

## **STEPHEN DIXON (1957 - )**

British ceramic artist Stephen Dixon combines political and social commentary with his highly decorated vessels and plates. He explores his topics through the use of metaphor, drawing on classical and mythological as well as pop culture figures and images. His slab-built forms incorporate a variety of techniques, including sprigging, silk-screening, modeling, and colored slips applied in multiple layers to deliver his message. As a Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, he has developed innovative printing processes for ceramic work, and has shared his craft as well as his strong beliefs through a series of residencies with both art and political organizations.

### **ARTIST'S STATEMENT – STEPHEN DIXON**

“A certain amount of my work is quite intellectual, planned and logical, but then there is a certain amount that is spontaneous and intuitive, and I try and get a balance of the two, really. I’m naturally much more inclined towards the planned and the ordered, but I’m always striving for a more spontaneous and innately creative way of working. Somewhere in the middle of that tension, I think, is that kind of spiritual thing about art – sometimes it can move you without you exactly knowing why, but it does it anyway. I think that’s as important to me as the political message, well, ideally these two things would work together.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Jane Webb. “On Decoration, Meaning and Authorship.” in *Stephen Dixon: the Sleep of Reason*. ed. Liz Mitchell. (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Art Gallery, 2005): 52.

### **RESUME – STEPHEN DIXON**

1957	Born, Peterlee, Co. Durham, U.K.
1976-1980	University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, B.A. Hons Fine Art
1983-1986	Royal College of Art, M.A., Ceramics
1986-1998	Part-time and Visiting Lecturer in Ceramics: Edinburgh College of Art The London Institute The Surrey Institute Staffordshire University Cork Institute of Technology Tameside College Manchester City College Berkshire College of Art and Design
1998-2003	Research Fellow in Contemporary Crafts, Manchester Metropolitan University

2000	Arts Council of England “Year of the Artist” Residency
2003-present	Senior Research Fellow in Contemporary Crafts, Manchester Metropolitan University
2006	Visiting Artist through HAT International Residency Fellowship: Helpmann Academy, JamFactory, and UniSASchool of Art, Sydney Australia

## ***BIOGRAPHY -STEPHEN DIXON***

British ceramic artist Stephen Dixon was born in 1957 in Peterlee, County Durham, a town that had been founded just 9 years earlier and whose population was primarily coal miners. While Dixon’s paternal grandfather and uncles were miners, his father taught physics at the local grammar school, so Dixon was exposed from the first to both middle- and working-class ethics. Dixon describes himself as introverted as a child and says he spent a lot of time making plasticine models. In secondary school his interest in art developed more fully, and he decided to pursue art as a career. He entered University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1976, graduating in 1980 with a B.A. in Fine Art.

His first job following graduation was as an art technician which involved responsibility for firing the kilns and mixing clay. He was intrigued by the technology and techniques and refined his craft by making copies of English medieval pottery and Japanese ceramics. After teaching for a short while he entered the Royal College of Art in 1983, earning an M.A. in ceramics in 1986. There, he was influenced by his tutors, including Alison Britton, Janice Tchalenko, and Eduardo Paolozzi. In particular he was influenced by Paolozzi’s “Museum of Mankind Showcase” which led Dixon to introduce political satire into his work and by Paolozzi’s use of found objects and the combination of fine art and popular culture.

Following graduation, Dixon began working in Alison Britton’s studio in King’s Cross along with Philip Eglin. The death of his father, however, in 1992 persuaded Dixon and his partner Alison Welsh to return to the north where both had close family ties. They chose Bury, Lancashire, where, on the top floor of an old mill in the village of Waterfoot, Dixon set up his studio. Welsh accepted a position as Lecturer in Fashion at Manchester Metropolitan University, and a few years later, as their family grew, they moved to the suburbs of south Manchester.

Dixon’s work has been a marriage of fine art and political and social criticism, his clay a canvas for the message he wants to deliver. There is a long tradition of artist as social critic, not only in Britain, and Dixon sees himself as belonging to this tradition. He points out the British use of cartoons and caricatures in ceramics and other mediums and the even longer tradition of ceramics as the “story-teller” of cultural and political history; that much of what we know about older civilizations is derived from the pottery left behind, work that has endured long after other historical records have been lost. Indeed, Dixon believes one of the functions of art is to confront ideas and to provoke thought and not just to create decorative objects.

