





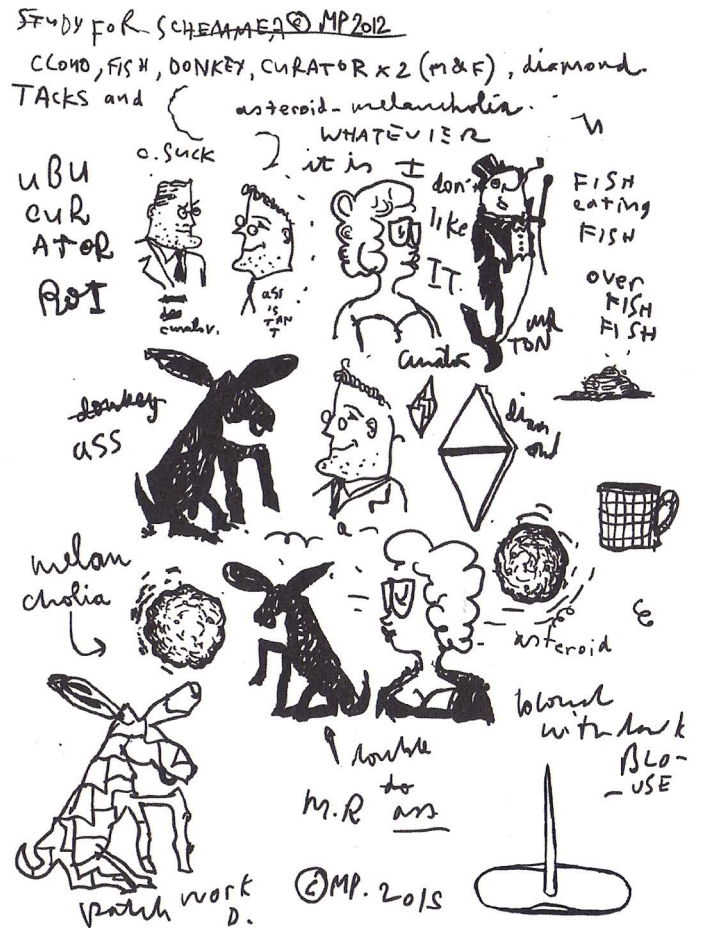
NOW

Martin Poppelwell, Black Barn Gallery, October 2012

WHAT

What do you get when you cross a fish, a curator and an ass? It's a question not often pondered outside Martin Poppelwell's studio. However within these walls, the three have been introduced and then left alone together to see what unholy alliances might ensue. The ass trips over a triangle, landing in a pile of tacks, while the fish looks on, bemused. The curator stands off to one side, processing the scene and considering how it might shape the subsequent discourse. His assistant is meanwhile kept occupied by a ceramic slug that keeps changing perspective.

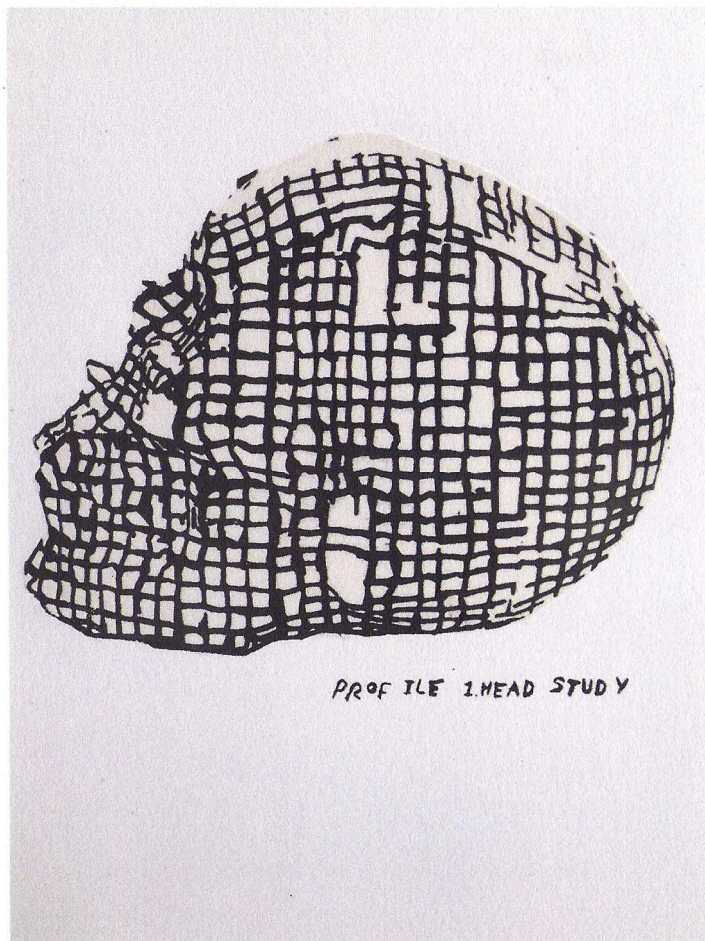
There is nothing spontaneous about this meeting. Poppelwell's cast did not just happen to be in the same place at the same time. Instead, this rumpled bunch have been drawn forth from the artist's back catalogue and, joined by some new arrivals, come together to provide the raw material from which he shapes this latest body of work. While on the surface of things chaos reigns supreme, it is a mistake to read the artist's particular brand of chaos as just that - a series of random encounters between words and images; or paper, paint and pots. In actuality these works are highly controlled, deliberate exercises in which Poppelwell deconstructs and reassembles his practice in order to find new combinations and directions for his work.



