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A CLOSER LOOK AT ... STEPHEN BOWERS

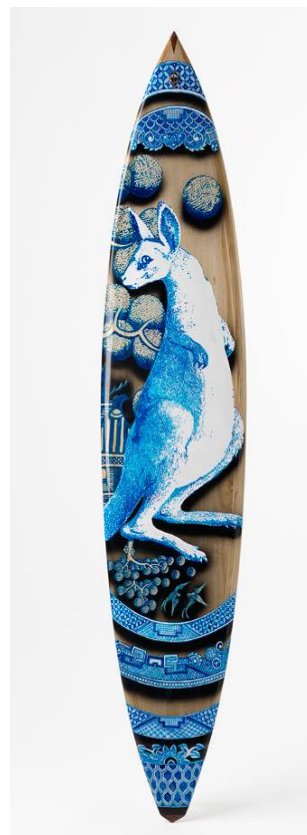
“My work draws on the traditions of ceramics, but with a larrikin spirit of irreverence. I make use of vernacular images from many sources, including Australian motifs and cultural references. Attention is invariably drawn to the rich surfaces in my work, their complex designs and the *capriccios* acted out upon them. The invitation to look closer is rewarded by details and images that rely on an understanding and control of techniques. I use multiple firings, creating layers of under-glaze decoration in poly-chrome colours or intricate blue and white line illustration, often finished in gold lustre. For me, creating pictures and stories on curved ceramic surfaces is a journey of revelation across ever-receding horizons. The result should be an engrossing and seductive richness of vitrified imagery; pottery made plasma.” Stephen Bowers, 2010

The elaborately decorated ceramics of Stephen Bowers demand a closer look and in doing so reward us with a richer understanding. The sumptuous ornamentation is more than decorative beauty, often exhibiting a quirky sense of humour and holding a deeper meaning.

Much of the imagery Bowers uses in his work is derived from historic sources – for example, the Stubbs kangaroo, as seen in *Blu Roo: China Green Tea*, *Stubbs Meets Spode* or *Antipodean Willow Surfboard*.



Stephen Bowers *Stubbs Meets Spode II* 2016
wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze colour,
clear earthenware glaze 8.5 x 58 cm



Stephen Bowers with Peter Walker
Antipodean Willow Surfboard 2012
handmade, hand-painted hollow core surfboard,
Paulownia wood, fibre glass, synthetic polymer, 228.5 x 48 x 7.5 cm

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This image of the kangaroo painted in 1773 by George Stubbs (1724 – 1806) for Sir Joseph Banks following his exploration on Captain Cook's voyage. For Stephen, the imagery reflects "our cultural expectations and insecurities and how things arise and where their origins lie and how they might be transformed within our culture."

(Stephen Bowers, *In Conversation*, 2016 – please view the video on our website to hear Stephen talk more about his work in this exhibition)

Other sources used by Bowers include William Morris designs (known to the artist from the collection at the Art Gallery of South Australia) and designs for French toile. These can be seen in particular on the *Camouflage Dogs* which set up a pull between the English and French, and further comment on European exploration of Australia.



Stephen Bowers *Camouflage Dogs* 2013 hand-built unique artist proof pair earthenware, underglaze colour, clear glaze, on-glaze burnished gold, enamel

William Morris (1834 – 1896) was an influential English designer greatly influencing interior design of the Victorian period with a focus on quality hand-crafted furnishings.

Image below left of Willow Boughs wallpaper c.1900, Art Gallery of South Australia



French toile is patterned cotton fabric, originally imported from Asia and then manufactured at the textile factory at Jouy-en-Josas from 1760, depicting floral patterns, pastoral scenes and inspired by Asian imagery and patterns. image above right sourced www.toilesdejouydecoration.fr

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Perhaps the most recognisable reference in Bowers' work is his use of the Willow pattern, the classic Chinoiserie blue and white design that has been in production since the late 1700s. In adapting the Willow pattern in his own hand-painted original works, Bowers cleverly plays with the idea of the Willow pattern's very creation. The traditional mass produced English design based on Chinese references is picked up by Bowers and given an Antipodean slant, for example, with the inclusion of the typical willow bridge placed in the context of Sydney Harbour- so the pattern is again adapted and at one more remove from its original source, although perhaps coming closer to 'home' considering Australia's proximity to Asia. Further, the sheer quantity of production and the manufacturing process of the popular Willow pattern produced in England is subverted through Stephen's unique artworks – these Willow works are distinctive and special.



