

FRIDAY 1 MARCH TO FRIDAY 10 MAY ———
PRESENTED BY SAMSTAG MUSEUM OF ART
FOR THE 2024 ADELAIDE FESTIVAL

Nuske

BRUCE NUSKE ——— WITH KHAI LIEW



Living up to one's teapot: Bruce Nuske — an essay by Robert Reason

Bruce Nuske's ceramic practice, which spans more than fifty years, has firmly shunned the whims of fashion, taking instead a long view of ceramic history. Highly original and idiosyncratic, Nuske's work is instantly recognisable and desirable, his teapots and vessels having acquired an international reputation.

Nuske's formative years were spent on a farm in Western Australia. This 'boy from the bush' was influenced by his observations in the landscape—Australian wildflowers, native trees and animals—not necessarily stereotypical interests for a young boy, which perhaps explains why he later found secondary school in Adelaide, at the age of sixteen, a less-than-welcoming experience. Raised by his mother, Nuske recalls her response to his being teased as 'perplexing'. Her suggestion was, 'Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see'—advice which encouraged him to be sceptical of information received from others and, to an extent, of his own observations. This slightly nonsensical wordplay appealed to Nuske and eventually found a creative parallel in the stories and sculptural forms in his work. One such example is the inscription *Plainly ornate and extravagantly meaningless* on a favourite teapot, a baroque beauty in the form of an exotic male bird carrying aloft a precious egg. Described as a hybrid pelican/dodo-like creature, it metaphorically carries a lot of Nuske with it—a deeply held desire for people to see beyond the surface, to embrace difference, enjoy the whimsical, and realise that ultimately purpose and meaning have many and elaborate guises.

In 1969, at the age of twenty, Nuske began a four-year Diploma of Design (Ceramics) at the South Australian School of Art, where he was taught by Milton Moon. Rather than becoming an acolyte of the Anglo-Japanese tradition, Nuske found inspiration in Robert J. Charleston's *World Ceramics: An Illustrated History*, a sweeping reference book that opened his eyes to what he recalls as 'the splendour of European porcelain and all its froth, frivolity and bubbles'.¹ Moon did, however, instil a deep sense of connectivity to materiality in Nuske, working, exploring and pushing the boundaries of clay with the necessary technical processes, skills and perseverance to develop his ideas. This initial close connection with his creative material has seen Nuske maintain his strong allegiance to craft-based practices. While not following the Leach–Hamada tradition of stoneware and muted glazes, Nuske was similarly not a convert to the Californian West Coast Funk tradition brought to our shores by Margaret Dodd and taken up by a number of aspiring ceramists in Adelaide in the 1970s. Later called 'Skangarooovian Funk', it was often overtly political, sexual or religious—themes that did not resonate with Nuske. That said, the exploration of earthenware clays, sculptural forms, decoration and colour were threads common to Nuske and Funk ceramists.

Following the completion of his studies, Nuske became a teacher at TAFE in drawing and ceramics, maintaining his professional role at various TAFE campuses until 2018. Although full-time employment allowed him the freedom to create exhibition pieces for group shows, it restricted his capacity for solo shows to a handful during the period of his tenancy at the old St Peters Jam Factory from 1980 to 1986 (three years of which included a leave of absence from teaching).

Throwing or hand-building teapots, vessels and small sculptural forms is the backbone of Nuske's practice, and integral to that practice is their decoration. Any assumption that the particular form and decoration applied to a piece are superficial or superfluous is to miss the point of Nuske's work. Continuing a long tradition of ceramic manufacturing, both are informed by Nuske's knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and European pottery techniques and styles. Think late Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, Neo-gothic, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau. But keep in mind also that British and European porcelain were heavily influenced by China and Japan. Nuske explains: 'I like looking, gleaning, glancing backward into ceramic history, to interpret and represent elements from the past which I can mix with my own narratives and decorative practice'. Indeed, Nuske has accumulated an impressive study collection of antique ceramics, and talks about these just as passionately as his own work. With the discerning eye of the maker, he dissects and compares historical teapots and jugs, assessing the various elements carefully, from the character of the onglaze enamel to the translucency of the sprigged decoration.

Although mainly comprising work produced in recent years, this exhibition includes a number of significant earlier pieces. Two large pots from 1985—one decorated with peonies, the other, chrysanthemums, in coloured oxides over a white slip—illustrate Nuske's love of painterly brushwork, the rest of the surface being rigorously carved to reveal the warm brown Bennetts clay from Adelaide. In style, the pots reference both Oriental ceramics and Art Nouveau cameo glass. Plants and flowers and Nuske's own lush garden are a constant source for his work. Two sculptures from 1983—*Self-portrait with dead bird* and *Self bird with dead portrait*—are significant narrative works. Beguiling anthropomorphic birds in various guises inhabit Nuske's oeuvre, and in both of these works the artist takes on the form of the mother bird to enable an exploration of the more feminine aspects of his persona. In the first work, she is mourning the loss of her offspring (a dead sparrow found in a gutter) and in the second, she herself has passed away. Perched on chairs, these strange characters appear at once completely logical and totally absurd, the mix of kitsch and sentimentality rendering the work endearing.

