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WHEN WEST DEAN College in Chichester, England, accepted Australian Penny Byrne into its ceramic restoration and conservation school, staff had little idea of the radical they were unleashing on unwary figurines. What started as a joke—slipping minor additions to original pieces by the watchful eyes of examiners—has now become a highly-successful career for this conservator-cum-artist, foregoing work with major conservation firms in London to construct new work out of discarded and unloved ceramics.

What was it that initially drew you to ceramics and then to conservation?

My mum had an antique shop in Mildura [in rural Victoria], so I grew up surrounded by antiques and was drawn to ceramics more than anything else. When I finished school I was accepted into law and into art school ... and I chose the fine art path, although I did go back and do the law degree as well. In the end, ceramics just grabbed me. I did my fine arts degree and then was accepted into the graduate diploma at West Dean.

I just couldn't imagine being a potter—you need to have all the creative abilities for that sort of work but I also had this understanding and love of ceramics from my mum's shop. As a kid, I remember finding an old tip at my nanna's house—just a rubbish dump basically—and I did my first archaeological dig, digging up old bits of china, washing them, putting numbers on them. My grandfather was a well-known anthropologist and a taxidermist so I was always surrounded by creative, restorative, and historical endeavours. I was brought up to be interested in the world in that way.

So you did find a creative outlet through conserving and restoring other people's work?

You have to be creative to do it. There is a lot of skill involved—

just practical manual dexterity skills in using the tools and equipment—and a big knowledge of chemistry because you have to know about the different adhesives, cleaning materials and all the rest of it. But then the in-painting and replicating glazes and decorative finishes are incredibly creative. You have to know about colour matching, using paints and brushes and airbrushes and so on. So there is a creative element but it is restrictive in that you are recreating someone else's work and you have to be incredibly careful, precise, accurate and patient. I've always been all of those things but there is also a cheeky streak running through me and there was never an outlet for that in conservation. You have to respect the object, not damage the object. You are restoring, conserving. You have to look after it.

At what point did you decide to disrespect the object?

Well the first act of disrespect was actually at West Dean but it was very gentle. I was restoring a little dog—a Derby lady figurine from about 1820 with a little dog at its base. I was making new ribbons for her hair for my final assessment—little pink ribbons out of epoxy resin—and as part of that I made a little pink bow around the dog's neck. It was no big deal really but the point was the dog didn't have a bow so for a purist's point of view it was pretty radical. My joke was to see if the assessors would notice and say: 'Well, nice bow but you should take it off'. But they didn't! [The ribbon] was so good that they just thought that the figurine had a porcelain bow around its neck—very harmless. I worked in the museum sector after that and had a few little jokes along the way but nothing to do with ruining objects.

But at some stage you must have decided to break free from the conservator mould, however naughty, and start to take these objects as a starting point for your own work. How did you go from caring for other people's work to creating objects that could be exhibited under your name?

PENNYBYRNE

Story Paul Flynn



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Broke free? Well, there is a background story. My studio is in Collingwood [Melbourne] in Easy Street—and back in the 1970s two women were murdered on that street and no one ever discovered who did it. It was pretty gruesome and it became this urban myth—so whenever I would tell people where my studio was, there was always this reaction of “Oooh, Easy Street? The murders!” The studio is in a big 2-story warehouse with about 40 artists working there and a small gallery space. Back in 2004, we decided to have a fringe festival show in our small gallery. Any artist who had a studio there could put a piece in the show and we would call it *Murder on Easy Street*. So even though I was a conservator, I suddenly thought: “I could make an artwork for this show”. I had a figurine in my studio that was a Dresden porcelain ballerina in a lace dress. My mum had it in her shop and said if I could fix it, feel free, but if not, do what I want with it. So I made it as though that figurine had murdered another ballerina and called it *Murder on the Dance Floor* after the Sophie Ellis Baxter song. I made a samurai sword out of epoxy putty and put the head of another figurine in the ballerina’s hand and splashed blood all over her. She had this big grin on her face and looked as if she’d just beheaded this other ballerina. People thought it was hilarious but classic fringe show, nobody came to see it.

Later, I was sitting on a tram and saw an ad for the Linden Postcard Show. I knew nothing about the art world. I thought the work [I made] was funny and wanted other people to see it. It won one of the prizes that year—the postcard prizes. I’ve never been more surprised in my life than when they called out my name. A tiny little photo of my work was put in a review and mentioned my work in *Artlink* magazine. I didn’t know about that either.