Dixon was given his first one-man show, *Trouble in Paradise and Other Stories* in 1987, followed in 1992 by his first solo show in the U.S. in 1992, *Seven Deadly Sins*. Three years later he completed the ambitious work *The Levantine Chess Set*, now in the Manchester City Galleries, which used chess as a metaphor for international tensions between the West and the Middle East. While his earlier works had been comprised largely of lidded boxes with elaborate modeled, figurative decoration, the completion of this large project made him reluctant to return to the confines of working with the boxes. He chose as his new vehicle flat-backs, a style popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with Staffordshire ware. Again, the works were metaphorical, criticizing the decline of modern Western culture by using such icons as Madonna, Rambo, and Ronald McDonald.

1996 found Dixon again evolving into a new style, this time moving away from densely modeled figures and into making plates which used a lighter clay and were decorated with sprigging and mono-prints. The plates further evolved into vessels, and decoration became more graphic, looser, and softer. Decoration was now primarily on the surface, painterly and more contemporary, and done in multiple layers of prints, drawings, and paintings. Content continued to be political and social commentary, but now, rather than the “cartoonish” images of the earlier work, the images were more subtle, less obvious, the layers and layers of images reflecting the layers and layers of meaning

In 1998 he applied for the new position of Research Fellow in Contemporary Crafts at Manchester Metropolitan University, a fellowship that allowed him the freedom to explore and experiment with ceramic printing and to work in a much larger scale with the university’s large kilns. The result of the first two years of this fellowship was the solo exhibition *Beauty and the Beast*, which showcased six major new pieces and a style far more graphic than before. His “alphabet” of images – drawings, photographs, found images, etc. – has become very large, and he combines and overlays them to produce highly complex visual images.

Taking his concern with world politics to a new level, he received an Arts Council of England “Year of the Artist” residency in 2000 which allowed him to work with Kosovian refugees through Amnesty International, using images of their experiences to create art to record their memories. That was followed by a Crafts Council grant to develop long-term business opportunities in Japan. These international experiences culminated in two new important bodies of work in 2004: *21 Countries*, an installation at the Imperial War Museum North of 21 plates referencing U.S. foreign policy since 1945, and *Savage Indignation*, a group of pots concerned with the war in Iraq. Most recently he spent three months in the JamFactory in Adelaide, Australia, on a residency funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council which again resulted in a new direction in his work, this time into metal and textiles and the use of ready-made objects, such as enamelware, rather than self-constructed objects as the basis for his art.

Dixon’s work is included in a number of public and private collections, among them the British Council, the Crafts Council, and Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal Museum of Scotland, and the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. In addition his work has been shown in a number of solo and group exhibitions in the U.K. as well as the U.S.

## ***BIBLIOGRAPHY – STEPHEN DIXON***

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### Periodicals

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Jackson, Lesley. "Stephen Dixon: Beauty and the Beast: Anatol Orient, London." *Crafts (London, England)* no. 168 (January/February 2001): 58-59.

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### Video

Dixon, Stephen. *The Fired Print: Contemporary Approaches to Printed Studio Ceramics*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2001. Educational slide set.

## **GALLERY REPRESENTATION – STEPHEN DIXON**

The Scottish Gallery, Aitken Dott Ltd, 16 Dundas Street, Edinburgh, EH3 6HZ, U.K.

## **WEB SITES – STEPHEN DIXON**

<http://www.blackswan.org.uk/?Page=72>

Includes link to recent interview with Stephen Dixon

<http://www.hat.mmu.ac.uk/residencies/proposal.php?artist=69>

Includes links to audio and video presentations by Dixon

<http://www.artdes.mmu.ac.uk/profile/sdixon>

Stephen Dixon faculty page

<http://www.craftaustralia.com.au/articles/20061129.php>

Conversation between Jane Webb and Stephen Dixon

<http://www.stateart.com.au/sota/hit-list/default.asp?fid=4056>

"Cracks in the Surface," an article about "Surface Tension" exhibition

<http://www.caa.org.uk/exhibitions/exhibition-archive/2004/stephen-dixon.html>

Discussion of "Savage Indignation" exhibition

July 2007