



STEPHEN BOWERS – JAMAIS VU

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LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

THE ART OF CAMOUFLAGE: THE CERAMICS OF STEPHEN BOWERS

Stephen Bowers has blazed a distinctive and highly individual path with his ceramics. Since the 1980s, he has brought imagination and finesse to a remarkable body of work. In an area of the ceramic medium often characterised by earnestness and restraint, Bowers rewards viewers with an engaging opulence achieved by finely executed imagery and luxurious decorated surfaces. His palette is rich and vibrant, often set off by the lavish use of gilding in compositions that pay homage to a diverse cross-section of historical sources – any image can be fair game for Bowers – and, while he draws much from the rich history of ceramics, his interest is not limited to that medium. Anyone with a passing acquaintance with European and Asian historical design may discover references to blue and white transfer-printed English ceramics, Staffordshire ornaments, book illustration, Ming porcelain, the designs of William Morris, and French printed textiles.

Such discoveries are personal and the key here is the tension between collage and camouflage. For while Bowers might seem purely decorative, his compositions, upon closer inspection, reveal layers of images and information. The challenge (and delight) for viewers is to seek the clues and recognise references. What, one might ask, are the various Morris patterns quoted? Are they wallpaper or curtain designs? Was decoration on original Staffordshire dogs so psychedelic? Where is the dodo image sourced from, and why does it have a Willow pattern background? If that is Tenniel's Alice in Wonderland on the side of the cup, what on earth is she doing with a wheelie bin? As these questions imply, Bowers' images are more than simple acts of decorative appropriation and whimsy. Narratives are suggested; arrangements and juxtapositions invite questions and offer viewers opportunities to concoct narratives of their own.

Within the forest of detail, broader themes lurk. Hints of colonisation, exploration and trade, the transfer and appropriation of images and the global history of craft and design can be detected. Something as familiar and as seemingly simple as the ubiquitous Willow pattern, with its faux *chinoiserie* design, tells of the English use of Chinese ornament, adopted, adapted and applied to mass-produced goods sold to global colonial markets, making its industrial manufacturers extremely rich in the process.

In an act of further adaption, Bowers co-opts the English blue and white ceramic

tradition, laboriously hand painting it instead of printing it. It can be found in many of his bowls, plates and vases and can be seen in the elegant decorative borders of the out-sized cup, suggestively titled, *Child's Play*, 2013. His borders often have multiple patterns with rich embellishment, some purely geometric, others more directly based on plant forms.

For an artist who consciously works with ideas of cliché and things-taken-for-granted, Bowers incorporates sometimes unlikely subjects. *In the Land of the Dodo*, 2013, a large blue and white plate that depicts a dodo against a Willow pattern background, illustrates this perfectly. The flightless dodo bird, a type of large pigeon that made very good eating, was first recorded by Dutch sailors in 1598 on the island of Mauritius. The bird was hunted by sailors and its habitat destroyed. By 1662 its population had collapsed and the hapless bird disappeared. Extinction of the dodo less than a century after its discovery drew attention to the hitherto unrecognised problem of human involvement in disappearance of entire species. The dodo achieved a kind of immortality in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and has since become a minatory symbol for the stupidity of human-caused extinctions. Recorded images of the dodo are mostly known through seventeenth-century illustrations and subsequent copies of them, from which the image of the dodo on this plate derives. The extinct and exotic creature stands like an heraldic beast against a background of an imaginary Chinese landscape based on the Willow pattern design. This pattern, the most famous of all English blue and white *chinoiserie* ceramic designs, was created in England in c.1780. The pastiche of Chinese motifs was designed to appeal to a mass audience; it may well be the most commercially successful ceramic design ever. The formal structure of the elaborate patterned border of *In the Land of the Dodo* is interrupted by a tree that grows from the side of the plate. This suggests that the plate should be viewed at a different orientation so that all is topsy-turvy. The extinction of the dodo and the Chinese derived imagery are directly related to European exploration, trade, colonisation and consumption, and to European ideas of the exotic, the foreign and the 'other'. In this combination of images there are multiple readings and interpretations. Perhaps Bowers is asking 'why is it, so many beautiful species end up on our plates?'

As a kind of stalking horse for his inventive decoration, Bowers uses familiar forms –

chargers, cups and saucers, vases, Staffordshire ornaments. Apart from the latter, they are useful and practical domestic shapes. What Bowers often does with the form is to modify it – usually by enlargement, sometimes dramatically so. This magnification has the strange effect of creating a disconnect from the original while also implying that the object is to be looked at through a lens of aesthetic history. When he does adhere to original scale, the richness of decoration and jewel-like detail seem to make the work larger than it really is.

The Pair of Staffordshire Dogs, 2013, is considerably more than a mantelpiece ornament. As a one-off, hand-built 'artist's proof' pair, they are somewhat over-scale in comparison with many nineteenth-century prototypes upon which they are based. Again, through changes of scale and use of decoration, Bowers manipulates expectations. Staffordshire ornaments were normally decorated in a rather hasty manner and sometimes quite crudely, features that remain part of their appeal today. Bowers' dogs, in contrast, are not from any generic Staffordshire kennel. These are a rare strain and are given the extraordinary decorative treatment. They are lavishly gilded and overlaid with a complex arrangement of circular patterns, several of them recognisable Morris furnishing designs, as well as late eighteenth-century Napoleonic French fabric and *toile* designs. Typically, there is a quiet subtext to all this lavish design work. It is no accident these mantle-piece forms are covered with wallpaper and home furnishing designs. Bowers is obliquely commenting on patterns-in-nature and how nature is appropriated and consumed in patterns, which, in turn, condition and reflect our relationships to, and expectations of, the natural world.

