



MARK THOMPSON
sine qua non

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LAURAINÉ · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

Boonwurrung Country
5 Malakoff Street
North Caulfield VIC Australia 3161

T: (+613) 9509 9855
E: ausart@diggins.com.au
W: diggins.com.au

Gallery & Exhibition Hours:
Tues – Friday 10 am – 6 pm
other hours by appointment



A Juggling Pug 2024
earthenware, underglaze, decals
h.: 80cm

KT and the Cormorant 2024
earthenware, underglaze, decals,
gold lustre
h.: 75 cm

MARK THOMPSON: sine qua non

As one of Australia's leading set and costume designers, in addition to his achievements as a painter and ceramicist Mark Thompson has built his practice on a bower bird principle of collecting "bright and shiny" things from all kinds of sources including newspaper clippings, art book illustrations and web sites. "Everything", the artist says, "is grist for the mill and nothing is sacred or off limits."

His preference for porcelain and associated decorative technologies has been motivated, not only by his conversion to the medium in the context of 1960s Funk Ceramics, but also a passion for ceramics styles in a wider context of applied and decorative design. His trademark bravura mastery of modelling and rich polychromatic glazes with gold lustre accents has never been driven by a desire to emulate traditions but a determination to challenge

COVER:
Comb Up 2024
earthenware, underglaze, decals, gold lustre
h.: 61 cm

them and coopt whatever looked useful to the cause of tongue in cheek wit and unbridled experiment. The artist has also described this as "raiding and repurposing ideas."

What a menagerie of creatures we have here. The hybridity of associations are products of a free-range imagination. Few make any real sense. Why KT has a cormorant on her head, or a rather exasperated courtier wears a toad on his wig (*Toad of One*) is beyond reason. And why is that grimacing man in the discomforting clutches of a reptile (*The Reptile*)? And who is really the reptile? If one imagines there might be a fantastical narrative, perhaps an operatic plot or a fairy tale, to explain things, then no explanation is necessary. Just get on board and see where the story leads. In true Thompson manner this journey is enhanced by a surfeit of decorative embellishments and theatrical flourishes. The artist continues to be fascinated by ornamentation in all media and across all historical styles. An example is the epaulette as seen in *Peter Perriot*. To the uneducated eye it looks like an epaulette on the right shoulder. For Thompson it's a particular insignia,



Fezzed Up 2024
earthenware, underglaze, decals, gold lustre
h.: 58 cm



Peter Perriot on a good day 2024
 earthenware, lustres and decals
 h.: 78 cm



Tondo 2024
 earthenware, gold lustre
 diam.: 58 cm

True reality is only in dreams
 - Charles Baudelaire

replete with history and symbolic significance. Ceramics aficionados will recognise connections between his creatures (toad, hare, cat, et al) and the grotesque ceramic creatures created by Eduard Stellmacher (1868 – 1945) in Bohemia, and also The Elector Augustus the Strong (1670 – 1733) who created a fashion for porcelain sculptures to adorn tables and fill his Japanese Pavilion in Dresden with fabulous beasts. A key work in this context is *Juggling Pug*. This sculpture demands to be read through the prism of history. Pug dogs, imported into Europe from China in the 16th century, rapidly became a fashion item for society ladies. As a measure of the breed's popularity a 'Pug Order' was established in Bavaria in 1740. Members of the Order owned real pugs and secretly wore medallions decorated with a pug. The production of the pug figurines required for the



A Toad on One 2024
 earthenware, stain, decals, gold lustre
 h.: 51cm



The Reptile 2024
earthenware, lustres
h.: 40 cm



Turbaned Bird 2024
earthenware, decals
h.: 75 cm



Hindi Alice in a kimono with the Rabbit 2024
earthenware, underglaze, decals, gold lustre
h.: 68 cm

initiation were commissioned from porcelain manufactories with the Meissen designer Johann Joachim Kändler (1706 – 1775) defining the genre.

Aside from the extravagant patterning and ornamentation and figurative motifs the sculptural forms also reference design and art history. This is particularly evident in the bust which is the organising agent of several of these works. The bust evolved as the aristocracy, then wealthy middle classes maintained a love affair with the genre that knew no bounds. It was simply so deployable and an enduring token of respectability. From the Surrealists and Pop artists to the inscribed busts of contemporary Australian artist Ah Xian and Indigenous artist Jason Wing's balaclava-masked Captain Cook, this motif continues to be a vehicle for ideas.



Flowerhead 2024
earthenware, enamels
h.: 52 cm



Duck Head 2024
earthenware, gold lustre
h.: 70cm

Thompson's imagination in ever-overdrive delivers a spinning mirror ball of possibilities. This is particularly evident in the Pierrot tropes as seen in *Peter Perriot* and *Comb Up* but also in the androgynous portraiture with its 'sad clown' resonances. It is tempting to read self-portraiture into the faces (see in particular *Flower Head*) but Thompson deflects this reading towards an inevitable outcome of using one's face (and indeed hands) for visual reference. A complementary reading, involving echoes of 16th century Mannerist portraiture (think the attenuated features of heads and bodies by artists such as Pontormo, Tiepolo, El Greco and Parmigianino), may be more appropriate, and indeed, Mannerism with its valorisation of brittle artifice. But on the slippery slope of endless possibilities it might be equally useful to read these quizzical figurines as later day expressions of the 19th century Decadence movement (think Félicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley) with its hermetic humour and bonfires of vanities dancing on the edge of the grave.

– John Neylon, September 2024

John Neylon is an Adelaide-based art writer, poet, curator and artist and is currently the art writer for *InReview*.