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A Head for Figures

IN THE ARTIST BARNABY BARFORD'S WORLD, EVERY LITTLE KNICKKNACK COUNTS. DAISY GARNETT TAKES A TALLY.

Barnaby Barford spends most of his working life in a shed in his East London garden, surrounded by cheap figurines — the banal ones you get for pennies from charity shops or on eBay, the ones with nothing to recommend them, the ones that nobody wants. Well, nobody except Barford. In the hands of this 29-year-old product designer, ceramicist, teacher and artist, these found objects are transformed into one-off collector's pieces — works of art, really, sold in London through the David Gill Galleries or at the major design fairs.

Barford collects the figurines, cuts them up, reassigns bits of them — a head here, a body there — and then repaints them to create something entirely different, like part of a mirror or a chandelier. "Oh, I Thought it Would Be Bigger," for example, is a centerpiece for a table composed of two impeccable women, one of whom looks exactly like C.Z. Guest, staring at a large, well-endowed black stallion.

"This one arrived from eBay," Barford says about one of the female figures, "and I hated her at first. But all the figurines I use are ugly in one way or another. They tend to be mass-produced in China, and most people would dismiss them on principle, but I like making them nice. Even just painting the horse black makes a difference. Often people think I've made everything from scratch, but I'm not interested in that. I like transforming a dowdy figurine into something else."

It's impossible not to call Barford's output art. David Gill, who deals mostly in furniture and decorative art, says of Barford's work: "It is poetic, colloquial and punchy. For me, he is a sculptor and an artist working in the same tradition as Grayson Perry." (Perry, who won Britain's prestigious Turner Prize in 2003, also used to show his work with David Gill.)

But Barford's work is wonderful design as much as it is art: even the most decorative pieces — the table centerpieces — have a purpose, while still functioning as satire. His piece "Well I Think He's Done a Cracking Job!" shows a naked woman, a white poodle's head where her own should be, twirling on a gold ball in front of a mirror and looking at herself admiringly. Titles are clearly important to Barford, who can pinpoint the exact moment he first discovered the cartoons of Ronald Searle.

Like his work, Barford is hard to classify. He got a degree in 3-D design at the University of Plymouth, which included a year of studying ceramics and glass in Faenza, Italy (where he also met his Italian fiancée, Val, a toy designer, who now lives with him). The experience encouraged him to continue in ceramics rather than, say, going into computer-based design, which in turn led him to an M.A. at London's Royal College of Art.

It was there, Barford says, while he was under the influence of fellow art students, that he began thinking more conceptually, doing things like cutting up plates and making pictures out of them. Barford's graduation project in 2002 was an inspired conceit in which he animated the mythical story of the Willow pattern, a popular china motif, and projected it, along with text, onto two white plates set as they would be on a table in a restaurant. It's called "Conversation Piece," and its purpose is to provide couples who have nothing to talk

The sum of his parts Clockwise from top left: Barnaby Barford in his work shed; his piece "Donkey"; his Global Service plates for Nymphenburg.

 PORTRAIT BY STEPHEN GILL

Arch nemesis Barford's "Oh Please Mummy Can We Keep It."

'I'D LIKE TO DO SOMETHING SURREAL AND ANARCHIC,' BARFORD SAYS.

about with a story to tell each other over dinner. The animation is incredibly subtle; the plates look as if their pattern has come alive.

Apart from anything else, Barford is a meticulous technician and a gifted craftsman. He currently teaches ceramics at Central Saint Martins and is embarking on several ambitious projects with the German porcelain manufacturer Nymphenburg. In addition to collaborating with Barford on new pieces like the Global Service — a set of 14 plates that together make up a map of the world — the company has basically given him access to all its existing figurines for a large art piece. There is also a project with a rug, and a plan to make a short animated film.

"The film is a way of scaling things up," Barford explains. "At the moment, each piece I do is a scene — but imagine telling a whole story."

Barford is at once quietly passionate and very droll about his work, and so it is without a whiff of pretension that he adds, "I'd like to do something surreal and anarchic."

Still, with so much going on, does he think of himself as an artist or a designer? "At the gallery, I'm called an artist. And sometimes that's what I call myself, but if I showed my work in an art gallery I might not be able to make mirrors and tables.

"But then," he adds, "I do one-off pieces." A pause. "Most of my friends are designers. Does that help?" Another pause, as if he's trying to come up with something more meaningful. In fact, surrounded by such inventive work, he doesn't have to. "Basically," he concludes, "I just like messing around with things." ■

BARNABY BARFORD