

Let's talk shops

Artist Barnaby Barford spent two years creating 3,000 china replicas of retail outlets from every postcode in London and assembling them into a teetering tower at the V&A, as he tells **Marcus Field**

BARNABY Barford hates shopping. "If everybody was like me our economy wouldn't be doing terribly well," the artist tells me when we meet in his east London studio. "But as a subject for exploration, something that you don't like is a good place to start."

And nobody could accuse Barford of not exploring his phobia thoroughly. For the past two years he has been cycling around London, sometimes 50 miles in a day, to photograph shops in every postcode in the city. During this time he has gathered more than 6,000 photographs of retail outlets, from boarded-up premises in deepest E11 to the swankiest stores in SW1.

His primary purpose has been to create a remarkable installation, *The Tower of Babel*, a teetering 6.5m structure featuring 3,000 ceramic shops – each of them a replica of a real one – which will be unveiled at the V&A next week. But his research has also resulted in the creation of an extraordinary photo archive of London's 21st-century retail landscape.

Barford, 37, who graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2002, began thinking about making a ceramic model of London about five years ago. "First of all, I was thinking of a flat city," he says. "And then I wondered how I could somehow show the divide between rich and poor. Then I started looking at towers, and the idea of the Tower of Babel came up."

As we talk, Barford points out a reproduction on his wall of the Biblical tower, painted by Pieter Bruegel in 1563, and recounts the Genesis story of how, after the Flood, the people of the Earth began to build a tower as a

symbol of their collective power. God, seeing this challenge to his supremacy, cast the people across the world, dividing them by different languages for eternity. "This began to resonate," recalls Barford. "I thought how London is like hundreds of different countries and languages all in one city, how this is expressed through our shops, and how I could build a tower that would be both a celebration and critique of commercialism."

Barford's early research trips took him to the areas closest to his home in Highams Park. At first he just this time he has gathered more than 6,000 photographs of retail outlets, from boarded-up premises in deepest E11 to the swankiest stores in SW1.

"The derelict shops are my favourites, as they are the story of how London is changing"

him but gradually began to catalogue his research by area. "I bought an A-Z and began to mark the roads I'd been down. Then I crossed off the pages at the front until I'd covered the whole city." He also started to sort the shops he photographed into hierarchies, a process which gave him the idea of arranging the tower with the cheapest shops at the bottom and the most expensive at the top. "I ended up with 11 bands," he says. "So at the bottom there are London's derelict shops, the ones that are empty or boarded up. These are my favourites, in a way, because they are the story of how London is changing – they won't be like this for long. Then there are charity shops and chicken shops, DIY shops and convenience stores, phone shops and hairdressers. On the upper storeys there are the luxury fashion shops and jewellers."

At the pinnacle sit Barford's top 10. "They are all auction houses or galleries because they can charge what they like for what they sell." Among them are Christie's and Sotheby's, and contemporary art galleries including White Cube and Victoria Miro.



Retail therapy: Barnaby Barford, left, has created a tower of miniature china shops to demonstrate the variety and hierarchy of shopping outlets in London

Barford's definition of what constitutes a shop is broad. "I had a rule: no restaurants or bars. But I wanted to put takeaways in, and cafés, because I think they're really important to us. So Bar Italia is there, and Starbucks."

Many iconic stores feature in the tower, including Harrods and Selfridges, and quirkier London institutions such as Arthur Beale's chandlery in Shaftesbury Avenue and Beigel Bake in Brick Lane. Others didn't make the final cut. "So in a way, it's my London – a map of the things I found interesting."

THE 3,000 china shops are currently stored in Barford's studio, prior to their installation in the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries. As he talks, he opens a box and carefully picks out a few of the little shops to show me. They are surprisingly

pretty, a testament to Barford's perfectionism. "I'm a quality freak," he says. "For me, it was important that each shop was a beautiful object in its own right." To ensure this high standard the miniatures have been made by 1882, a bone-china manufacturer in Stoke-on-Trent.

After whittling his 6,000 shops down to 3,000 Barford turned his photos into digital transfers, which have then been applied to basic ceramic shapes and glazed and fired several times. "So they will stay like this forever," he says,

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turning over one of the shops lovingly in his hands. There's something gently humorous about seeing hardware store Clerkenwell Screws rendered as daintily as a Royal Doulton tea cup.

To complete such an ambitious artwork, with its multiple possible interpretations, is impressive enough, but Barford has also devised a playful way for the public to participate in his project. On the day the tower is unveiled each of the shops – signed and numbered – goes on sale, with prices ranging from £95 for one at the bottom of the tower, to £6,000 for the ones at the top. "The consumption of these objects becomes part of the work, conceptually," he says. "It's a whole extra layer." The 20 charity shops will be auctioned off separately, with proceeds going to the individual causes.

Barford is not a born Londoner. He grew up in Dorking, Surrey, and studied design at Plymouth University, before moving to the capital to take his MA. During his second year at Plymouth he studied on an Erasmus scheme in Faenza, Italy, home of the famous majolica earthenware. It was there that he first began to work in clay and where he met his future wife Val, a toy designer. "I didn't speak Italian and she didn't speak English, so for the first few dates we just sat with a dictionary between us," he remembers. The couple now have two sons, aged four and two.

After graduating in 2002, Barford began making artworks on his kitchen table. "I started to cut up china figurines and stick them back together so they were humorous or sinister." What began life as cutesy ornaments were transformed into subversive objects that quickly attracted buyers.

Barford soon found himself a dealer, David Gill, and began showing at his gallery in St James's. For his most recent exhibition he presented a set of mirrors themed on the seven deadly sins, their ceramic frames packed with images of porn stars, food and money. Among Barford's collectors is Sir Paul Ruddock, chairman of the V&A, who commissioned a mirror on the theme of "lust".

Does Barford feel differently about shopping after five years immersed in the subject? "I was really cynical about it to start with," he says. "I thought, 'if you're looking for happiness through shopping, you're in danger.' But now I can see that it does make some people happy. And you've got to take your hat off to the people who run these businesses, many of them who are from other countries. What I think I'm really saying is, 'Look, this is us. Here's what's happening at the top, here's what's happening at the bottom and this is everything in between. This is our city. How do you feel about that?'"

■ *The Tower of Babel*, part of the London Design Festival, is at the V&A, SW7 020 7942 2000, vam.ac.uk, from Tuesday until November 1. Shops are available to buy from September 8 at thetowerofbabel.vandashop.com

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