

Historic Narratives

Bouke de Vries uses his skills as a conservator to create new work. Simon Martin explains.



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1 *Leo*, from *Signs (Metamorphosis)*, eighteenth-century Derby figure with silver crown and mixed media, 2011, H37cm
2 *Aries*, from *Signs (Metamorphosis)*, Ming figure of Guan Yin with mixed media, 2011, H35cm
3 *Vanitas*, exploded Bow porcelain teapot, c1765/2012, Ø28cm

As part of the Cultural Olympiad this year there are many Olympic-themed art projects taking place around the country, created by some of Britain's leading contemporary artists such as Anish Kapoor and Jeremy Deller. Yet there are seemingly few projects involving ceramics, despite the fact that the site of the Olympic village in the Lea Valley in East London is intimately tied to the history of British ceramics. In the 1740s this was where Thomas Frye and Edward Heylyn established the Bow Porcelain Factory on the banks of the River Lea, producing soft-paste porcelain to imitate imported Chinese and Japanese porcelains and rival the wares being produced at Chelsea and Meissen. Known as 'New Canton', the Bow Factory was the largest in England and the first to specifically produce porcelain wares that incorporated bone ash, a precursor of bone china. Today there is little to mark this significant location in British ceramics history, except perhaps in the name of Thomas Frye Court, a new high-rise apartment block overlooking the Olympic Village.

BOW PORCELAIN Although the Victoria and Albert Museum and British Museum, both in London, have important examples of Bow Porcelain, this Olympic connection is not being explored there, but rather in the Sussex city of Chichester. In 1999 Pallant House Gallery was bequeathed a collection of nearly 300 pieces of Bow Porcelain, which forms one of the most comprehensive records of the output of the factory between the years 1747 and its closure in 1776. The collection was formed by Geoffrey Freeman, who began collecting Bow late in life with the sole intention of developing a historically important body of work, undertaking extensive research, and co-authoring a book on the subject. With such a

collection the Gallery could have mounted a worthy, but conventional historic survey exhibition, but instead we decided to bridge past and present by commissioning an installation from a contemporary artist that would create new narratives and connections between the individual pieces. The notion of inviting contemporary artists to engage with historic collections is by no means unique: recent successful examples have included Grayson Perry at the British Museum, George Shaw's Graham Sutherland exhibition at Modern Art Oxford and, Edmund de Waal at Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire. But in this particular case the chosen artist brings a variety of related skills to his commission: not only the eye of a contemporary artist, but the skills of a ceramics restorer – invaluable when dealing with fragile historic objects.

DE VRIES AND PALLANT HOUSE The London-based Dutch artist Bouke de Vries originally worked in fashion design alongside Zandra Rhodes, John Galliano, and Stephen Jones. But he later trained as a ceramics conservator at West Dean College, near Chichester. For many years he has worked for museums, collectors, dealers, and even Grayson Perry, restoring and conserving items that have met with damage. He is familiar with handling ceramics of all periods, from Han dynasty figurines to Meissen, continental bisque, and Delftware, and hence unafraid of tackling an ambitious installation of this important collection, which will line the walls of the carved wooden staircase in the eighteenth century Pallant House, a Grade I listed Queen Anne townhouse dating to 1712. De Vries' installation will thus simultaneously mark the 2012 Olympics and the 300-year anniversary of the building of Pallant House, with a playful nod to the celebrated

4 Bouke de Vries 5 *Chimera: Dogsnake*, eighteenth- to twentieth-century ceramics and mixed media, 2010, H25cm 6 *No No No (Amy Winehouse)*, nineteenth-century Samson porcelain figure and mixed media, 2009, H43cm. Courtesy the Zabudowicz Collection, London 7 *The Last Emperor*, twentieth-century Chinese porcelain statue, terracotta warrior fragments and mixed media, 2010, H35cm
Photography Tim Higgins



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porcelain displays of Daniel Marot, who was interior designer to the Dutch King William III of Orange. The technical logistics of creating such a display are complicated, to say the least, but it was decided that in order to broaden the appeal of Bow porcelain to a non-specialist audience a daring approach was needed to excite and engage. The guiding ethos at Pallant House Gallery is the juxtaposition of modern and historic elements, both in the architecture (a mix of eighteenth-century and contemporary) and the displays. In the past, WOKmedia's fragmented porcelain eggs with interiors painted with Chinese erotic scenes have been suspended in the stairwell, and in the 2010 exhibition *Contemporary Eye*: Crossovers Barnaby Barford's subversive ceramic tableaux were interspersed with polite porcelain tea groups, and Bouke de Vries' sculptures were placed on historic furniture.

