

BOUKE

DE

VRIES

Emma Crichton-Miller talks to the Dutch-born artist about his love of ceramics, his reverence for Chinese porcelain, and his desire to subvert the traditional



The Ceramic Artist



Bouke de Vries, born in Holland in 1960, is a most unusual ceramic artist. Trained first as a fashion designer, working alongside Zandra Rhodes, John Galliano and Stephen Jones, and then later as a highly skilled restorer of museum quality ceramics, with clients that range from the National Trust to that national treasure, Grayson Perry, he approaches this most vulnerable material not with fear and trembling, but with tenderness and delight in its mortality. For de Vries makes art not out of raw clay, fired into fragility, but out of the broken shards of once highly valued ceramic wares. Whether these are masterpieces of Ming porcelain or homely earthenware figurines, treasured Meissen or workaday delftware, items of 18th-century Worcester soft-paste porcelain or mass-produced ceramic portrait busts of Chairman Mao, de Vries takes his start in what remains, building sculptures from fragments.

De Vries's work was born six years ago out of reverence for the ceramics he handled, above all for the fine examples of Chinese porcelain he was privileged to mend, but also by the artist's desire to move beyond recapturing past perfection, to explore a wide range of ideas and emotions. As he puts it to me, 'I am trying to give these things a new existence, a new relationship to life'. What emerges depends upon his mood and the character of the original. While often haunting or poetic, de Vries's mischievous sense of humour inspires sometimes surreal or outrageous contemporary reinterpretations of traditional forms and motifs. As he has engraved on a recent work, *The Repair 6* – part of a solo show in Milan running until 28 March – a clear glass form blown to echo the 19th-century porcelain 'sang de boeuf' Chinese vase, whose fragments it contains: 'From shattered remnants of broken ceramic, beauty is born anew.'

Almost inevitably, de Vries is much beloved by museum curators. Over the last two years he has been invited to create a major installation of new work for the Holburne Museum in Bath. *Wars and Pieces* is a display of battles amidst broken china owing more to the Chapman brothers than to 18th-century polite society. It has travelled on to the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin, and will be exhibited at the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale between May and October. He also created a dramatic installation of Bow porcelain for Pallant House: *Bouke de Vries: Bow Selector*. Meanwhile, this autumn, he has been invited to work with the historic porcelain collections in the Château de Nyon, the medieval castle outside Geneva. This is home to a museum of porcelain, honouring the brief period between

1781 and 1813 when hand-painted Nyon porcelain was all the rage. De Vries will make new work in dialogue with the museum's collections. There is undoubtedly a frisson for visitors used to the endless perfection of museum displays to be confronted with de Vries's anarchic assemblages, but as de Vries himself also acknowledges, 'their damage and their fragility stir feelings of empathy, and the fact that I save the pieces and give them a new narrative makes it possible for people to form their own stories'.

Outside the museum, de Vries's work has been diversifying. The show in Milan, at the Gloria Maria Gallery, located in the former knitware factory, Atelier Les Copains, is titled *Threads of My Life*. Taking the theme of Ariadne's thread, de Vries has combined some Japanese and Chinese ceramic pieces patched together using flying strips of gold, in a variation on the venerable Japanese technique of Kintsugi, or 'golden repair', with other pieces bound together with gold thread and string. In the figure *Ariadne*, the broken 20th-century continental white ceramic female figure kneels on a 4th-century BC Greek dish, on a small wooden plinth, holding a ball of gold thread which spins around her. The idea of finding your way back refers not just to the restorer's art but also to de Vries's journey back into his own past life in textiles. De Vries has used other materials, including blown glass and two 17th-century wooden cupids that hold the words 'Amore' and 'Desire' made out of gold thread, stretched between their hands, like cat's cradle. Simultaneously, during the European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) held annually in Maastricht (14–23 March 2014), the dealer Adrian Sassoon, for whom de Vries has worked for fifteen years as a specialist restorer, displays a series of de Vries's *Memory Vessels*, each of which is a completely transparent glass vessel blown to recreate the shape of the original broken vessel, with the fragments inside.

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Last summer, de Vries embarked on a completely new adventure. He was invited by the pioneering gallerist and design guru Pearl Lam to visit China, with a view to making some limited edition pieces for Pearl Lam Design. De Vries had never been to China before, yet, as he tells me in London, while China as a country may have been a mystery to him, 'Chinese ceramics are the mainstay of all my work'. He has only to point out that apart from one white delftware porridge bowl and a Japanese piece, all the *Memory Vessels* encase Chinese ceramic vessels: 'Delftware is in any case an attempt to imitate Chinese porcelain. It shows you how important the Chinese porcelain tradition has been.' Indeed, so frequent



Minotaur, 2014
15th-century Thai temple figure,
18th- and 20th-century Chinese
porcelain, 21st-century British earthenware
and mixed media
37x32x116 cm.



Above: War and Pieces at the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin

Below: A selection from War and Pieces, 2012

Theseus and Ariadne, 2014
19th-century Continental porcelain and mixed media
28x22x29.5cm.

have been de Vries's encounters with the finest Chinese porcelain that his first shock on reaching China was to discover 'how little Chinese porcelain there is out there'.

Accompanied by Danful Yang from Ms Lam's team, his first stop was Dehua, in Fujian Province. This was the ancient centre for the manufacture of Blanc de Chine, or white porcelain, made from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) onwards, and much sought after by western collectors. It is still made there today, in the traditional way. 'They can work so finely!' de Vries assures me, adding that these highly skilled craftsmen mostly stick to traditional figures such as dragons or the familiar statues of Guan Yin, a Buddhist figure associated with compassion. While de Vries has talked to the factory about using some broken pieces in his sculptures, what really caught his eye were these Guan Yin figures, and the potential for 'bringing her up to date, giving her headphones, or a mobile phone, or a laptop'. Rather than making one-off pieces, as de Vries had done up until this point, with Ms Lam he would create a series of designs that would then be made on site.

De Vries's second stop was Jingdezhen, the old ceramics capital of China. Here, de Vries was amazed by a factory making giant vases seven metres high, with all the sections hand thrown. As far as he could see: 'Everything that can be made in ceramic is made in porcelain here – from rubbish bins to the cladding of lampposts.' He is already beginning to work on a prototype for another series of objects that might be made in limited editions here. Finally, before his return to Shanghai, where Pearl

Lam has two galleries, de Vries flew to Xian to see the Terracotta Army and also the first Han emperor's tomb: 'The thousands of clay stick figures here are much less known than the Terracotta soldiers, but I thought much more poetic and beautiful.' This return to source has inspired a run of entirely new work from de Vries – maybe not art from fragments of broken Chinese porcelain, as before, but the creation of new contemporary design from the redirection of an ancient discipline. As de Vries sums it up: 'traditional but subverted'.



A series of Bouke de Vries's 'Memory Vessels' will be on display at TEFAF, Maastricht, 14–23 March 2014

