

BARNABY BARFORD



The Seated Bear



Roe and Fawn



The London multi-media artist Barnaby Barford (b. 1977) makes us look in the mirror, figuratively but sometimes also quite literally. With his works he wants to investigate why society and people are in such a mess and offer alternatives to answer these questions.

Ever since he was a kid, Barford wanted to draw and make things. It is a natural consequence that he would turn his passion into a career. He studied at the Royal College of Art and obtained a master's degree in ceramics. A true eureka moment during his education led Barnaby Barford to work mainly with this material. He describes his first project with slip casting as follows: "We made a model in plaster and then a two part mould also in plaster. After casting with slip, I clearly remember the feeling when I opened the mould for the first

time! WOW! It was like opening an Easter Egg. It was the realisation that I could make any shape I wanted and make it as many times as I wanted." This technique is now at the basis of his practice. But what about the ideas he wants to express in his work? The artist finds inspiration by asking himself the question 'Why?'. He says he is very interested in current affairs and tries to understand his place in society with his work. In this way he not only gives others insight into certain matters, but also addresses social and political problems.

FEARS, NEEDS AND HAPPINESS
Many of Barnaby Barford's series revolve around a particular fear or need that drives mankind and that the artist looks at critically or deals with in a satirical way. These feelings can hinder our ability to be happy or, on the contrary, cause us to behave in a certain way in the hope that it will bring us happiness.

For example, in 2015 his *The Tower of Babel*, a six-metre-high tower consisting of 3000 bone china figures which was exhibited in the Victoria & Albert Museum. In doing so,

he confronted the viewer with the hierarchy in our consumer society and the urge to confirm our self-esteem with materialistic matters. The figures were all replicas of London shops, with the bottom rows being the most dilapidated houses and charity shops. The higher the tower, the more chic and exclusive the names became. In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Barford literally placed a mirror in front of society and made us think about the motivations behind our behaviour. The frames around the seven mirrors all consist of floral and leaf-shaped pieces of porcelain in a very specific colour or with a specific print. In 'Avarice' we recognize money bills from different currencies, in 'Gluttony' they are prints of takeaway menus and advertisements for fast-food restaurants.

This shows that the works of Barford have an enormous stratification, which makes them visually appealing at first sight, but when looking closer and trying to understand their meaning it becomes clear that they are expressing their criticism of a particular subject in many different ways. This is also the case with the more recent series *Me Want Now* (in combination with his word drawings) and *More More*.

The Tower of Babel
Victoria and Albert Museum
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© Barnaby Barford, Marinn Sivka

Glad that the Brexit hasn't come through yet, Imagicasa went to London for an enlightening conversation with the artist about art, politics and life.

WHERE DO YOU FIND INSPIRATION? WHAT MAKES YOU DECIDE ON A SUBJECT YOU WANT TO IMMERSE YOURSELF IN?

"Why?" This is the question that drives my work. Why do we behave the way we do? Why have we ceased to be citizens and are now just consumers? Why do we vote for things that are harming us? Why are we seemingly so unhappy? Why has the apple had such a significant role in the history of humankind? I always start with a question and as I work, more questions evolve. I may never arrive at the answer, more often theories. I start with a question and will undertake a large amount of research, generally reading from as broad a perspective as I can and then the research becomes more and more focused. Quite often this will trigger more questions. Throughout I will be making work. So I am really thinking through making."

WHICH OTHER ARTISTS DO YOU LOOK UP TO AND WHY?

"My work spans sculpture, drawing, painting, film and installation, and conceptually it explores our anxiety afflicted society, as such I enjoy looking at a broad selection of artists. I love the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, but for painting I love looking at Harland Miller and Joan Mitchell. For film I look at the work of Brian Eno and Jan Svankmajer. Of course, for the apple there is Magritte and no one is better at anxiety than Francis Bacon!"

YOUR WORK IS OFTEN SOCIALLY OR POLITICALLY THEMED. WHY IS IT THAT YOU SO STRONGLY FEEL THE NEED TO TACKLE THESE ISSUES?

"I am trying to understand why we are in such a mess. I am also trying to understand my position within this society. I am interested in current affairs as much as past times. Have we always been like this? What is different now? I think art can bring a different perspective to these questions. I think artists look at the world in a different way, they are able to make different connections between things. I don't make loud protest art, my art is quieter, but I hope it has an effect on people. Although inspired by current issues,



I hope the overall themes and therefore the relevance of the work lasts well beyond my time. I do believe that art can make people look at things and situations in a new light, it can change people's perception."

IN ME WANT NOW, WHAT IS THE RELATION BETWEEN THE QUEUE OF ANIMALS, THE WORD DRAWINGS AND THE TROPHY HEADS?

"This body of work started by looking at an

already anxious society that was being provoked and fired up during the Brexit referendum. The animals are seemingly powerful creatures, from the polar bear to the tiger, the wolf, the black panther to the brown bear, who wait alongside the vulnerable: the baby elephant, the rabbit, the roe deer and foal. The queue places them all side-by-side, powerless as they wait for the unknown, perhaps a visual allegory of human existence. Are they us, are they nature?

The drawings on the walls are made by repeating single words over and over again until the meaning becomes lost and confused. 'Choice', 'change', 'power', 'growth', 'fortune', 'hope' and 'glory' all cry out from the walls.

The words are inherently positive but once spoken and repeated in the media

and by our politicians their meaning becomes warped. It is as if the animals are being shouted at, these are the new bastions of our society, these are the important things.

There is a sense of disquiet that hovers throughout reminding us of human queues – from ration queues to the dole queue to lines simply to get in. A series of trophy heads in a separate room, featuring the ceramic animal heads mounted on mirrored plaques, may suggest the future of the waiting animals, offering a disturbing sense of doom.”



Truth Apple

It is Adam and Eve, the Judgement of Paris, Heracles, Newton, The Beatles and Steve Jobs, it is Cézanne, Magritte, Snow White and William Tell, it is even the American Frontier! It has been a symbol of sin and redemption, beauty and discord, poison and immortality. I am fascinated at how this most humble of fruits has had such an impact on our history and culture. Working across drawing, sculpture, film, installation and painting, I am using the apple as a lens to explore fundamental questions driving human nature, especially our anxiety afflicted society and our incessant need for 'more.'”

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM YOU IN THE FUTURE?

“There is so much to do, it is very exciting. I have just started with the apple and this has been such a font of inspiration. I would very much like to curate some exhibitions about the apple and I am working on an artist book about the apple too. I want to carry on loving making work and hope to reach new audiences and broaden my perspectives too. I am obviously still addicted to shops after making the *The Tower of Babel* at the V&A and I think I am just about ready to embark on a new shop project too.”

We could listen to Barford talking about his work for days, but we don't want to come across as too greedy. So, we are now patiently looking forward to the unique creations that he will undoubtedly present to us in the coming years. (Text: Eline De Mont)

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR MOST RECENT WORK MORE MORE MORE?

In the past few years, I have been focussing my research on understanding 'happiness' and specifically the perceived lack thereof in major Western democracies. Looking at the causes of mistrust, unrest and division, this understanding fed itself into my drawings and sculptures and eventually into the apple. I have become obsessed with the apple.



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