De Vries' work as an artist developed from his career as a conservator. He explains, 'Some people would say, that's not worth restoring, a little Meissen figure, three hundred years old, too damaged to repair. But I started thinking, rather than throwing it away, what can I do with it, to give it a new story and a new life, to make something positive of the accident, which is perhaps the most dramatic thing that has happened to it?' De Vries began to use his skills as a conservator to make new narrative sculptures, for example *No No No* (2009), a dancing Amy Winehouse figure created from the fragments of a French nineteenth-century porcelain figure; his surreal series of Chimeras that are humorous assemblages of animal and man figurines; or his *Dead Nature* series in which fractured everyday vessels such as bowls and milk jugs are presented in glass domes with natural elements such as flowers and insects as a reinterpretation of the aesthetic of decay in Dutch still life paintings of the Golden Age, a tradition that was particularly strong in his hometown of Utrecht. De Vries has said, 'Pottery is one of the only things that a culture leaves behind, because it survives. And then every culture is identifiable by their ceramics, they all have a style.'

STAIRWELL INSTALLATION For his installation at Pallant House Gallery, De Vries mounted individual pieces of Bow porcelain to panels on

the stairwell walls, grouping playful figurines, tableware with blue and white and vegetal decoration, and white wares. He has said that he wishes to 'accentuate and celebrate the history of these ordinary domestic wares'. As part of the project, I commissioned De Vries to create a new sculpture from the fragments of a globular Bow teapot (c1765), which was broken some years ago. Instead of attempting what would have been a complete restoration, he has embraced the brokenness of the piece, 'exploding' the fragments on an armature, interspersed with butterflies to form a kind of 'vanitas' reflecting the fragility of existence. As he has used conservation techniques, it is reversible, should a future curator wish to fully restore the piece back into a complete pot. But for the time being the sculpture has an honesty, and rather than denying its fracture through resin-filling and retouching, its story is revealed and continues for a contemporary audience. As De Vries says, 'Even if it is broken, it still has all the skills of the original craftsman in it.'

This autumn De Vries will be creating another installation at the Holburne Museum in Bath, which, like Pallant House Gallery, is an eighteenth-century house with a contemporary extension. Inspired by the wide variety of broken pieces from Captain Holburne's eighteenth-century Chinese export porcelain tobacco leaf service made for the European market, he is creating what he describes as a 'war banquet, staging a royal battle between *ancien-regime* sugar and revolutionary porcelain, and reflecting on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of grand banquets given on the eve of battle (such as the one on the eve of the battle of Waterloo, memorably recalled in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*'). Both installations present an exciting development in Bouke de Vries' career and question received notions of value and the interpretation and display of artworks. It is no small step for museums to take a less precious approach to the curation of their ceramic collections, taking them out of the vitrines to convey new narratives, but with this risk comes exciting possibilities that will hopefully not only enable visitors to enjoy the beauty and craftsmanship of the original objects, but Bouke de Vries' artistic intervention. □



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The installation will mark the 2012 Olympics and the 300-year anniversary of Pallant House

Forthcoming Exhibitions Bouke de Vries: *Bow Selector*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, July 2012-July 2013; *War and Pieces*, Holburne Museum, Bath, 1 September-2 December 2012
Symposium To accompany Bouke de Vries' exhibition *War and Pieces*, the Holburne Museum, Bath are holding a symposium

titled 'Subversive Ceramics' on 9 November 2012. For more details contact Simone Homes: S.Homes@bath.ac.uk
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