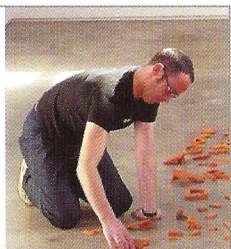




OBJECT : IMAGE

Martin Poppelwell is well known for his ceramics, but is scathing of the applied arts scene in New Zealand. Creating ceramics was a path back to his true love, painting, he tells Aaron Watson.

National Grid 2005, Black stain on terracotta.



Martin installing his show.

"I started by drawing on to the shapes, simple cylinders or jugs. Stuff that was in no way original whatever. Very much like Picasso, just jumping in and not trying to be original, but to be prolific."

IF Martin Poppelwell's name is associated with ceramics, it is because he has found it easier to get those works in front of the public eye. But Poppelwell's enduring love is painting.

He studied ceramics with Ross Mitchell-Anyon in the mid-1990s, primarily as a way to reinvigorate his love of painting.

"I was bored with painting all the time. It can be tiring or over-obsessive. I found it that way, anyhow," Poppelwell says.

"I decided to make decent domestic crockery, to get under people's noses. Pottery was very unfashionable. That's kind of why I went for it.

"I started by drawing on to the shapes, simple cylinders or jugs. Stuff that was in no way original whatever. Very much like Picasso, just jumping in and not trying to be original, but to be prolific."

Ceramics are easier than paintings to disseminate, he says, and you can produce a lot of work quickly.

"Making large paintings takes a lot of time. You have to

cover your arse when you are spending two or three months on a couple of big paintings. Ceramics enabled me to get a head of steam up behind me, and I could take six months out to concentrate on painting."

If Poppelwell sounds like he is dismissing ceramics as a lesser art, he doesn't mean to. It's as valuable as any other visual art, he says.

"Coming from a painting background, I felt the work should be shown in galleries. I never had it in my head that it would go anywhere else."

He is surprised that applied arts practitioners in New Zealand feel they are treated as lesser relations of their fine arts brethren.

"If people in the applied arts feel undervalued, that's their own problem. It's not about them, it's about their art. This chip on the shoulder thing, I don't know where it comes from. For the large part, the reason their work isn't valued is that it isn't very good. There are a lot of excuses made for pretty shoddy work.

"The applied arts is in a pretty sad state, really. That's

probably to do with the way education is being run. I want to see the applied arts die – before re-emerging as something different."

Working with ceramics taught Poppelwell not to value his materials, which freed him to try new sorts of work, he says.

"I set out to reactivate, or make painting interesting for me. Ceramics was all about drawing. I was able to use my materials badly, and treat them like nothing.

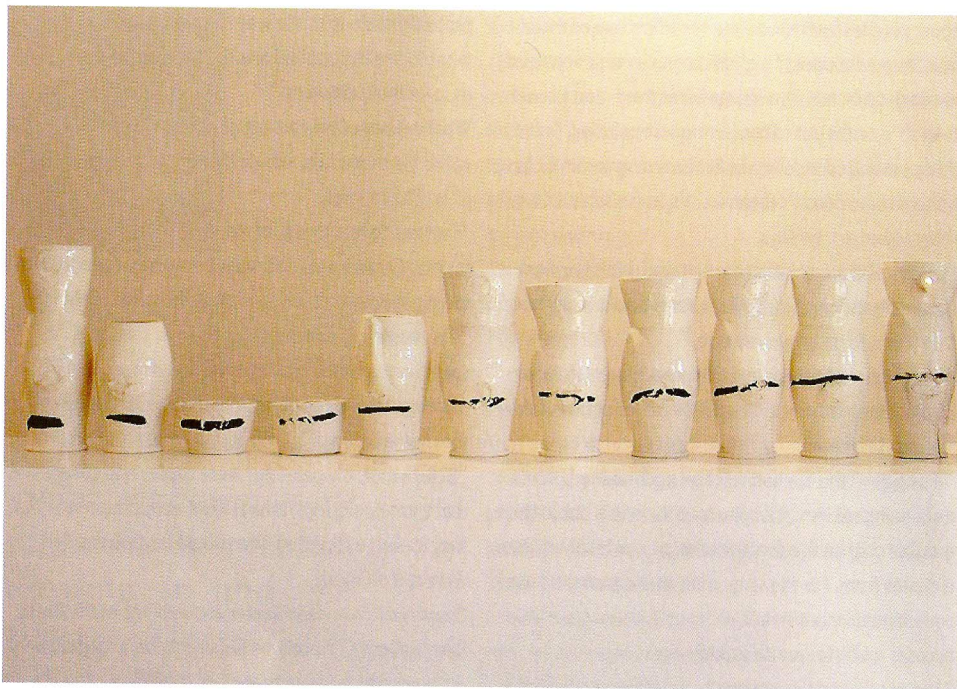
"The reason my paintings look the way they do is I've spent so much time looking at objects. I make the paintings feel like an object. They have a 3D character – the contradiction of 2D and 3D mixed up on a flat surface.

