STEPHEN BIRD
MY DAD WAS BORN ON THE MOON
2 AUGUST – 4 SEPTEMBER 2013

THE SCOTTISH GALLERY
CONTEMPORARY ART SINCE 1842
16 Dundas Street, Edinburgh EH3 6HZ
Tel 0131 558 1200 Email mail@scottish-gallery.co.uk
Web www.scottish-gallery.co.uk

Front cover: Man with tree and dog, 2012, clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 24 x 20 cms
Above: Adam and Eve with eyes and spoon, 2013, clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 23 x 5 cms
Here in my Norfolk barn the mists highlighting the cobwebs in the woodpile I am cold and envious. Not just envious of Stephen Bird’s joyfully dark and inventive talent but also because as I sit here feeling as if I am wrapped in a wet lettuce the talented one is probably slipping into his Speedos for a spot of surfing down under.

Stephen Bird arrived in Australia in 1999, the year I deported myself to that sunburnt country. I first met Stephen at Merran Esson’s studio in the Queens Park suburb of Sydney. Merran is one of Australia’s leading ceramic artists and runs the Ceramic Department of the National Art School. She was generous to both Stephen and I in those early days. Stephen worked from her studio and both of us spent time at the Art School - clay and kilns – what more could an immigrant artist want?

Stephen’s work immediately caught my attention. Here was a ceramicist who did not throw pots but made comically tragic tableaux, which were quirky and poetically satirical. My first impression of him was of a somewhat dreamy Scot, fool that I was. Behind Bird’s vague gaze is a steely determination. When Bird has something to say he will find a way to say it.

British artists who choose to live and work in Australia soon discover that they are liberated from the competitive self-promotion of the arts in the UK, which can sometimes lead to a highly professional form of repetition. Not so in Australia. Artists are free to fly as near to the sun as they dare or talent allows but are equally free to crash and burn. Both experiences can take the artist beyond what they thought was possible. And this exhibition is evidence that Stephen Bird is up and away.

His Australian experiences are not just observed and recorded in his work. His ceramics and watercolours radiate the feel of Australia, from the glitter of the Eucalypts to the strange and dramatic scenes that bring Sidney Nolan to mind. Bird’s work at first glance looks individualistic and eccentric but there is a well thought out direction driving his art and a breadth of technical skill that gives him an extraordinary freedom of expression.

I was not surprised to discover that Stephen was born in Stoke-on-Trent. Staffordshire pottery figures, Toby jugs and Commemorative plates seem to have migrated to Australia with Bird and taken up citizenship – murder and mayhem in the outback, shoot-outs in the Eucalypts, sex in the Pandanas.

Ray Hughes, the idiosyncratic Sydney art dealer with the eye and appetites of a Renaissance Pope, gave Bird his first exhibition. More recently his solo exhibitions in Australia have been shown at the blue-chip and more circumspect Rex Irwin Gallery, each exhibition more successful than the last.

When I returned to the UK from Australia in 2012 Stephen kindly helped me empty my Bondi studio and as a departing present he made a Toby jug replica of myself – forever in rude, elderly health. Vulgarity has to be done with wit and style and Bird has both.

Ian Fairweather, another immigrant artist from Scotland, left the old country behind and made a major contribution to Australian painting (1938-74). Forty years on Stephen Bird has established himself as more than a footnote in Australian ceramics.

Roger Law, 2013

Roger Law used to be famous. He was the evil genius behind the mocking caricature puppets for *Spitting Image*. The award winning TV series ran for twelve years, with Law masterminding the corruption of an entire generation’s respect for authority and institutions. When the satire bubble burst... Law did what some people thought was the only thing he could do... he transported himself to Australia.
“One cannot look at this.”
Stephen you were born in Stoke-on-Trent, which is also the birthplace of British manufactured pottery. Some of the work you have made for this exhibition recalls Staffordshire figures – I’m thinking of the Jesus shootout in the bush or the striding man with his dog – is this a childhood flashback or a more conscious nod to the UK’s ceramic past?

It all started as a childhood flashback, then became a conscious nod which developed into an obsession. I thought I knew Staffordshire pottery. When I migrated to Sydney in 2007 I brought with me a humble collection of Toby Jugs which I began to reference in my work. I soon realized that most Australians just did not get this appropriation and I ended up having to explain the history and context over and over again. I began to question just how much I really understood about these early industrial ceramics and I decided to take a closer look. This research became the starting point for the Industrial Sabotage ceramics.

You grew up and were educated in Scotland at a time when Mrs. Thatcher seemed to have personal vendetta against the Scots. Was it these youthful experiences that politicized you and gave you a taste for satire?