Stephen Bowers *China Plate* 2011 wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze colour, clear glaze, 6 x 63 cm

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Stephen's sense of humour is also apparent in this work with his love of puns, the soaring willow birds squawking "Me China Plate" at each other as they recognise their rhyming slang 'mate'.



A closer look at this work reveals the highly skilled technique of the artist and his use of trompe l'oeil with the escaped beads from the necklace within the cockatoo's mouth sliding over the surface of the large plate, or the depiction of the bug on the gumnuts like a fly on a seventeenth century Dutch still life, showing the artist's virtuosity.

Stephen's work is included in the current exhibition at Geelong Art Gallery, *Tricking the Eye: Contemporary Trompe l'Oeil* (showing until 12 February 2017)

The richness of the decoration is intensified through the layering of many different references from art history, decorative arts and natural history, and the opulence is highlighted through the use of shimmering gold. This is perhaps most obvious in the striking pair of large palaceware vases *Exotic Birds and Strange Fruit*. These are masterly works, with beautiful depictions of Australian flora and fauna (both the sulphur-crested and red-tailed black cockatoos paying homage to bird illustrator William Cooper, 1934 – 2015 and the banksia based on historical botanical sources dating back to Cook's *Endeavour* voyage).



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Stephen Bowers *Exotic Birds and Strange Fruit, Pair of large mirrored Palaceware Vases* 2012
wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze colour, clear earthenware glaze, on-glaze gold lustre, 74 x 55 cm

These vases are a mirror pair so that placed together one reflects the other. This theme of reflection is strengthened through the use of the highly polished gold, giving a glassy finish to the works so that they act as a mirror to the viewer who finds their own reflection in the surface as they closely admire and examine the ornamentation.

The sheer size of the vases is impressive and playing with scale can also be found in *True Blue Cup and Saucer* where the familiar domestic object is enlarged in the manner of Alice in Wonderland's "Drink Me" potion.



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Alice features on the cup, provoked by the possibility of Alice falling through to the earth to the Antipodes. Here she is caught up in the concern for water preservation (see the water tanks, giant tap, the 'Pope' branded sprinkler, stylised wave patterns, a surf life saver, the use of water in our civic spaces of parks and gardens), appropriately so for our dry continent, with even the blue and white willow pattern reminding us that willow trees grow near water. A closer look at this detailed work rewards the viewer with many witticisms to be discovered, the skeleton bones on the handle relating to bone china; the Stubbs kangaroo with a drawer for a pouch; the inclusion of 'Boofhead' (from the cartoon strip which ran in the Sydney Daily Mirror from 1941 to 1970); and the incongruous image of Alice taking out the wheelie bin whilst listening to her Walkman. The piece is unique in that it was made and fired in one go unlike other works where the vivid colour and depth of background and detail of brushwork rely on a process of multiple firings with treatments of gold or enamel done last before a final gloss coat of clear earthenware glaze.



Stephen Bowers *True Blue Cup and Saucer* 2009 wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze colour, clear glaze, cup 36 x 55 cm, saucer 9.5 x 80 cm

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These large-form works are a result of a long working collaboration Stephen has with Mark Heidenreich who throws the forms which Stephen decorates. In a similar vein, Stephen has worked with Peter Walker to create the surfboards which Peter has made and Stephen has decorated. This concern with craftsmanship and collaboration is fitting, harking back as it does to a centuries old ceramic tradition. As with all Stephen's work the juxtaposition of past and present is alive.



For further information please see our website
<http://www.diggins.com.au>

where you can view works from the exhibition

view a video of *Stephen Bowers, In Conversation*
talking about the exhibition

view a video of the exhibition opening with
speech by Geoffrey Edwards

view a stop-motion video of Stephen creating the
Camouflage Dogs

download the catalogue with essay by Christopher
Menz

Keep an eye out for our next **A Closer Look At...** where we will look more closely at the remarkable Camouflage Dinner Set.