"Before that, my paintings were copies and collages of real estate paintings. What I liked about them was that they looked unfinished. There were large areas that were not painted."

Poppelwell lives near Napier and exhibits at the Black Barn Gallery. Currently, he is working on large paintings on linen, which presents another challenge.



Study for a Red Cross 2004, oil on linen. 84 x 312 inches.



Untitled 2005, black stain on white earthenware.

"It just presents challenges because it is \$1000 a roll." But the scale of the works doesn't change their essence, he says. From small things, big things grow. "I draw. Essentially, I just draw. The paintings are large representations of small drawings. The more you draw and scale up, the more you begin to see how things work." Poppelwell's not a fan of letting the viewer take from a work whatever they will.

"I think that's a total cop out. I know a work is finished when I know that the effect I want is there. I'm being completely dictatorial in the way I want the viewer to see the work. I'm directing the meaning of the work. I'm completely responsible for it.

"They have a real impact on people, in terms of colour, in terms of information... the way I interwork text and gesture into one effect. I enjoy the fact that I can see the effect on the viewer.

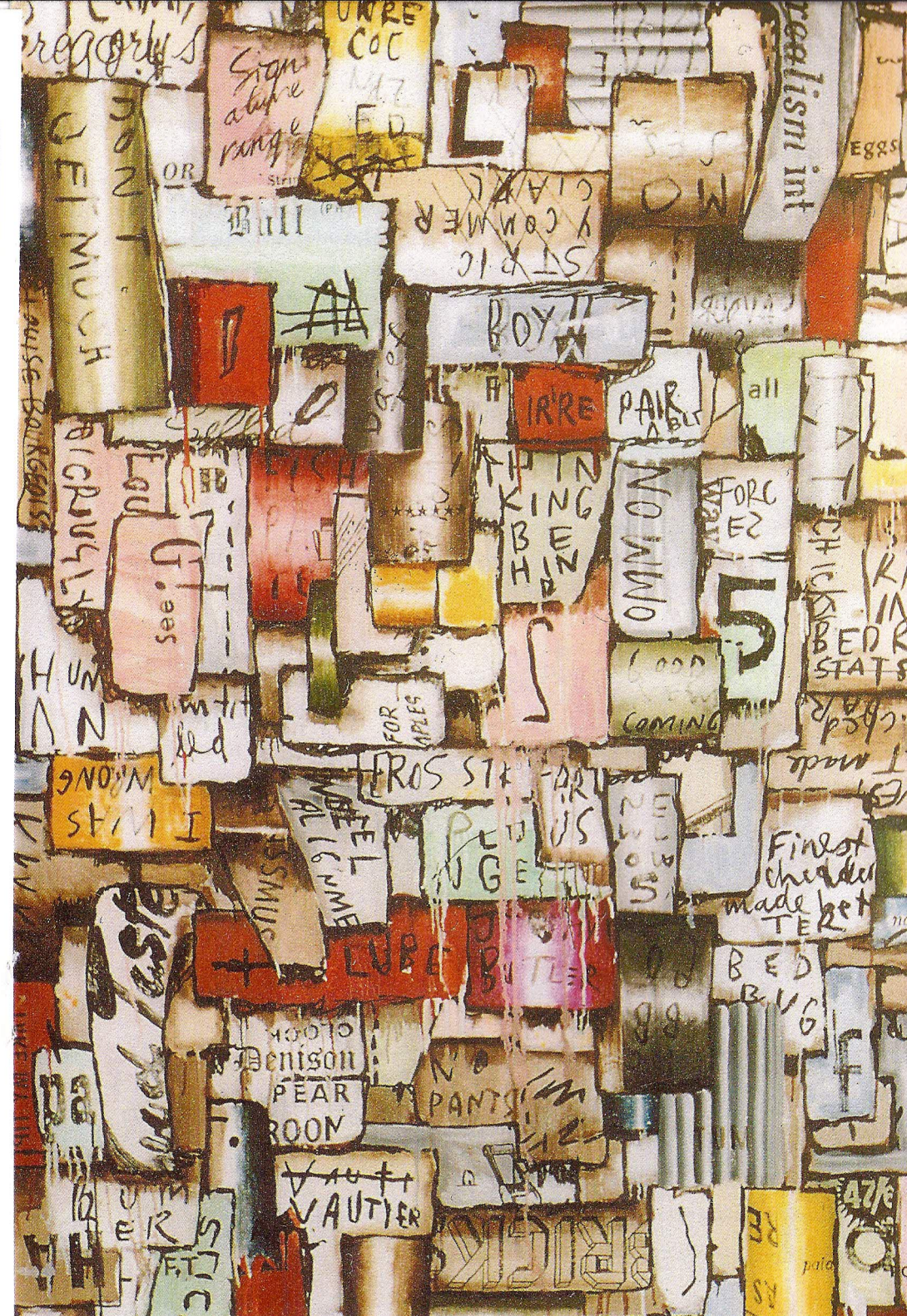
"The artist has a lot more control than they are often able to articulate. You can direct people's minds into places." However, Poppelwell doesn't want to be a prophet or social activist. He accepts Oscar Wilde's dictum that art and politics don't mix.

