

# CRAFTS



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# ORIGINAL SIN

Barnaby Barford's latest project based on the seven deadly sins sees him take a startling new direction, says Grant Gibson. Portrait by Elisabeth Scheder-Bieschin

Opposite: Barnaby Barford in front of *Pride*, ceramic, gold lustre, mirror, wood, enamelled copper wire, epoxy putty, 2.2 x 1.1 m  
Left: *Pride* (detail), 2012



Bleak is the word that springs to mind when describing the Hastingwood Trading Estate. Just off the North Circular in London's Lea Valley, it's somewhere architects like to describe as a non-place, composed of concrete flyovers and underpasses, car pounds and industrial sheds storing cheap-looking furniture, garages and firms selling railing. The sound and smell of engine exhausts is ever-present, as lorries and white vans drop off and pick up. It isn't necessarily a place you'd expect to find an artist's studio. 'I kind of like it,' laughs Barnaby Barford, asked why he wasn't bothered about finding a space with other makers. 'I don't really have time to sit and chat to people anyway. I come into the studio, graft and then go home.' It serves a practical purpose too, being a cycle ride from his home and his young family just north of Walthamstow. But also, as he explains, 'I wanted a bigger space with good access and I wanted to make stuff that wouldn't fit through a door.'

Which is one way to describe his latest project – a collection of over-sized mirrors based around the seven deadly sins, to be shown at the David Gill Gallery in February. Up until now the artist has been best known for his series of wittily subversive figurines, which he's used as a medium to comment on such pet subjects as class, love, sex, and consumption. So the mirrors represent a distinct departure and a new phase in his career. It's all quite exciting, or at least it would be if Barford and his two assistants weren't working to a looming deadline. As I walk in, all three are beavering away in silence, and a sense of intensity is palpable. 'You know he's quite tortured,' David Gill tells me subsequently over the phone, adding, 'I think he really does have this poetry, this artist's intuition.'

All of which is almost certainly true. Right now though he's very busy, because this isn't straightforward work. Each mirror is made up of thousands of tiny ceramic leaves and flowers, which have to be painstakingly attached to strands of twisted wire with Milliput, then arranged into clumps, before being screwed into the timber base of the mirror. The leaves themselves have been imported from

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DAVID GILL

Italy, although Barford made all of them for the first pair of pieces in the collection, *Avarice* and *Sloth*, using an icing cutter. Each petal was reshaped and flattened down before being dried, fired and glazed. Then all the decals were cut out, before the pieces were all fired for a second time. 'I didn't know how to make these,' he says pointing to two works in progress standing up by the near wall of the studio. 'What materials to use. How to stick things to other things. I didn't know, so it was just a matter of working it out.'

Slight, unshaven, dressed in a white lab coat with a football scarf wrapped tightly around his neck and talking with a noticeable estuary twang, Barford cuts a fascinating figure – part artist, part inventor, part Dickensian street urchin. He first came to attention at his graduation at the Royal

College of Art with *Conversation Piece*, where he projected his own particular take on the traditional Willow Pattern onto a pair of white plates placed on a candle-lit table set for a couple. The idea was that the lovers would be able to read each other's romantic tale, after dinner.

It was another couple of years before he started experimenting with the found ceramic figures he'd been collecting. 'It got to the point where my wife said: "Look, you've got to do something with these." So I bought a Dremel and cut them up.' As the work progressed, Barford became more confident in – and perhaps more confrontational with – his subject matter. 'The crux of it is we think we're pretty advanced as a society but actually, emotionally, our characters are exactly the same as they've always been, probably since the dawn of society. Our emotions as individuals haven't changed.' *The Battle of Trafalgar*, for instance, was a collection of 22 tableaux documenting the darker side of London, including underage drinking, casual violence, and nuns on a hen-do. Its centrepiece was a hoodie graffiti-ing one of Trafalgar Square's famous lions. Meanwhile, at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, *The Big Win: A Modern Morality Tale* was a loose update

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BARNABY BARFORD

of Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*, capturing the descent of a lottery winner into a world of gambling, sex and over-consumption. *Damaged Goods*, his short animation for Channel 4, was a comment on the structure of British society.

This interest in class may stem from his childhood. Brought up by his secretary mother, who had to work several jobs at once to make ends meet, the young Barfords were sent to private school, paid for by their grandfather. It led to an almost schizophrenic existence. 'In school-time we were quite well off people and then in the holidays we went to a daycare centre in Dorking. You didn't feel like you fitted in anywhere. But looking back now it's nice because you can kind of get on with everybody.'

It was at the University of Plymouth, while studying 3D design, that he began working with ceramic. Just the idea of being able to make any

form in multiples really interested me,' he says. While there he flirted with rapid prototyping, or as he puts it 'the idea of virtual arts and crafts', but changed tack on arrival at the RCA, experimenting with partner Lee Critchlow by cutting up plates and cups and sticking them back together.

