

Ceramic beefcake and other desires: The art of Stephen Benwell

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Stephen Benwell has never been interested in what some might consider the traditional boundaries between fine and applied art. He has made ceramics that are small sculptures, painted on the surface of large vases as if they were canvases and scorned those who considered figurines to be outmoded decorations. His most recent sculptures and vases are practised observations of the flawed nature of our world.

Benwell's emergence as a young and innovative artist coincided with the promotion of Australian craft, especially ceramics, by the Australia Council for the Arts in the late 1970s and 1980s. Looking back at his exhibited work, it is apparent that he did not belong to the Anglo-Japanese tradition of brown pots, nor to that espousing an Australian style such as the work of Joan Campbell and Marea Gazzard, or even the newer funk art potters, such as Margaret Dodd and Lorraine Jenyns. His anthropomorphic teapots, jars and vases were more sculptural than functional, but could not be categorised as funk art. In the catalogue for 1980's 'Recent Ceramics: An Exhibition from Australia' Benwell made one of his few artist's statements from that time:

My work is influenced by many styles from primitive to contemporary. I handbuild because this technique allows me the freedom to make a variety of shapes. Often one piece will contain a mixture of styles in an attempt to find a new arrangement of forms. The brushwork is used to give the piece depth and to accentuate its character.¹

Unlike the symmetrical shapes of the sculptural work in earlier shows, the three vases included in the 1980 exhibition demonstrated a desire to break down symmetry in both shape and decoration. Onto coil-built, almost classical-waisted vase shapes, Benwell added free-form 'growths': organic forms springing from the edge and enlivening the rim of the vase. These 'growths' – and the decoration which began carefully to explore and define the edges of forms – helped the artist challenge conventional shapes and the 'right' place for decoration. More

than any other work at this time these vases show Benwell's wish to undermine the notion of his ceramics as practical objects, even when they are made and described as vases.

During his 1984 Paris residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Benwell further explored earthenware. This allowed him to paint, remove, smudge and repaint over his surface decoration in a manner impossible with stoneware or porcelain. The Paris vases had the most highly developed and complex decoration of any of his work to that time. More than ever before he used the surfaces of his pots as a painter would a canvas.

Benwell's ceramics have always been more sculptural and decorative than useful. Extensive is his knowledge of the traditions of sculptural ceramics, especially those of Europe and Asia, and the anthropomorphic ceramics of Mexico and South America. The inspiration for small details can be traced to obscure and unexpected sources. The English, French and German figurines of the eighteenth century, such as those produced by J. J. Kaendler, are much admired and undoubtedly responsible for some of Benwell's first figurines: an ungainly male and female pair made in 1986 – a dumb, perhaps fallen and shocked Adam and Eve.

Over the next decade Benwell occasionally made small sculptural pieces, perhaps most significantly a group of fourteen miniatures with an average height of about 10 centimetres produced in 1990. While some were miniature vessels, there were several which combined figures with vessels, the liveliness of which was an obvious indication of a continued and developing interest in making sculptural works. This came to fruition in the late 1990s, and in 2001 Benwell exhibited a number of tall-standing male figures at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne. These were displayed on shelves around the walls, while his more typical large vessels occupied plinths in the centre of the gallery. For the first time his audience was undoubtedly made aware of his interest in creating sculpture.

These men were clumsy. Technical necessity meant that the hand-built bodies were supported by huge feet and massive thighs and occasionally had the remnants of the *bocage* of their eighteenth-century forebears around the base. Arms were exaggeratedly long, almost ape-like, and their pin-headedness was complemented by jug-ears. Exaggerated nipples and penises further emphasised that while these standing male nudes had their origin in the Greek kouros, they very much belonged to our own time.

