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A CLOSER LOOK AT ... THE CAMOUFLAGE DINNER SET BY STEPHEN BOWERS



Following our Closer Look At some of the works in our current exhibition *Stephen Bowers: Jamais Vu* (which you can download at www.diggins.com.au) we now invite you to take *A Closer Look At* the remarkable Camouflage Dinner Set.

The series of entrée, dinner and serving plates feature Australian parrots against a rich and complex background of shapes and patterns and designs which in part have been inspired as a result of a Churchill Fellowship awarded to Stephen in 2014 to research museum collections in the USA, UK and Europe.

Incorporating ideas of tromp-l'oeil, natural history, decorative arts, historical reference and personal commentary, the series strikes a thought-provoking balance between consumption, use and display. With their fragmented imagery, the plates suggest the possibilities of larger stories. The delicacy inherent in ceramics is almost overcome by the opulent ornamentation with its shimmering gold and layers of patterning, revealing the mastery of Bowers' technique.



Building on Stephen's interest in the use of fragmentation in his work, which has been a theme he has explored for decades, the Camouflage series use this layering of sections to

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great effect. These cartouches both work in harmony and contrast with each other and allow a deeper level of narrative into each piece where the parrot may find itself surrounded by vignettes inspired by William Morris wallpaper; French Toile textile designs; botanical illustration; references to trade, in particular the Dutch East India Company; masterpieces from museums around the world and the obligatory reference to the famous blue and white willow china.



The Camouflage Plates certainly reward the viewer who does take a closer look as there is such a richness not only in the skilfully hand-painted ornate patterning and sumptuous use of colour, highlighted with shimmering gold, but also in the cultural references and part of the fun is playing sleuth to discover the myriad of allusions.

The parrots featured on the plates are really portraits, some paying homage to bird illustrator, William T Cooper and include Cockatoos (Sulphur Crested, Red-Tailed Black, Major Mitchell), Corella, Rosellas, and Lorikeets. The botanical patterns inspired by nature and through historical sources (for example William Morris designs; French toile designs and botanical illustration such as from Cook's Endeavour expedition) are symbolic of the colour and beauty of the natural world and its appropriation into the human environment. This mix of cultural references from such a wide range of historical and diverse regions prompt us to consider Australia's place and context within history and the contemporary world. Further, the fragmentation is symbolic of patterns being disrupted within society and globally.

“Framed within the illusory, sleight of hand, tromp l'oeil world of my plates, images of overlap, disruption and fragmentation occur. This is a response to the dilemma of living

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in a time of spectacular consumption of finite resources, of increasing pressure of human population and environmental impact, global warming and the breaking down of the resilience of the natural world.” Stephen Bowers, 2016



Inspired by the vivid colour and detail found within the decorative traditions of ceramics, Stephen specialises in underglaze decoration with additional applications of on-glaze lustres, gold and enamel adding yet another luxurious layer to his work. Layers of decoration are painted on in stages and across multiple firings. A video of Stephen working can be viewed on our website.

The Camouflage Plates are useable with suitable care and are available as a complete dining setting or alternatively, plates are available to purchase individually.



“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

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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."

Christopher Menz, *The Art of Camouflage: The Ceramics of Stephen Bowers*, catalogue essay for *Stephen Bowers: Jamais Vu*, 2016 – the full essay can be read by downloading the catalogue from our website (www.diggins.com.au)

For any further details or inquiries please contact the Gallery.

Please visit our website www.diggins.com.au

to view images of the artworks

watch *Stephen Bowers In Conversations*, talking about the exhibition

watch a video of the exhibition opening with Geoffrey Edwards

view a stop-motion video of Stephen at work

download the catalogue