You may be shocked Roger, but as a young and naive fool I actually used my first vote to elect Mrs. Thatcher for her first term. It was when I attended The Duncan of Jordanstone Art College in Dundee that I became aware that I had the only Tory Dad in Scotland. Over the next 10 years the Conservative party attacked many of those freedoms and opportunities available to a young aspiring artist trying to live in Scotland. What were the yuppie years in the south of England was, for Dundee, food hand outs from the European Union’s Milk Lakes and Butter Mountains. I became part of a generation which grew up on the Rock and Roll (dole). I learned to survive on less than £40 a week and the way you live on the bread line is to become part of a community. I did not become outwardly politicized until many years later when New Labour began to lose their way and I became outraged enough to use satire.
In Britain competition is relentless and potters who find a successful formula stick to it and grow reluctant to ring the changes. Australia seems to have had a liberating, almost hedonistic, effect on your work. What do you find are the differences of working in Oz as opposed to the UK?
The biggest difference for me, working in Australia as opposed to the UK, was that I was completely nocturnal in the UK. Moving to Sydney was extremely liberating for myself and my art. The lights were on, there was less rigidity in Australian art and I also found a liberating lack of censorship here. Sydney is a very hedonistic city.

I think any artist who comes to Australia with a slight reputation in the UK is seen as an Exotic European. It’s always interesting to step outside your culture and find that some things you thought were ubiquitous are highly prized elsewhere.

You have certainly captured the extraordinary light and the mystical feel of the Australian bush in these pieces. When I am in the bush I am never sure what I might encounter. It heightens the senses. Do you feel the same?
I have never intentionally turned to any landscape for inspiration, but in Australia the land is so vast and so invasive it just hijacks any venture you undertake. I recently drove into the outback to make a short film with artist Neil Irons and musician come architect Paul Smith. We left Sydney a few days after tropical cyclone Oswald hit the north eastern sea board. We had a fairly specific program but we were just so distracted by the landscape and nature in all its wildness. We drove past whole mountain sides destroyed by fire and rivers with nine meters of flood water. Then there was the wild life which was everywhere. We would get out of our tents each morning never really knowing what we might find.

Many Australian artists ultimately turn to the landscape for inspiration. I notice in many of your pieces for this exhibition you have depicted the untidy and unfinished Aussie bush and your tableaux would not look out of
place in the tabloids – shootings, murder, sex – what is going on Stephen?
I used to blame the shootings and murder in some of my works on some 3rd party. I used to say “my works are just reflecting the violence in the press or committed by armies and militia”. Now I am beginning to realize that this is just a real cop out. Maybe those images are welling up from my own unconscious violent, pack hunting, monkey brain. Now I have accepted this responsibility I am a lot more careful about what images I put out there. I think violence is best served up on a plate. As for the sex, I have always seen these works as a physical embodiment of love and an antidote to the bloodshed. It’s interesting that these works have been shown and acknowledged far more in Australia than in the UK. I am told that the Art Gallery of South Australia regularly display my Adam and Eve doing it doggy style on the wall of their gallery with pride.

I really enjoy the visual jokes in your work – whether it is a tromp l’oeil pun or a scrawled home truth – Art of Hatred is a Labour of Love is my favourite from this show – are these quotes directly from Bird or seen and noted down for future use?
That’s a really tough question. I do note down a lot of phrases which end up adjacent to images in my sketch pad. I also toy with words and create my own quotes, but the older I get the more puzzled I am by the delusion of the self. In my work I make a connection between images, words and the unconscious but I am only just beginning to realize just how powerful that relationship can be.

Your family and friends feature in this collection of work and the results show a commitment to Australia and its way of life – from going bush or perving on the beach. An Australian journalist friend of mine when asked why the Aussies had made such good desert rats in World War II replied it was because they were really good at camping. Stephen are you becoming 100% Australian?
Certainly camping in Australia is a very different beast to camping in the UK! I still like to retain some of the simplicity of camping and getting hungry, wet and grubby is all part of the experience for me. I don’t have nearly enough camping gear or a big enough tent to be 100% Australian yet.

Now... how did you become so good at ceramic glazes? You can replicate anything from a tin of paint to a fried egg or metal spoon.
Potters are incredibly generous with technical information especially if you show them an example of your huge failing. My training as a painter taught me to build up images in layers, and to keep looking and adjusting all the time. I have simply applied the same technique to my ceramics.

What aspect of Australian art has influenced the work you are doing now?
It’s impossible to work in Australia without noticing the huge influence Asian art has here. Certainly the ‘Writing Mind’ or Xie Yi tradition has had some effect on the way I use a brush now. Australian potters have a great deal of knowledge and understanding of high fired traditional Chinese glazes and also their eccentricities in using the potter’s wheel. Joseph Purtle, my studio assistant for the summer is the embodiment of this fusion between east and west, and we set about making a series of vases. Throwing leaves me with the frustration of being a machine operator. Joe sees it all so differently and he feels the Zen in the appliance where I feel like I am driving a bus around a muddy field.