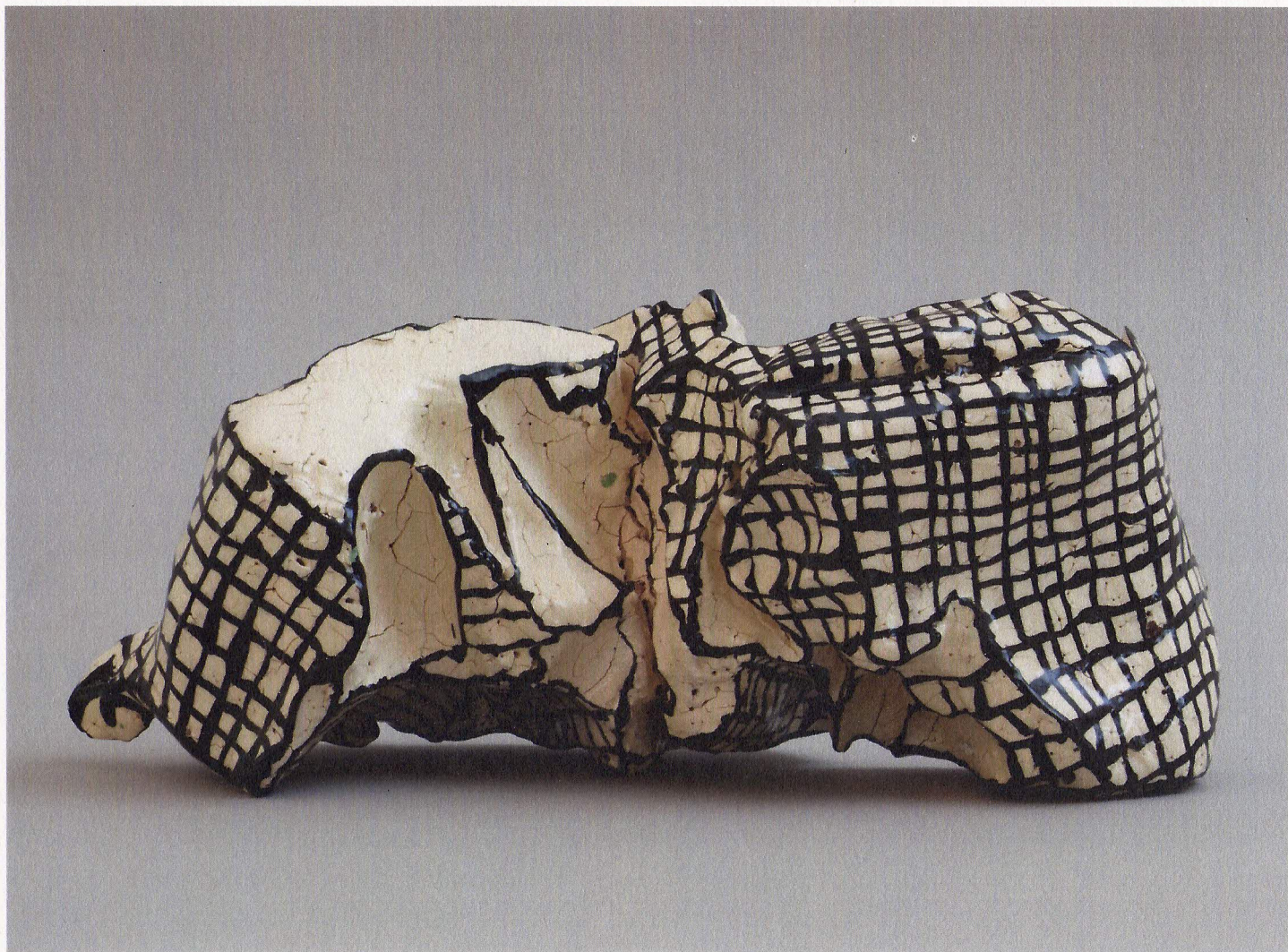
Understanding Poppelwell's pots is a ticket to the heart of this exhibition. He came to clay as a visual artist interested in making objects that could feed into a contemporary art conversation. Rather than simply extending his practice however, he quickly realised that pottery opened up an entirely new avenue of investigation. This territory was altogether more political than perhaps the artist had initially appreciated. His very genuine interest in clay was largely lost on the ceramics community, many of which seem still to be waiting for Poppelwell to learn how to make 'proper' pottery before they give him his due. From the other side of the fence, the art crowd tend towards understanding his ceramics simply as a vehicle for mark making; much more comfortable with a bowl on the wall than one on the dinner table holding the salad greens.

