glaze, 40 x 33cm
Trip to the outback, 2013, clay, pigment and glaze, 47 x 25 x 25cm

Lola and Lawrence vase, 2011, clay, pigment and glaze, 50 x 17 x 17cm

Tall figures and Stephen Bird, 2003, Sandy Hope

Tall figures detail, 2003, clay, pigment and glaze (right)
Self portrait as a Toby Jug, 2010, clay, pigment and glaze, 32 x 18 x 25cm

Acacia Creek Vase, 2013, clay, pigment and glaze, 32 x 26 x 14cm
STEPHEN BIRD CV

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

      Gould Gallery, Melbourne

2013  My Dad Was Born On The Moon.
      Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland

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

2009  New work.
      Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia

2008  Industrial Sabotage.
      Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014  Bacchanalistas. Ferrin Contemporary at The
      New York Ceramics Art, NYC, USA

2013  Peripheral Visions. Contemporary Art from
      Australia, Garis+Hahn, New York, USA

2012  Redlands Westpac Art Prize.
      National Art School gallery, Sydney

2011  Hyperclay: Contemporary Ceramics.
      Object Gallery: Australian Centre for
      Design, Sydney

2010  Collect. The Saatchi Gallery,
      Duke of York HQ, London, UK

2009  Larger than Life. The Dundee Imagists in the
      1980s. Lamb Gallery, University of Dundee


COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
National Museums Northern Ireland
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
Manly Art Gallery and Museum, Australia
Arizona State University Art Museum, USA
The Grainer Collection, Washington, D.C., USA
The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane
Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah, NSW