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

So why has he decided to give up making the figurine tableaux? 'I've been wanting to change what I was doing for quite a few years but projects came up, and the timescale was always too short to explore something new. In December [2011] I just said: "All right, I'm going to stop. Totally stop and start again." It got to the point where I know I can make an interesting sculpture out of figurines. I can do it. It has lost its challenge really.'

When he lit on the idea of the seven deadly sins, making mirrors came to mind because, as he says: 'I didn't want them to be things that are looked at. I wanted you to be in it. You can't in a way look at it without looking at you in it.' However, he was also keen to keep working in a familiar medium: 'I didn't want to chuck everything out,' he explains. 'I still think ceramic is a funny material. It's relatively unexplored in contemporary art. I still think you can make any idea you want out of clay. I know it and I'm known for it. Besides,

This page, clockwise from right: *Just give me your fucking money!*, from *Private Lives*, bone china, porcelain, enamel paint, other media, 30 x 29 cm, 2007; *Opposite: Avarice*, porcelain, decals, polished stainless steel, wood, enamelled copper wire, epoxy putty, 2.1 x 1.4 m. All work by Barnaby Barford

*fuckingsalads!*, from *Private Lives*, bone china, porcelain, concrete, enamel paint, other media, 13 x 23 cm, 2010; *French Kiss*, from *Private Lives*, bone china, porcelain, earthenware, enamel paint, other media, 30 x 29 cm, 2007; *Salads? I'll give them*



Across spread (l-r):  
*Gluttony*, ceramic, polished stainless steel, wood, enamelled copper wire, epoxy putty,<sup>1,57</sup> x1.5 m; *Sloth*, porcelain, mirror, wood, enamelled copper wire, epoxy putty, 2.15 x1.22 m; *Pride*, ceramic, gold lustre, mirror, wood, enamelled copper wire, epoxy putty, 2.2 x1.1 m. All work 2012, by Barnaby Barford



I've got no interest in metal or wood anyway.'

The seven deadly sins – *Gluttony*, *Lust*, *Avarice*, *Pride*, *Envy*, *Wrath* and *Sloth* – have long been fertile ground for artists, from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to David Fincher's Hollywood movie *Seven*. Barford admits he spent three months reading and researching his topic – at one point he hands me *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, a 1978 book by journalist and critic Henry Fairlie, full of notes and exclamation marks in the margin. All the while he was thinking and drawing, 'which was quite nerve-wracking really, because I've never not made stuff.'

And if the early indicators are anything to go by, it should prove to be an intriguing collection. Some of the sins, of course, are easier to turn into three-dimensional objects than others. Using currency on the flowers and leaves in *Avarice* was an obvious choice, for instance. Likewise *Lust* features various pornstars, although it concentrates on their faces, which are all contorted in a shut-eyed state of ecstasy. 'In a way that's the least thing people look at,' explains Barford. Meanwhile, *Wrath* is circular in shape, with orange and red flowers, *Envoy* picks out images from the London riots and *Gluttony* looks intestinal and blubbery. Its flowers feature excerpts of take-away menus.

The first piece he completed was *Avarice*, and I have to confess that seeing it on David Gill's stand in the luxurious environs of PAD London was a slightly unsettling experience. Here was an expen-

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BARNABY BARFORD

Arguably the most difficult to achieve are *Sloth* and *Pride*. The former looks a bit like an enormous amoeba, with pure white leaves. 'It's not laziness. It's believing in nothing. Loving nothing. Hating nothing. The only reason you're alive is because there's nothing to die for. So I wanted this piece to be nothing. It's beautiful, but has an indescribable form.' The latter, by contrast, is a thin and elongated mirror with only enough space for one person to inspect themselves at a time. 'The idea is that it looks like this religious icon where you'd have the Madonna inside or something like that. But actually the religious iconography has been removed and it's your image in there.'

Interview over, Barford immediately returns to his leaves. And as I head back under the flyover to my bus stop, it strikes me that perhaps this is the key to Barford's success. Out of this cold Edmonton garage, he's creating work in the great tradition of British satire, from Jonathan Swift to Armando Iannucci, which manages simultaneously to appeal to the establishment while at the same time mercilessly poking fun at them. It's a neat – and rather wonderful – trick.

*'Barnaby Barford: The Seven Deadly Sins'* is at David Gill Gallery, 2-4 King Street, London SW1Y 6QP, (020) 7793 6600, from 27 February – 12 April 2013. [www.davidgillgalleries.com](http://www.davidgillgalleries.com), [www.barnabybarford.co.uk](http://www.barnabybarford.co.uk)



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