What’s next?
Next year Wollongong City art gallery, Australia, will curate a touring show which surveys my paintings, ceramics and moving image works from the past three decades.

This interview features in Craft Arts International, Issue No. 88
Pair of Pugilists, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 66 x 26 x 19 cms (left), 73 x 30 x 20 cms (right)
‘Rex’ Ernest Battarbee (1893-1973) was an Australian artist notable for painting landscapes of Central Australia, and for teaching Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira to paint. The representation of places familiar to the local Aranda (Arunta) people made a great impact on Albert Namatjira, known simply as Albert, who asked Rex for materials in order to do his own painting. Rex undertook his third visit to Central Australia in 1936 where he employed Albert as camel-boy during excursions. Rex taught Albert basic watercolour painting, and was delighted and inspired by his pupil’s aptitude. He included three of Albert’s works in his 1937 Royal South Australian Society of Arts, Adelaide and in 1938 arranged a solo exhibition for him at the Fine Art Society Gallery, Melbourne.
Kangaroo Fight, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 33 cms
Kangaroo and Joey, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
Kangaroos at Erlanda Point, 2010
etching, 22 x 29 cms
In 1842, Ralph Reid emigrated with his wife Emily from Scotland to Australia, he was a sheep farmer and they had a family of 12 children. He committed suicide on April 24, 1868 and was buried in un-consecrated ground in a single grave near the Queensland New South Wales borders overlooking Acacia Creek. The grave was discovered in 2009 by Lyn Spain. Ralph Reid is Stephen Bird’s great great grandfather.

In 1853 Mr Ralph Reid, an unusually tall man of 6 feet and 7 inches and weighing around 20 stone, was superintendent of Maryland and continued this role until 1859 when he wished to start out on his own account as a sheep farmer. He was given a flock of sheep by Matthew Marsh and went into partnership with Charles Marsh on the Acacia Station in 1860; by 1861, they had 11,905 sheep and the Reid family prospects looked secure.

By 1868, events were conspiring against them; Ralph declared that the land was unsuitable for sheep. He was in despair at seeing the lambs dying and complained that his healthy lambs were pining away; he seemed at a loss to know why this was happening and it placed a great strain on the family financially. At the same time, his own vision was failing. The March family then claimed Acacia Ridge for themselves which meant that Ralph would have no residence or means of support and this is probably what drove him to take his own life. His family were unable to give him a Christian burial and so they purchased a plot of land where he could be buried without a Minister of Religion. Afterwards, his wife moved to Warwick where she died a few years later in 1872 leaving the children orphans.
Acacia Creek Vase, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 32 x 26 x 14 cms
Pink plate with ink and eyes, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 6 x 29 x 21 cms
Paint tray with jug, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 15 x 30 x 19 cms
Art of hatred, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 16.5 x 16.5 cms
Remorse, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 44 x 53 cms
Man with tree and dog, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 33 x 24 x 20 cms
Man with dog and dog poo, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
Man with stick and dog, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 25 x 26 cms
Roger Law Toby, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 35 x 18 x 24 cms
Self portrait, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 36 x 16 x 20 cms
One cannot look at this, 2011
clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 18 cms

Pottery, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 19 x 19 cms
Adam and Eve with eyes, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 35 x 43 cms
Adam and Eve with eyes and spoon, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 18 x 23 x 5 cms
Petrol, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 40 x 33 cms
More British eggs, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms

Andy Murray, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
Artist talking to his children, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 38 cms
Shattered vase, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 39 x 19 x 19 cms
Walk in the woods Mt Kaputar, 2013
watercolour on paper, 57 x 76 cms
Self portrait drawing a palm tree, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 38 cms
Silly wee bastard, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
You are a waste of space, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 26 x 26 cms
“This is what you were born for.”

This is what you were born for?, 2011
clay, pigment, glaze, 17 x 17 cms
Man with insects, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 53 x 43 cms
Black plate with egg, eye and biscuit, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 20 x 29 cms
Daily bread, 2012
clay, pigment, glaze, 40 x 50 cms
BIOGRAPHY
1964  Born Stoke on Trent, UK
1987  B.A. (Hons) Fine Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee
1988  Post Graduate, Cyprus College of Art, Lema, Paphos
1998  Higher National Certificate, Ceramics, Angus College of Further Education
Lives and works Sydney (AUS) and Dundee (UK)
Nationality: British and Australian

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
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
      Irony makes a country strong. Gould gallery. Melbourne. Australia
      Industrial Sabotage Phase-3. The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
2009  New work, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
      Windows show, Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool, UK
2008  Industrial Sabotage, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
      The view from here, paintings from Australia. Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh
2007  Compass Gallery, Glasgow
      Figure this, The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent
2006  The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh
2005  Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, Australia
      One Five Two Gallery, Dundee Contemporary Arts
2003  A journey to Australia through India, S.E. Asia. Open Eye Gallery
      England & Co, London (concurrent show with David Larwill)
2001  Compass Gallery, Glasgow
1998  Works on paper, Wysing Arts, Cambridge
1994  Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh
1994  Psychology Institute, Edinburgh
1989  Tower Gallery, Dundee University

