



Merric Boyd, 'Jug with Trees', 1942, ht 15.8 cm



Arthur Boyd, 'Angel and Ramox', 1948, plate, diam. 45 cm

WHITE GUMS AND RAMOXES

Ceramics by Merric and Arthur Boyd from the Bundanon Trust Collection

WHITE Gums and ramoxes is a touring show curated by Grace Cochrane, sourced from the collection of the Bundanon Trust and focused on the ceramics of Merric Boyd and his son Arthur Boyd. It includes sculpture, paintings and drawings related to their pottery activities. Later works from the AMB (Arthur Merric Boyd) Pottery include collaborative ceramics by artists such as John Perceval and Neil Douglas. The exhibition allows evaluation of the relative artistic contributions of the Boyds – Arthur and Merric – and their coterie, family and friends to the field of ceramics.

An accompanying short movie intro-

White gums and ramoxes takes its title from two characteristic motifs in the work of Merric Boyd (1888-1959) and Arthur Boyd (1920-1999). Merric was preoccupied with interpreting his local environment, including the white trunks of gum-trees, while Arthur's 'ramox' is typical of his interest in hybrid, allegorical figures and beasts. Although the ceramic works of father and son are very different, many of the same attitudes and approaches to art influenced both, and link their separate ceramic pursuits. Merric's pottery and drawings often draw on his family and their environment, while Arthur's ceramics, prints and paintings, consistently refer to the influence of his father.

(From introduction to exhibition and catalogue.)

duces the exhibition. Cochrane, formerly of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, has prepared a comprehensive hardback catalogue that illuminates the artworks, the artists and their families. This contains relevant history, extensive references to further reading, a complete thumbnail-illustrated listing of all the works in the exhibition and a timeline of events for the Boyds, as well as many larger images of the works.

From its opening at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra in August, 2009 the exhibition will tour six states and territories. Full details of the itinerary are posted on the website: www.bundanon.com.au

This exhibition raises many questions about Merric Boyd's ceramics. Various present-day ceramists who have seen the show or are aware of MB ceramics, have expressed the opinion that the AB works stand the test of time better than those of MB, which now appear awkward and naive both in the basic vessel forms and the applied modelling. His figurative work, using children and friends as source, is far more assured.

The colours of MB ceramics show a limited palette of cobalt blues, copper greens and iron yellows and browns. He mixed slips and glazes using the limited range of ceramic colorants available to him, compared to those used in later ceramics in the exhibition.

MB's focus on gum trees and what might be seen now as Australiana was topical, perhaps even typical, as Australians searched for an identity distinct from their colonial status in the early 1900s. This genre can also be placed in the earlier European convention of using flora in pottery decoration, initially inspired by Asian imports and adopted by most UK and European ceramic industries; although MB's interpretation is clearly idiosyncratic.

Presumably his jugs were intended for use, but they would function poorly. The handles had a gap too small to fit a hand through comfortably, and pots with a spout such as his *Jug, Horse and Cart* of 1947 have the base of the spout placed so low that with it sitting still any liquid contained would pour out until the vessel was half empty. Clearly aesthetic expression was considered more important than function.

The MB drawings display the same almost naive style – seemingly a quick scribbled sketch. His drawings move more towards realism after MB in old age stopped working with clay and focussed on drawing. His

Merric Boyd, 'Figure of Arthur Boyd aged three years', 1923, hand-formed earthenware, ht 15.2 cm

Merric Boyd at Open Country pottery, Murrumbidgee, Victoria, 1914. From Bundanon Trust archives

paintings, using watercolour and pencil, employ broad strokes which are almost completely non-representational impressions.

Merric Boyd has been held in high regard by Australian curators and ceramic historians and has often been said to be 'the father of Australian studio ceramics'. Given this national status it seems odd that (admittedly after a brief search) I have found no attempts to place him in an international context other than to refer to his limited wartime travels to England. One appropriate international comparison would be with the ceramic work of the American George Ohr, the "mad potter of Biloxi" who worked earlier than Boyd, between 1888 and 1910. By strange coincidence Ohr's pottery burned down in 1894 as did MB's in 1926. Ohr manipulated clay into unconventional vessel forms, but managed to avoid any sense of the awkwardness so evident in MB ceramics. The most apt comparison is with Artus van Briggle, of whom, paralleling Boyd's description as the father of Australian studio pottery, it has been said that his pottery in Colorado Springs was foundational to American art pottery. Grace Cochrane points out that Merric Boyd was influenced by Art Nouveau; Artus van Briggle is credited with 'having a significant impact on the Art Nouveau movement in the US' (Wikipedia).

The AMB (Arthur Merric Boyd) Pottery was set up in 1944. Compared with the pottery of Merric Boyd, the AMB Pottery wares have a more conventional ceramic character of form, and 'around the form' decoration. There is also a greater colour range. Reds, pale turquoise blue, purple and various shades of green confirm access to a wide range of commercial colours. I particularly enjoyed the delicacy of the Neil Douglas *Bowl with wildflowers*. Cochrane notes that the AMB pottery was set up by its collaborators ... 'In order to make a living and finance their wider art interests ...' and so conventional pottery makes commercial sense being saleable to a wider market. Even so (Cochrane quotes from Peter Herbst): 'We avoided "good taste" like the plague'. Ironically, this suggests that anyone admiring the work must by definition be lacking in good taste!

On large flat dish forms and especially on large tiles, Arthur Boyd's painterly approach comes to the fore and these objects have great charisma. The large tiles, especially *30 Pieces of Silver*, make use of vivid colours and a thick transparent glaze giving a different quality to oil painting. In the large bowls, *Susannah* and especially *Aboriginal Groom*, the glaze flowing from the rim during firing melds into the



Arthur Boyd, 'Man with Fallen Flowers and Dog', c. 1966, oil on canvas, 108.8 x 113 cm. This painting includes recurring symbols of Merric's boots, a shaking epileptic figure, Peter the family dog and the ramox



Arthur Boyd, '30 Pieces of Silver', c. 1950, glazed earthenware tile



painting, revealing in-depth understanding and use of the behaviour of ceramic materials.

The handling of the large bowl *Angel and Ramox* (1948) achieves a feeling of depth of paint rarely seen in ceramics. The "ramox" of the exhibition title (*White Gums and Ramoxes*) refers to Arthur Boyd's practice of conjoining images to produce a composite such as the combination of ram and ox, said to be a symbol of bestial sex.

Arthur Boyd's paintings in this exhibition were chosen for their focus on ceramics as subject matter. I found it interesting to compare the methods of applying layers of colour in the paintings and in his ceramic works. He moves oil paint around as a potter might move a thick slip – although oil paint stays where it was put, whereas the slip would flow and even out more. This technique is seen in *St Francis with Potter*



Arthur Boyd in Bendigo, 1941

Holding a Butterfly, *Man with Fallen Flowers and Dog* and my favourite AB painting *Potter Sketching*.

An unforeseen effect this exhibition had on me was becoming aware of the difficulty of separating the artwork from the legend of the Boyds. A considerable volume of literature on an artist leads to preconceptions which can alter when faced with a body of artistic evidence such as this exhibition, and that is one of its main values – to see for yourself. I commend it to anyone interested in ceramics, particularly early Australian ceramics, or anyone interested in the role of the Boyds in Australian art, as a source for personal re-evaluation.

Owen Rye

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