

Dan Elborne's Brutal Beauty

As an undergraduate art student in Brisbane in the mid 90s I chose to study ceramics as a major instead of the then very popular discipline of painting. It wasn't ceramics as such that interested me, but rather the medium of clay. The infinitely malleable quality of the medium seemed to allow for endless creativity, even if creativity was by then *passé*. Painting seemed overdetermined by the long shadow of medium specificity and the endgame politics of postmodernism that still seemed to haunt the walls of academia like some un-dead Banquo. Ceramics, having a close affinity with reproductive technologies in the industrial context often lent it to the politics of postmodernism – appropriation theory, multiple versus original and so forth. With slip casting techniques a student could quickly demonstrate, through the multiple casting of the same object, their allegiance to a process of mechanical reproduction over authorship, technique and formal processes. The student was far more likely to hear the names of theorists such as Rosalind Krauss and Walter Benjamin than the names of formal minimalists like John Mason and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, much less expressionists like Peter Voukos or Paul Soldner.¹ The casting technique demonstrated Krauss' theory of the lack of originality in avant-garde works. So too did it lend itself to Benjamin's theory of mechanical reproduction, demonstrating art's lack of special aesthetic qualities or aura, or art's made for reproduction in an industrial age.² Out of the studio went the potter's wheel – we were to be sculptors and artists, not ceramicists, and certainly not potters!

As a young ceramicist from Gen Y, Dan Elborne is not wedded to any particular ideology, aesthetic or anti-aesthetic, modern or post-modern, but that does not mean his work is devoid of politics *per se*. Elborne is an artist committed to the politics of life, if not so much the politics of art. Elborne wants to say something with his art; he wants it to touch people, to have some effect, but he does not want to make moral statements about the evils of war. Such statements of artists usually bury political nuance beneath moral certitude. Much of today's socially-oriented and apparently ethical practices make this mistake: they claim that if the politics is correct, the work is good; that it provides a moral lesson or useful model for community to follow.

¹ For a survey of Pigott's work see Rye, Owen, "Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: A Fifty Year Survey", *Ceramics Art and Perception*, 2005, Issue 62, p3 – 6. For an article that discusses the dichotomy between the geometric and the expressive see de le Galle, Romane, "Between Expression and Geometry", *Ceramics, Art and Perception*, 1994, Issue 15, p9 – 14. For an interesting artist who revives minimalism through the medium, see Jordan Taylor's recent objects in Taylor, Jordan "Clay and Light", *Ceramics Art and Perception*, 2011, Issue 84, p22 – 25. Taylor also has interesting things to say about the experience of parallax, something recently theorised by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek. See Zizek, S. *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006.

² Krauss, Rosalind, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986. Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, Fontana Press, London, 1973.

Elborne's interest on the contrary, offers no such certitude. His interest is in producing works that affect both viewer and reader in equal measure. His is a sublime beauty, a beauty lined with horror. As Elborne explains, 'In my current body of work, I am interested in exploring ways to create objects that reflect the horrors of war, and the impact it has on people. Along with this I still aim to create something aesthetically beautiful'. This strategy is not without its risks. As Boris Groys warned, there is a risk associated with blending aesthetics and politics which can well lead to an aestheticising of politics. The result can lead to the most horrible use and abuse of ideology.³ Elborne runs this risk, but the subtle complexity of his project is unlikely to result in abuse of power because moral or political certitude is not claimed. His recent work is intended as a kind of memorial, an ongoing project dedicated to an event and those effected by its brutality, and yet it is perhaps the most personal response to conflict he has produced in his short career as an artist.

His project, *Five Hundred*, commemorates his grandfather's war service and those who served with him. Elborne explains 'I was influenced by my grandfather's time in the Indonesian war for independence' against Dutch colonial rule. His Dutch grandfather was part of a draft of 500 men sent to fight against Indonesian independence. This conflict, not well known to Indonesia's Australian neighbours, consumed four years (1945 – 1949) and by some estimates, as much as 400,000 lives, including many of the 500 that concerns Elborne. The installation features 500 slip cast delft ware emblazoned bullets that surround the exhibition space and the viewer in that space, creating a kind of sublime experience that echoes Edmund Burke, or more closely, Kant's understanding of the sublime as a response to either great magnitude or the overwhelming forces of nature.

The 'numerical' and the 'dynamic' sublime, associated with immense scale and threatening force, solicit a different feeling than beauty for both Burke and Kant. Kant suggests that whereas beauty allows the imagination to enter into free and harmonious play with the concepts of the understanding before a formally contained experience, a process that produces pleasure, the sublime blocks this free interaction of faculties, and as a result, pleasure is accompanied by pain. Rather than a feeling derived from nature, however, Elborne's is a sublime generated by culture, a cultural sublime, a manufactured horror. The ceramic bullets, Elborne explains, are cast in earthenware, a material often used by the Dutch as a substitute for the more expensive porcelain, to create their delftware plate sets. His obvious immediate influence is the Brisbane artist Mel Robson. I'm thinking of her water jet cut-out guns such as the evocative *Weeping Willow* series and *Shot Gun (positive)* 2008 cut out of 'Blue Willow' dinner plates. His broader influence no doubt comes from

³ Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992.

the work of artists like the great American political artist Richard Notkin whose arresting works have interrogated the politics of institutionalised conflict from Vietnam to the Gulf Wars.⁴

But where Robson's and Notkin's objects are usually created and displayed singularly or in small groups or arrangements, Elborne has installed no less than 500 meticulously cast objects that appear at first sight to be mere copies of some original slip cast model. The vast scale of the bullets that traverse three of the four walls of the Red Door gallery at the University of Southern Queensland Australia is impossible to view all at once. The viewer, lost in this numerical expanse, while overwhelmed at first sight, is encouraged to bring the eye toward the detail of individual bullets and thus offered respite from the imposition of scale on the body. Once there, the eye is met with the most delicate, hand-painted floral patterns resembling the Dutch practice of delft ware design, thus alluding to Elborne's grandfather's service. Each ceramic bullet is individually painted – each displaying a hand-painted image of a flower, not a single one being a copy of any other, and yet each decorated unit contributes to a seemingly endless number of bullet clones when viewed at a distance. The original of the detail is coupled with the reproduced clone of the distance view, aura within mechanical reproduction, beautiful pattern with conceptual brutality suggested by the conventional use of the bullet.

The feeling of a dynamic sublime comes from the threat associated with this conventional use of the bullet. The bullet has but a single purpose. And yet, to further complicate the conceptual side of this Kantian couplet of imagination and understanding, the bullet, unlike the blade of a bayonet, is a producer of distance par excellence, a requisite for aura according to Walter Benjamin. The gun allows its user to kill from a distance, thus, to some extent at least, to remove the body from the process, a process perfected by the introduction of the virtual war in the Gulf analysed by Jean Baudrillard.⁵ But these bullets, despite their obvious association with industrial warfare, are fragile, precariously resting on a shelf not unlike that found in many homes of the time that contained photos of family and friends before Facebook found a digital platform for housing and organising friendships. These brutal and beautiful objects look like so many dominoes, one finger-push away from oblivion.

Elborne suggests 'this allows the form to represent the violence of war while the material reflects fragility and preciousness'. He goes on to add 'I am interested in this contradiction between concepts behind the work, against the visual appearance of the object itself'. Again, Kant's understanding of pleasure derived from the 'disinterested' appreciation of formal beauty, of

⁴ Badenhorst, Antoinette. "Peace/War, Survival/Extinction: An Artist's Plea for Sanity", *Ceramics Art and Perception*, 2011, Issue 86, p10 – 13)

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Indiana University Press, 1995

imagination in concert with the understanding or faculty of concepts is one way of appreciating this complex relationship. But Elborne is not 'disinterested', nor I would suggest, is his audience, because the work is weighted a little more on the side of the concept than the formal side or beauty. As I have already noted, this beauty compromised, or perhaps complicated, by the sublime unease associated with the vast expanse of the method of display, but also by the disquiet associated with the brutality of war evoked by the display of 500 cast bullets. Elborne's recent work confronts the viewer with an art that neither disturbs through an obvious avant-gardist tactic of shock, the sublime as a presentation of the Kantian "thing" beyond the assurance of appearances, nor does it comfort with a mere formal presentation of beauty addressed to a disembodied eye. His is a brutal beauty that demands a more reflective and patient audience who is prepared to let it deliver its complex affect.

David Akenson

Dr David Akenson,

Lecturer Art Theory
Faculty of Arts, A Block
University of Southern Queensland
Australia 4350
07) 4631 1126 office
07) 4631 1133 fax
akensond@usq.edu.au

This is the Author's Accepted Manuscript Version of:

Akenson, David (2014) *Dan Elborne's Brutal Beauty*. *Ceramics Art and Perception*, 24 (95). pp. 36-39.

ISSN 1035-1841. Available from USQ ePrints at <http://eprints.usq.edu.au/26122/>