How do you find your figures now and how do you decide if something is worth fiddling with or should be restored or left on its own?

Basically on eBay and also op-shops [second-hand stores]. But people are now starting to give me things too. That’s been interesting. My initial work was based on figurines I had found so those figurines gave me the idea for the work. But then when I realised I could access the worldwide car boot sale of eBay, I could find specific figurines—so instead of being reactive, I could be proactive and search for things like sharks, if I wanted to do a piece about shark fin soup, which I’ve done. Or equally, on eBay, I’ll do a random figurine search and look through hundreds and think: ‘oh that’s just too good to leave’. Then I’ll leave it in my studio for a while and think about it.

As far as what to muck around with and what not to muck around with, well because I know about antiques and ceramic history, I know what I’m dealing with so I do have my limits. I wouldn’t wreck an early Meissen porcelain figurine, for instance. Although I know [Ai Weiwei] did drop that Han vase [for his controversial 1995 photographic series *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*]. I’d like to find that vase and restore it ... that would be my artwork, a video of me putting it back together.

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Most of your work seems to be quite political too though. Why are you choosing those kinds of themes?

I’m politically engaged in the world anyway. My going back and



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studying law was part of that. I care deeply about social justice, human rights, the environment—it just seems I've found a way to express that artistically I suppose. It allows me to talk about those things that are really important anyway but through my art. I'm not a member of any political party at the moment but I have been on and off over the years. It's a way to express myself—it's as simple as that.

They tend to be political but they're not always—they can just be silly and light hearted. Sometimes they can just play on words. There's one called *Get Forked*, a little rabbit with a fork in its head. I don't know why he has a fork in his head—it's just a play on 'get fucked'. I'm interested in language and words as well. People can think what they want but sometimes it's as simple as 'I think I'll just stick my nanna's fork in this rabbit's head' [laughs]; a bit macabre and bizarre but just playing with names.

And the titles are quite important. They give a context for the work.

Yeah they are. It's frustrating sometimes when the work might be shown but people don't make a big deal of the titles.

Given that political bent, George and Laura Bush have made frequent appearances in your work. What are you going to do now as they fade from the scene?

When [former Australian Prime Minister] John Howard lost the [2007] election, my mother called and said 'Don't worry it will be alright. Bad things will keep happening' [laughs]. Suddenly I didn't have John Howard to pick on. But Tony Abbott is throwing up some ideas—as is the Labor Party with Kevin Rudd being toppled.

So he might get forked?

Yes, well because my work is political, I can plan what I'm going to make, but then politics intervenes and I have to change my plans.

So in my next show in September, I'll have a work about Kevin Rudd martyred like St Sebastian with arrows coming out of him, but then he'll also be stabbed in the back with about 6 different knives that will have to do with all the different reasons he was toppled—unions, the caucus, emissions trading scheme, mining tax and all this sort of stuff. He's well and truly got. ■

Born 1967, Penny Byrne grew up in Midura, rural Victoria. In 1987, she completed a Fine Arts degree in Ceramics at Melbourne's RMIT before a graduate diploma (Ceramics and Glass Conservation and Restoration) from West Dean College, UK. She also gained her LLB from La Trobe University, Melbourne. Byrne is represented by Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney.

EXHIBITION
Penny Byrne
Ill Gotten Gains
9 Sep - 26 Sep 2010
Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney
www.ssfa.com.au

- 01 *Broken Hearted*, 2008, mixed media, 32 x 39 x 14cm
- 02 *Penny Byrne in her studio*, Courtesy ABC TV
- 03 *Get Forked*, 2008, mixed media, 23 x 11 x 11cm
- 04 *It's murder on the dance floor*, 2010, mixed media, 24 x 24 x 12cm
- 05 *Not Another Landmine Lamented Sallyanne*, 2009, mixed media, 49 x 39 x 20cm
- 06 *Will the Little Hick Terrorist*, mixed media, 36 x 14 x 12cm [detail]
- 07 *Save me, save me from tomorrow*, 2008, mixed media, 76 x 61 x 23cm [detail]
- 08 *George and Laura were all set to shock and awe*, 2007, altered vintage ceramic, epoxy, plastic, 32 x 17 x 12cm
- 09 *Diamante Doggie*, 2010, resin dog, swarovski crystals, epoxy resin, 27 x 17 x 20cm [detail]
- 10 *Hiroshi and his friends are having a whale of a time*, 2008, mixed media, 16 x 29 x 6.3cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney

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