I'm being completely dictatorial in the way I want the viewer to see the work. I'm directing the meaning of the work. I'm completely responsible for it.

"The only social role of art is to feed the artist and fill the galleries and museums."

Wanting people to find meaning in the works themselves means Poppelwell rarely gives interviews.

Study for Dongo II 2004, oil on linen. ▶



He also distrusts the mainstream media.

"I'm not interested in trying to advertise the meaning behind my work. I'm more interested in saying: It's available from 10am-7pm, go and see it."

The media often struggle to understand the concepts behind an artwork, particularly where those concepts are the product of an advanced art education and the results appear abstract or non-artistic. The furore over et al.'s *the fundamental practice*, New Zealand's contribution to the Venice Biennale 2005, is an example, he says.

Poppelwell has worked with Marilyn Tweedie, the artist behind et al., and is critical of the coverage her work received at home.

"I did quite a lot of work with Marilyn. What she has done focuses in on a sound European tradition of splitting her work into different characters.

"I liked it, but it was really destined for the pages of

Art Forum rather than the newspapers. It wasn't contextualised properly [in the newspapers]. It's like TV – people either get it quickly or they turn off." He is an advocate of more art education for everybody and has offered his services to the artists in schools program. So far, nobody has taken him up, which is okay, he says.

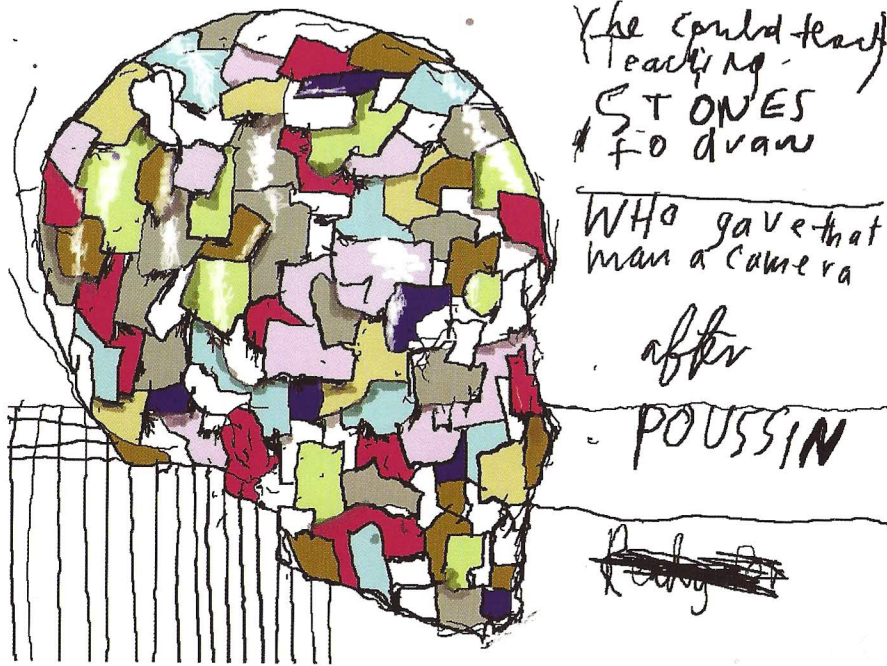
"It's all well and good to get artists into schools.