Unusually, the artist's finger marks were left clearly visible in the whitish clay. They give the impression of a hurried making, although knowledge of Benwell's careful work practice denies that this could be true. These are very considered figures in which the more realistically painted eyes and lips contrast with the pink, blue, yellow and occasionally gold-spotted surface. They are awkward, clownish, perhaps diseased. These are modern men, somewhat lost and confused, and there is no reason to compare or confuse them with Greek heroes and gods or any noble purpose.

In 2005, as part of his Master of Arts at Monash University, Benwell assembled a large group of figures in an exhibition he called 'The Impassioned Shepherd'. After a long career of not giving his work titles, this indicated a change of approach and gave his audience many clues as to the origin of his imagery.

Along with his knowledge of ceramic traditions, Benwell has a thoughtful appreciation of European painting, especially that of France. The idyllic landscapes of Poussin and Lorrain, in which gods wander the earth and are responsible for the terrible tragedies that befall ordinary men and women, are particular favourites. Coupled with a love of newspaper-style sports photography, which had long been a source of imagery for the figures occasionally painted on his pots, Benwell was creating figures that possessed strong classical allusions yet were undoubtedly modern men. Benwell's muscled

modern heroes were all brawn and no brains. The sculptural heads – reminiscent of fragments of classical sculpture rather than portrait busts – were remarkable for their ‘dumb-fuck’ expressions. Never beautiful nor ideal, they were warriors of our times.

In his most recent exhibition at Niagara Galleries in 2007, Benwell continued to develop these sculptural pieces. His men stood around, grouped like ‘Muscle Marys’ at the gym or a body-building competition. A new departure for Benwell, the dry surface of these sculptures is painted and sprayed and spotted with detail more realistic than in earlier work: faces flourish rosebud lips; bushy eyebrows emphasise worried looks; five o’clock shadows are visible, as are darkened armpits and pubic hair. Nipples and genitals are a babyish pink. Fumbling hands and feet add to the impression that these guys are all a bit lost and confused – either gods fallen to earth, or just bewildered humans. A couple have fallen backwards and, while recalling footballers brought down in a tackle, they are also reminiscent of mortals who challenged the gods, like Icarus who fell to earth, or Danaë who received Zeus in a golden shower.

The exhibition also included a range of vessels, notably some large vases and pitchers, in often unusual and awkward shapes. On the best of these the surface was painted and splashed with a lighter, more lyrical decoration than ever before. Benwell’s practice of creating a collage of images and decorative motifs was maintained and the painted surface was built up in many different ways. However, *Large pitcher – the waterfall*, 2007, seemed to herald a more complex surface. Although mostly white, this had been created by working and reworking over painted areas, rubbing out painted decoration and covering the surface with white slip through which there were glimpses of the previous painting. On this richly textured surface Benwell had applied a few scattered vegetal motifs, sprays of grass and flowerettes and two small cartouches. One of these

depicted the eponymous waterfall, the other a portrait head surrounded by blue and surprisingly resembling an eighteenth-century portrait miniature.

In 2008, thirty-one years after first visiting Greece, Benwell returned to the National Archaeological Museum of Athens to revisit favourite sculptures and painted vases. As had been the case with previous trips, this produced a burst of activity. In *Untitled group*, 2008, Benwell combined and clarified several aspects of his work from the past, most significantly his interest in miniature and classical sculpture and groupings of objects to make a single work. Around a tourist souvenir, a charioteer made of resin in imitation marble, he has arranged objects of his own making. These include a standing figure, a bust, and several heads and vessels on potter’s wheels or pedestals, as well as fragments of such figures. Making up the rest of the group are other empty vessels, as vacant as the stare of his heroes, and more mysterious objects from his personal iconography, including trees and odd-coloured lumps. Here, more than in any previous work, the artist looks back to the ancient tradition of observing and learning from the past. It is a mature sculpture which might well presage the future direction of his work.

1 Stephen Benwell quoted in *Recent Ceramics: An Exhibition from Australia*, exhibition catalogue, Crafts Board, Australia Council for the Arts, North Sydney, 1980.