



STEPHEN BENWELL

CERAMICIST

RUTH LEARNER explores the intricacies and the perfections of a dedicated ceramicist.

The intricate landscapes on Stephen Benwell's recent ceramics exhibition in April this year at Niagara Galleries appear to heighten their elegance and translucence. Figures, some with the inscrutable expressions of spectators, others *contrapposto*, loiter in open spaces populated by classical statues and dark mythological scenes. The artist and the work encapsulate essential paradoxes: immediacy and distance, the commonplace and the idyllic, and a re-envisioning of the classical within the intimate scale of the 'minor' work.

Benwell has rented and worked in the same studio, an old corrugated iron workshop off St Kilda Road, since 1986. He spends three or four hours each day working there, this habitual and rhythmic pattern tracing his creative life for over a quarter of a century. Benwell has travelled relatively little; the overseas trips he has made

having had a profound influence. This sense of concentrated focus, both in life and in art, along with a playful freedom that comes from a natural self-awareness, an understanding of limits, underpins the work.

Benwell attended the Victorian College of the Arts in 1971, at the height of minimalism and conceptualism. "None of these things meant anything to me. I arrived with my funny little paintings a bit like Picasso and Gauguin — I had been painting the male nude since I was 17. I moved sideways into craft and pottery as a way to find a surface, a form, that I could put my painting onto." Although an accident of time and context, Benwell stuck with ceramics, then experiencing a craft revival, first showing and selling his work at The Craft Centre in South Yarra.

Very early on Benwell was appropriating styles from seventeenth-century Meissen ceramics as well as Chinoiserie, itself a French interpretation of a Chinese aesthetic; this desire to reinterpret reinterpretations formed



the foundation of his work. While a young student, Benwell visited Greece, the classical antiquities feeding into his relentless pursuit of the figurative. "One of the things about the nude is it's outside of time, it's an imaginary world, a made up world."

In 1984, during a residency in Paris, Benwell went to Dusseldorf and saw the seminal show *Von hier aus. Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf* [From Here: Two Months of German Art in Düsseldorf], featuring many great artists of the day including Richter, Keifer, Baselitz and Beuys. At this time, Benwell was also experimenting with earthenware, the chalky porous ceramic enabling him to rework his surfaces more than ever before, presenting an ideal canvas for his painting.

Through early 2000, Benwell attended Monash University as a student. This association focused his interest on the classical, in particular on reinterpretations of the classical in Renaissance painters such as Lorrain and





Poussin. His 2005 Monash show *The Impassioned Shepherd* included paintings *After Claude* and *Rustic Elegy*, the Arcadian landscapes becoming central to much of his work.

Benwell eyes the classical very much through the present, drawing on newspaper clippings of "semi-naked AFL players" and video stills. His coupling of high art with low art or low culture points to a search for the unattainable. Benwell's interest in locating the classical ideal in the now is bound to fail, and perhaps it is this — the mercurial and fleeting nature of perfection — that keeps him going.

In her 1984 essay about the late nineteenth-century Alexandrian poet, C.P. Cavafy ('A Critical Introduction to Cavafy' in *The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays*), Marguerite Yourcenar wrote, "Ordinarily it is not so much the resurrection of the past that he seeks as it is an image of the past, an Idea, perhaps an Essence. His sensuality leads to a mystical sifting of reality, as spirituality would have done in another case."

Like Cavafy, who drew much of his inspiration from the Hellenistic poetic tradition, Benwell is searching for some kind of impossible resolution through memory and technique. By and large, his is a memory informed by secondary sources, very much Plato's world of appearance, an illusory memory, but one that through an intense and limited gaze has resulted in his own translations, containing all the nuances and slippage of a new language.

Reflecting the framework of his practice, the steadiness and poise, Benwell has always worked in a modest scale, refining and concentrating his hand-built figurines and painted ceramics. Cavafy, too, was dedicated to the small, to a preference for the minor work over the heroic; his lines and paragraphs, according to Yourcenar, "with all their lyricism, retain the naked beauty of a note jotted down for oneself".

In July 2013, Heide Museum of Modern Art will present a retrospective of Stephen Benwell's work, surveying his ceramics from 1970 to the present day. The large central galleries are an ideal space to show something of the artist's consummate control and attention to detail, and ultimately the exceptional freshness of this smaller work. □



Previous pages:

Left: Stephen Benwell, *Collection*, 2010, earthenware, 24.5 x 50 x 50cm. (Perspex box.)

Right top: Stephen Benwell, *For heroes only*, 2007, hand-built earthenware, height: largest 17cm, smallest 12cm.

Right bottom left: Stephen Benwell, *Flute*, 2010, porcelain, 23 x 9 x 9cm.

Right bottom right: Stephen Benwell, *Neo-classical figure*, 2008, earthenware, 20 x 9.5 x 8.5cm.

This page:

Top: Stephen Benwell, *Three fauns*, 2008, earthenware, each c.19cm.

Above: Stephen Benwell, *Large vase-the harvesters*, 2002–2007, earthenware, height: 53.5cm.