

Peppers, Pixies, & Pickled Onions



Paul Scott explores the extraordinary artwork of Jim Cooper.

In October 2012 I judged the *Portage Awards*, New Zealand's annual national competition for ceramics, hosted by Auckland's Lopdell House Gallery. The prestigious event included significant awards, as well as a selected, curated exhibition and bespoke catalogue. Although I had done a certain amount of remote pre-selection from photographs and anonymised artist statements, nothing really prepared me for the impact of what turned out to be the winner's work when I met it for real in Lopdell House Gallery. Jim Cooper's installation of two-thirds life-size ceramic characters, animals, and flowers, *The Millbrook Holiday*, was like a surreal primary school drawing brought to life in a psychedelic fusion of over-fired, brightly coloured glaze and unlikely sculptural form, which

somehow stood up and laughed at me. Art Educator Rod Taylor has described encountering art first-hand as being an 'illuminating experience'.¹ To be in a room with a Jim Cooper installation is certainly that; his work has a real presence, one that is, unfortunately, only partly conveyed in the diminution of scale and distance of a photograph.

PEN AND PENCIL Cooper has been working with clay since he was a child and has a deep affinity with the material, but it was encountering the work of American ceramist Peter Voulkos that liberated his practice and showed him a way to articulate his ideas and narratives. In conversation he emphasises the significance of drawing to his practice, talking passionately about the graphic use of pencil or pen as being essential in developing ways of thinking, seeing, and making. 'You find stuff in drawing, and it gets you to places that would take much longer using clay.' He spends hours a

¹ *Jim Cooper Did this*, work in progress, Taiwan, 2012 (Photo: Moyra Elliott) ² *Beattie* from Sgt Pepper installation, stoneware, 2009, H107cm approx. Courtesy White Space Gallery, Auckland ³ *Shirley Temple* from Sgt Pepper installation, stoneware, 2009, H89cm approx. Courtesy White Space Gallery, Auckland ⁴ *The Millbrook*

Holiday, stoneware, paper backdrop, 2012, H200cm. Winner of the Portage Awards, 2012. Courtesy Lopdell House Gallery, New Zealand ⁵ Jim Cooper during his residency at Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taiwan, 2010 (Photo: Moyra Elliott) ⁶ *The Millbrook Holiday* (detail), 2012, H200cm. Courtesy Lopdell House Gallery



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day with a pencil, and although acknowledging the importance of clay 'sketches' (his studio is littered with unfinished, unresolved, or broken pieces), it is clear that the two-dimensional is key to the resolution of the artwork. Significantly, it is also responsible for its inspiration.

ROCK MUSIC Early reliefs and wall panels grew from paintings, including works by major New Zealand painter Colin McCahon and Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, but the freestanding assemblages he is now making have developed over the past six years and come from a different source. Album covers and rock music have become increasingly important to his work, in visual content and conceptual realisation. The first major assemblage of sculptural forms evolved from a significant re-working of Peter Blake's artwork for the cover of the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album – and it is much more populous and exuberant. With 130 figures, Cooper's version was no meticulous remake. Some characters were removed, to be replaced by those he

felt more deserving. Newcomers included Buzz Aldrin, De Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle*, *The Queen*, Osama Bin Laden, and Mona Lisa. Cooper (with ghostly pallor and tongue firmly in cheek) also joined the montage in *Self Portrait as Space Cadet*. He followed up with a new version of the Rolling Stones' *Satanic Majesties* album cover, indicating themes that he has been investigating since.

The Portage's *The Millbrook Holiday* is one of the series that has examined, commemorated, and re-animated events of a very particular period. Cooper is fascinated by the mythology of the time between 1967 and 1969 when a new generation fused music, meditation, and LSD into an attempt at seeing and understanding the world in a new way. He describes how the intense, psychedelic process became tainted and corroded so that its potential was never fulfilled. This short period is the 'sliver of history' that now articulates his work. *The Last Record Cover*, his largest assemblage to date, contains over 600 characters, animals, and flowers, all covered in bright, shiny, glossy dripping glazes.

Notes 1 Taylor, R, *Educating for Art*, (London: Longman, 1986) 2 YouTube Shifting Sands' single 'Pixies'; <http://bit.ly/O0jL4X> 3 Jones, Jonathan, 'Grinling Gibbons: the wood-carver who took root in England', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2010 4 Cooper, Jim, 'What Makes me do it?', Cooper's writings on ideas behind the

imagery, (unpublished) courtesy of Moyra Elliot (from *Cone Ten and Descending* blog), <http://bit.ly/WV2scM> **Exhibitions** Jim Cooper is currently working at the Hualien Ceramic Art Studios, Taiwan, on an exhibition for the Aki Gallery, Taipei, in June 2013 (www.akigallery.com.tw)

Stockists White Space, Ponsonby, Auckland, New Zealand; Brett McDowell Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand; Martin Browne Contemporary, Paddington, Australia **Email** jcooperceramic@gmail.com **Web** www.whitespace.co.nz/artists/jim-cooper.aspx

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CHILDLIKE BUT MASTERLY Installations include drawn material, magazine cut-outs, paper works, as well as sticky tape and compost, but the overwhelming body is ceramic. The sculptures appear childlike, yet there is a technical mastery in construction and surface realisation that has come through years of experimenting, glazing, and testing. The loose naive quality of modelling and depiction is also timely acquired. Cooper's forms in the late 1990s were much slicker, reminiscent of the American tradition of painted sculptural ceramics, but he has taken a conscious journey back to the rawness of early works. It is something he continues to work at.

The symbiotic link between music, drawing, and Cooper's assemblages has also been realised in animations. 'I did some animal drawings then just walked them off the page', and in 2012 he created the video for The Shifting Sands' single 'Pixies'.² Links with bands might yet involve him in creating his own album covers. Rock music is perceived as being very much of a moment, but it has a longevity that no one expected; in that way it's a bit like ceramics.

BRINGING OUT THE LOST CHILD Cooper has a studio near Dunedin in New Zealand's South Island in an old pickled onion factory, but as a result of his 2010 Taiwanese sojourn, linked to Moyra Elliot's curated show for the Yingge Ceramic Museum, he has developed a yearning to work farther afield. Plans are afoot for a residency at the International Ceramic Research Centre at Gudagergård in Denmark, and an exhibition in London. If you get a chance to see the work for real, you will not be disappointed. Disbelief – that these things could really exist – will invite closer inspection, which in turn will reveal further delights: collaged cut-out roses from flower catalogues, dripping glazed triffid-like flowers, disparate characters with glazed smiling expressions, absurdity, and luminous, psychedelic colour. Although in a completely different medium and outrageously contrary in style, Cooper's work has something of the spirit of Grinling Gibbons, the famous seventeenth-century woodcarver who 'breathed life into still material'.³ The work has the ability to bring out the lost child hidden in us all, by re-engaging our sense of wonder and delight.

Success and the sale of work means Jim Cooper is able to make more art. He writes, 'It is important to me that I can feel there is this honesty in the making and the conception; an attitude that renders me both modernist and dinosaurian. I'm OK with that. I don't want the work to be clever either. I do this for me.'⁴ ☐



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