AWARDS
2012  New work grant, established artist, Australia Council for the Arts
      Vitrify. The Vitrify Alcorso Ceramic Award. (Shortlisted artist)
2011  Deakin University Contemporary Small Sculpture Award
2010  New work grant, established artist, Australia Council for the Arts  
   Woollahra Small sculpture Prize, Special Commendation  
2006  Dundee Visual Arts Award  
   Aberdeen artists design award  
   Shell Expo Award, Aberdeen  
2005  Engage Scotland Visual Arts Education Award  
2004  Professional Development Award. Scottish Arts Council Lottery Grant  
   Creative Development Award. Scottish Arts Council  
2000  Dundee Visual Arts Award  
1997  Mott McDonald Painting Prize, Aberdeen Artists Society, Travelled to N.Y  
1987  Elizabeth Greensheilds Memorial Award  
1986  Duncan of Drunfauilk Travel Award, Italy  
1985  Ian Eadie Memorial Award. Travelled to Holland and Belgium  
1984  Mitchell Painting Prize. Travelled to Barcelona, Spain  

BIBLIOGRAPHY  
       Recent acquisitions, Artonview, National Gallery of Australia, issue 73, Autumn 2013  
       50 things collectors need to know, Art Collector, Prue Gibson, issue 63, Jan-March.  
       Quinticential Australia, Sydney Morning Herald, 26th January  
       Where the wild roses grow. Exhibition catalogue. Published through Blurb Books.  
2011  Dark days, Bright Nights. WRAP Magazine, issue 3. Published by The Wrap Paper Ltd, UK.  
       Placement. Published by Oriel Davies and Fife Contemporary Arts. ISBN 978-1-907346-03-3  
2010  Laughter. Exhibition catalogue. Contemporary Art Space Tasmania  
       Laughter. Exhibition review. Artlink, Australia and Asia-Pacific Vol 30 no 4  
       Ceramics Today. Jeffrey B. Snyder. Published by Schiffer Ltd  
       Collect @ Saatchi Gallery, Catalogue. Crafts Council of Great Britain
2009 Contemporary Ceramics, international perspective. By Emmanuel Cooper, Thames and Hudson
Ceramic Art and Perception, issue 77, Stop motion ceramics, by Toni Warburton


2007 Ceramic Review. Review of Solo show at Scottish Gallery. Issue CR 224

2006 Dundee Visual Arts Award Scheme, Catalogue
Australian Contemporary at SOFA Chicago, catalogue
The Sunday Times, Inside Out magazine. Dec 2006 issue
SOFA Chicago, catalogue. Sculptural Objects & Functional Art

2005 Ceramic Art and Perception, issue 62, No Place Like Home, by Gregor White
The Australian News Paper, arts review, Dec 2nd 2005, by Sebastian Smee
The Journal of Australian Ceramics, 44#3. Collective Journeys by Stephen Bird


2003 New Wave, Wales-Scotland II Exhibition catalogue. Written by Amanda Game

2002 Sydney Myer International Ceramics Award. LaTrobe University, Victoria
Artesian Magazine. Review of Compass Gallery show. Summer edition

2001 Ceramic Review. Souvenirs From The Outside. By Gregor White. Issue CR190

1999 The Plate Show, catalogue. Collins Gallery, Srathclyde University, Glasgow

COLLECTIONS
National Gallery of Australia
National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Artbank Sydney, Australia
Deakin University Art Gallery, Melbourne,
Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums, Scotland
Paisley Museums and Art Gallery, Renfrewshire, Scotland
Dundee Art Gallery and Museum, Scotland
Dundee District Council, Scotland
Hackney Borough Council, England
Mexican Consulate, Blairgowrie, Scotland
Arizona State University Art Museum, USA
The Grainer Collection, Washington, D.C., USA
My dad was born on the moon, 2013
clay, pigment, glaze, 28 x 29 cms
Published by The Scottish Gallery to coincide with the exhibition
STEPHEN BIRD – MY DAD WAS BORN ON THE MOON
2 August – 4 September 2013

Exhibition can be viewed online at
www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/stephenbird

Stephen Bird would like to thank the National Art School for their assistance and support towards his project and for providing him with professional practice time to shoot essential film footage in Northern New South Wales and Queensland.

ISBN: 978-1-905146-82-6

Designed by www.kennethgray.co.uk
Printed by Barr Printers

All rights reserved. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced in any form by print, photocopy or by any other means, without the permission of the copyright holders and of the publishers.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body, and by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments.