

When Barnaby Barford is not cutting the heads off figurines with a Dremel, he is agonising over the fact that not everyone sees the fruits of his labours – Frankenstein-esque reconfigurations of familiar china characters – as art. It is not as if the provocative, often unsettling pieces – Snow White with a boob job, Mary spit-roasting her lamb – have not attracted the attention of some hard-hitters in the art world: next week David Gill is presenting new pieces by Barford at the inaugural Design Art London exhibition; later this year, the gallery will also host a solo exhibition of his work. What is bothering Barford is that, due to his parallel career as a product designer, his obsession with dismembering china dwarfs and reincarnating them as Asbo kids is at times confused with product design. ‘The figurines are one-off art pieces,’ he says, rotary drill in hand, from his studio in Walthamstow. On the shelves behind him the cast of china characters, picked up in markets and on eBay, seem to give a collective shudder.

It was at the Royal College of Art (from which he graduated in 2002 with an MA in ceramics and glass) that Barford began to express a liking for slicing up previously finished products. Together with a fellow student, Lee Critchlow, he produced a body of work made from fragments of plates. ‘But I kept thinking about figurines, and started collecting them obsessively,’ he says. ‘I like the fact that they are characters in their own right, but they are objects most people would dismiss as tat. By making the viewer look again I am disarming them.’

A trawl through previous one-offs is certainly challenging, not least in negotiating their confrontational titles. *You Sexy Bitch*, clearly a comment on vanity, sees a fur-clad woman admiring herself in the mirror, her head replaced with that of a dog. In *What Do You Mean You're Late?* two former cherubs are dressed in sports casual, surrounded by babies, and depicted as teenage parents. Decapitated shire horses, sexually aroused cats and perverted nymphs all play out their distorted roles in Barford's treatment of the human condition. ‘I am not preaching, just posing a situation which can work

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on different levels and letting people take from it what they want,’ he says.

While distorting figurines to such an extent, even for the sake of art, could have found Barford in dispute with some of the larger ceramics houses, it has in fact had the reverse effect. Earlier this year the artist was invited to visit Nymphenburg in Germany (the oldest and best-known manufacturer of porcelain figurines) and commissioned to produce a tableware range. The result is *Global Service*, a series of 14 plates printed with a section of a world map. He is also collaborating with the company to produce a series of one-off pieces, made from a collage of body parts. On top of all this, he is also working on a short film with Channel 4 and the Arts Council. ‘It is basically a love story between two figurines in an antiques shop,’ Barford says. Something tells me that they will not be living happily ever after.

Barnaby Barford is at the David Gill Gallery (020-7589 5946) at Design Art London, October 12-14 at Hanover Square, London W1 (designartlondon.com). Tickets cost £10. barnabybarford.co.uk



MONSTER MASH

Barnaby Barford delights in being the Frankenstein of figurines.
By Daisy Bridgewater. Photograph by Philip Sinden



Top Barnaby Barford in his studio.
Above from left *You Sexy Bitch*; one of the *Global Service* plates for Nymphenburg; *Struggling Will Only Make it Worse*