What's better is to get kids into art galleries.

"The more you know about a subject, the more it allows insight into the debate. If someone is not interested in art, they are only able to respond with the faculties they have."

At Auckland's Elam art school, he was involved in artistic projects that many laymen would find puzzling, at best.

One such project, with Daniel Malone, involved beating a piano with French bread.



Who gave that man a camera he could teach stones to draw after Poussin 2004, watercolour and linen on paper.

"The more you know about a subject, the more it allows insight into the debate. If someone is not interested in art, they are only able to respond with the faculties they have."

"Michael Stevenson [who represented New Zealand at the 50th Venice Biennale] used the soundtrack to that, and I think it was with the exhibition *Toi Toi Toi*."

On another occasion, he and Malone grew very rough beards and shaved them off in an art gallery.

"We got the oldest, bluntest razors and shaved each other with no soap. That's just bullshit, but people remember it. People stood in the gallery and watched."

Poppelwell hopes that spirit is still there in his recent works.

"If people actually stop for a moment while they are walking past on the way to the bar, or work, or the toilet, they will realise there is a playfulness," he says.

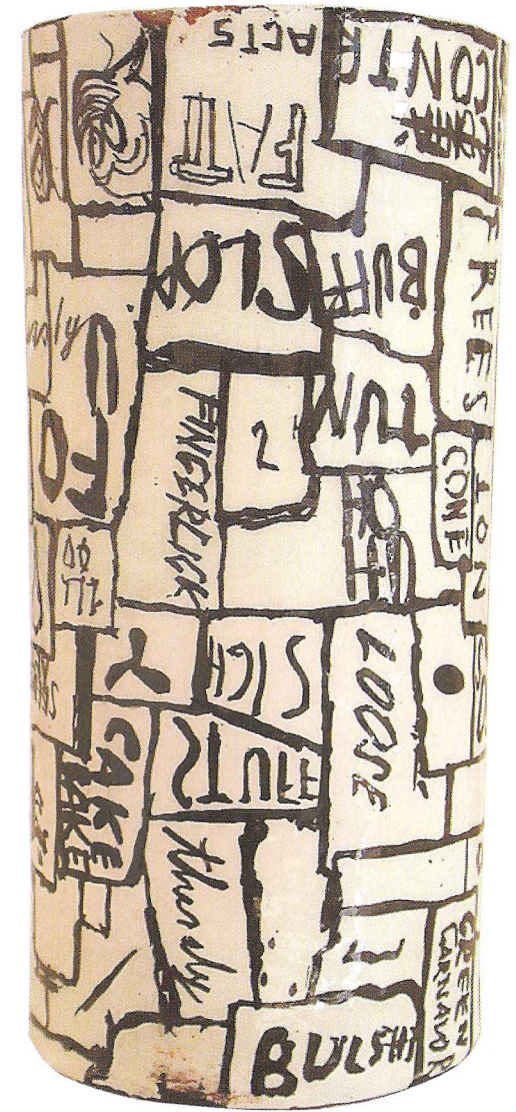
"I only let things out of the workshop if they have the ability to look after themselves, and poke fun at people and at the maker. I take being an idiot very seriously."

His large works are often filled with vibrant colour and a signature is the inclusion of text, which is a method that reminds him of his very early artistic experiences.

"When I was a kid my family had a drapery. After school I would sit up the back of the shop waiting for my dad to finish work. I spent a lot of time with the sign writer.

"It wasn't until I wrote a word or number on a painting... When I first did that I went back there, being a kid helping to do the signs for the shop."

Aaron Watson. ■



Study for a cylinder 2005, black stain on terracotta.