In Conversation with Stephen Bird

authors and photographers: vicki grima and stephen bird

[inside my studio]

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{xtypo_dropcap}W{/xtypo_dropcap}hen did you first use clay and what did you make?

When I was eight we had a teacher who brought in a bag of clay and we all made coil cups and then added eyes and noses etc so they were like Toby jugs. They were not fired but we painted and varnished them. Years later I tried to drink tea out of it and it dissolved.

Where is your current studio?

I have been working at Mary Street studios, St. Peters, Sydney, for almost a year now, but I also have a studio in Dundee, Scotland which I have maintained for 20 years.

Do you work alone or with others?

There are over 100 artists at Mary Street, but I work alone in my studio.

What are the essential features a studio of yours has to have?

Tolerant neighbours, bright lights and a good hi fi. A café close by is always a bonus.

Describe your work pattern – hours/days/week etc.

I usually go to studio from 11 am until 8 pm. At the moment I look after my two young children two days a week so on those days I go to the studio for six hours in the evening. Every few weeks I take a day or two off.

Describe the work you make in your studio.

At the moment I have three areas I am working in – painting, large-scale sculptures and ceramics. Quite often the line between them is very blurred and each medium informs the others.

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What is the most satisfying part of your work?

I always enjoy beginning a new piece of work. There’s that feeling of optimism and new promise as a work begins to take on a life of its own.

Why is clay your chosen medium?

I began using clay in 1996 as a way of combining my painting and sculpture. Whatever medium I use I like to get very involved with it and clay allows this because it’s so tangible. With clay I like the rhythm of the water flow as the clay changes from one state to the next. I think it’s a medium that a lot of people feel very tuned into and the metaphors between clay, the body and water and creativity are endless.

Type of clay?

Mainly white earthenware but also terracotta and porcelain.

Type of glaze?

I use a lead borosilicate glaze.

Type of kiln / firing?

10 cubic foot electric kiln.

List your 3 favourite things that you listen to while working.

This week it’s a new album by Glasvegas, Steinski’s retrospective “What Does It All Mean?” and some podcasts of Agroinnovations.com

Your favourite tool?

My Swiss army knife.

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How do you identify your work?

I write my name on it.

How do you sell your work?

I am represented by Ray Hughes Gallery in Australia and the Scottish Gallery in the UK.

Do you teach or sell from your studio?

No.

What other jobs, paid or unpaid, fit around your ceramic practice?

I sometimes teach part time at National Art School.

What is your favourite part of the ceramic process?

Painting layers of slips on wet clay.

What is the dreaded job that never gets done?

Financial book keeping always gets left till last.

What are you fussy about?

I always dry my work out very slowly. It avoids a lot of disappointment later.

If you could change one thing about your studio, what would that be?

I would like a window with a view please.

Which single piece of ceramics would you most like to own?

The bull-baiting scene modelled by Obadiah Sherratt in 1835 which is in the Brighton Pavilion Museum. Its strange mixture of violence, beauty and politics really opened my eyes to the potential of ceramics as a medium of communication.

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What would you do if you won the lottery?

I don’t gamble myself, but if I had more money than I needed I would have a big party and then make a donation to a children’s home in West Bengal which we have been visiting for 10 years now.

Do you have any exhibitions or workshops coming up?

From 15 to 17 May 2009, I am exhibiting at Collect at the Saatchi Gallery in London, a group show, Figuration at the JamFactory in Adelaide from 9 May to 21 June and at Ray Hughes Gallery, Surry Hills during the Australian Ceramics Triennale in July. I am undertaking residencies at the University of South Australia and at Hill End, the gold mining town near Bathurst.

How can people contact you?

www.stephenbird.net