Rather than being deterred by this reception, Poppelwell has thoroughly mined the territory; regularly inviting functionality to dinner only to seat it next to a handful of clay eyeballs and a lumpy swan. An emphasis has been placed on large installations – dinner services and domestic still life groupings that riff off the particular social and functional roles of pottery. The success of these works, which essentially raise questions of what pottery can and might be, centres around their scale and complexity. While each element maintains its own individual identity, the impact of the installations is held in the sum of these parts.

In this current project however, the internal dialogue of Poppelwell's pots has shifted. Instead of pulling together various elements, this exhibition breaks the installation down into a series of objects, sculptures and plaques that assert themselves more independently. It's as if the soundtrack has skipped from that of a cacophonous dinner party into a series of more intimate conversations – some audible, some eavesdropped, some reinvented for effect. Snippets of text on plates and bowls morph into more complex narratives that snake their way around forms. Repeated images appear with different dance partners throughout, and sculptural objects have moved beyond the figural and are increasingly becoming about clay and its properties and possibilities. Abstract forms, such as those Poppelwell refers to as 'slugs,' retain the visceral and physical properties of wet, unfired clay, and the sense continues to build that this is an artist who loves his medium – from the raw block of mud right through to its final firing.



Clockwise above: *Slug Study*, Screenprint, A/P 2012. *Head Study RHS*, Screenprint, 500mm x 360mm, A/P 2012. *Cookie, Eyeball, Cup*, Earthenware, 2012. Opp page: *Slug Study*, Earthenware, 2010.



The decision to pull something to bits can sometimes turn on you. Bravado can quickly change to panic when all the parts are laid out on the garage floor, out of context and suddenly unfamiliar. For Poppelwell however, the end game has never been to return the parts to their original position. Instead his deconstruction isolates the different characteristics of his work, gives them a quick warrant of fitness, and then proceeds to reassemble them in whichever way he sees fit. While some parts slot straight back into place, others find themselves in entirely new surrounds, forcing the renegotiation of existing relationships between material, surface, structure and scale.

This rationalisation brings new energy to the interaction between different media. As repeated motifs lurch from print to paint to pottery, a strong dialogue springs up between the different properties of each. The relationship becomes particularly dynamic when Poppelwell's pottery becomes the subject of a series of his prints. This is a decision that immediately raises questions of value – both in terms of the original vs. the reproduction, but also the elevation of a modest piece of earthenware into the position of being reproduced at all.

Knowing that this territory is a minefield, Poppelwell quite sensibly arms this exhibition with its own inbuilt curatorial team who emerge periodically to direct traffic and re-order any ideas in danger of running off the page. When their conversation starts to head around in circles however, other more sensible characters are called upon for direction. While the ass, fish and their compatriots provide sporadic help, the most reliable of the bunch can be found in the trusty grid. It is this grid that underpins the shape-shifting world of Martin Poppelwell; the sketchy foundation upon which the different threads of his work attach. This is the place that Poppelwell stands to survey his practice – the position from which he asks himself ‘now what?’

Lucy Hammonds

*Curator of Design Collections,
Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery*



Clockwise above: *Figure Study*, h380mm. 2012. *Ass Diamond*, h205mm. 2012. *Mr Ton*, d160mm. 2012. **Opp page:** *White Ass Study*, h560mm. 2012. *Curator*, d330mm. 2012. (all work Earthenware.)
Back: *Study for Ass*, Ink on Paper, 300mm x300mm, 2012. Photography of *Head Study & Slug Study*, Derek Henderson. All work copyright of the artist, 2012.



STUDY
FOR
ASS

M. POPPELLWELL
2012