Studying how the different types of decoration and patterns interact and flow over the three-dimensional modelled surface is fascinating. Bowers' use of Morris design is suggestive. Regardless of their general appeal and clear homage to one of the greatest pattern designers of all time, there is a direct and important local connection. Bowers lives in Adelaide, and the Art Gallery of South Australia holds one of the world's finest collections of Morris & Company furnishings, most of it a legacy from late nineteenth-century Adelaide interiors.

In the *Camouflage Series* dinner set, 2016, we see some of his most recent work. This multiple piece dinner service is a tour de force of elaborate decoration and a celebration of



STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

In the Land of the Dodo 2013
wheel-thrown earthenware,
underglaze colour, clear glaze
7 x 61 cm

the painter-decorator's art. It represents a culmination of ideas, imagery and techniques that Bowers has been developing and refining over decades. It also reflects results of a recent Churchill Fellowship, which in 2015, gave Bowers opportunity to research techniques and images in European and North American museum collections. He uses the results with aplomb.

Richly decorated hand-painted dinner services have been prized since their invention in Italy in the sixteenth century. The more elaborate and valuable services were used only for the grandest occasions. Despite developments in printing and less labour-intensive decorative techniques over the centuries, detailed hand-painted decoration for fine services has never entirely gone out of fashion. The *Camouflage Series* dinner set is an appropriately Antipodean response to the grand European dinner service tradition. Given this heritage, the decoration is a fusion of Australian and exotic motifs. The plates are individually decorated with Australian birds set against complex backgrounds of fragmentary decorative ornament, including several Morris patterns, printed French *toiles* along with sections referencing antique blue and white and Ming porcelains. Suggestions of shadows and overlaps are used skilfully. Another element of visual play occurs throughout the series; carefully painted *tromp l'oeil* amber 'beads'. These form

a kind of signature for the series, a broken and scattered necklace, which connects across all the pieces.

Australia has been referred to as 'a land of parrots'; in these plates we catch a glimpse of this ornithological richness. The viewer (or diner) is presented with birds as lively natural history specimens, set against the artificiality of 'patterns' that are themselves drawn from nature. Unlike the dodo, none of the birds depicted is considered remotely edible. They are usually admired for vibrant colours, beautiful plumage and their intelligence and engaging behaviour, which Bowers suggests so well, painting the eyes, beaks, claws and feathers in remarkable detail, emphasising their form, pattern and texture.

The overlaying of Australian and European imagery throughout the *Camouflage Series* emphasises the complexity of the cultural and visual relationships and references we all live with. If we take a step back from the luxurious detail of these plates, we might see Morris as representing English interests and the French *toile* as representing Napoleon. Here we catch Bowers dropping a hint at the drama played out in the nascent days of the fledgling English colony, when the French, literally, had designs upon Australia. The omnipresent Ming and blue and white are not-quite-so-subtle reminders that Australia is, in fact, geographically, part of

greater Asia. An uncomfortable reality, that continues to play out today. The *Camouflage Series* setting, with its rich and sumptuous detail, forms an Antipodean response to a great European genre. Like its grand ancestor, the *Camouflage Series* dinner set is a splendid service intended for display.

Throughout his career Bowers has been fascinated by the decorative and expressive qualities of ornament and image and how changing context alters their interpretation and meaning. By referring to art and design of the past and constantly placing it within a contemporary idiom he reminds us of the rich visual heritage we all enjoy. The *Camouflage Series* is the most recent example of Bowers' visual journey and a special statement within his oeuvre.

Christopher Menz, September 2016, with thanks to Stephen Bowers for his assistance.

Illustrated over page

STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

Camouflage Series, entree and dinner plates 2016
jigger-jolley, earthenware, underglaze colour, on-glaze
burnished gold and enamel, various diameters

The *Camouflage Series* dinner set can be comprised of dinner plates, entree plates, serving plates and charger. Each piece can be purchased separately.



STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

Pair of Staffordshire Dogs 2013
hand-built, one-off, artist's proof pair,
earthenware, underglaze colour, clear glaze,
on-glaze burnished gold, enamels
75 x 43 cm each



STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

Child's Play 2013
wheel-thrown earthenware,
underglaze colour, clear glaze
44 x 29 cm



STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

True Blue Cup and Saucer 2009
wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze
colour, clear glaze
29 x 80 cm









STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

Camouflage Series, entree plate 2016
jigger-jolley, earthenware, underglaze colour,
on-glaze burnished gold and enamel
diameter 25 cm

STEPHEN BOWERS 1952 -

Blue Chintz, charger 2013
wheel-thrown earthenware,
underglaze colour, clear glaze
6 x 62 cm

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