Nuske's participation in Australian Contemporary at COLLECT in London in 2006 signalled a significant moment in his career. Held at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), this important fair for object-based practices saw his work acquired by the Duke of Devonshire for Chatsworth House. Wendy Walker, in the accompanying catalogue, wrote of Nuske: 'Inspiration flows from a profusion of sources – his journals are filled with fine line drawings of potential projects, as well as pressed flowers and insects, fragments of patterned textiles, found scraps of patterned paper and images culled from magazines and photographs – in a dazzling, but considered montage of colour and pattern'.² His journals function as a deep wellspring, not a pattern book.

The V&A's unrivalled ceramics collection prompted Nuske's attendance at further COLLECT fairs, as both a visitor and attendee, and in 2014 he spent three months in England as a recipient of an Australia Council for the Arts Residency. Much of his time at the V&A was devoted to carefully drawing and photographing the industrial ceramics of the golden age of British production, extracting a huge amount of information for later use in design and fabrication. Drawing is a regular part of Nuske's practice, with the drawings themselves contributing to his important visual archive of forms, motifs and design elements from which his creative ceramic vocabulary arises. During the residency, Nuske interspersed his time with trips to other collections, also frequenting London's antique flea markets to buy interesting old pots, many of which bore some minor injury, thus making them affordable. More than seventy pieces, mainly teapots and jugs, accompanied him on his return to Adelaide, becoming 'new' primary sources in his extensive archive. These pieces encompass a plethora of styles and decorative examples—drabware bodies, black basalt wares, sprigged decoration, dry glazes, coloured slips, incised and applied decoration, teapot bodies and variously shaped spouts and handles—representing a variety and profusion of known and unknown factories, and anonymous highly skilled potters, mould-makers and decorators. Each one has something for Nuske to ponder on, with an eye to adopting, adapting, assimilating and integrating those aspects deemed applicable to the project at hand.

Facsimile and pastiche are not Nuske's objective; instead, he conducts an ambitious game of interplay whereby his shapes, coloured bodies, patterns, enamels and finishes can have multiple precedents—an approach, he reminds us, freely utilised since the beginning of European porcelain in 1709. Just as someone freshly viewing a Rococo 'cauliflower' teapot in the 1750s would have been delighted and charmed by this unusual form, so too does he hope and expect that his newest creations will provoke similar sensations from his viewer. Nuske's teapots are infused with the human characteristics of wit, satire or glamour, all the while retaining their functionality (yes, that's right) and, when used, awakening our senses of touch, smell and taste. Each 'personality' is carefully stage-managed by Nuske by means of their jaunty handles, erect spouts, bodily attributes, decoration and colour. Nuske has previously noted that the teapots are the 'spouted icon and Prima Donna of the ritual of tea ... the cross-dressing engine of hospitality, spanning cultural and social boundaries and a context for storytelling and imagining'.³ Out of the gallery and at home on the kitchen table, each teapot becomes an object of contemplation and wonderment, and a witness to its new social environment.

Nature and architecture, along with Western and Eastern sensibilities, are all at play in this collection. An angular Chinoiserie-style *Teapot* in burnished red clay makes a nod to Yixing ware, and its zigzag form to a pagoda temple. A cream-coloured *Teapot* takes this reference further, with the lid configured as a small temple, replete with stairs and a ladder ready for its occupant. The elaborate pricked decoration seen on much of Nuske's work is used here to define and decorate the variously angled planes of the teapot. A favoured technique for some time, the prick patterns are a subversion of sewing, Nuske for many years having enjoyed stitching with needle and thread to make clothes. In clay, he finds the process meditative, enabling the particularly precise patterning often required of a surface, the small, pricked holes following and amplifying other decorative elements or developing their own patterns to enliven the surface of the object. For example, in the baroque shell *Teapot*, the pricking defines the spirals of the overlapping shells and the *terra sigillata* slip induces a stitched-leather look.

Several porcelain teapots and generous earthenware jugs bring nature to the fore with sprigged or painted leaves and flowers, while a further two hand-built porcelain teapots have their bodies generously covered in applied leaves and are particularly charming. The foliage of geraniums and viburnums, ficus leaves and more, collected by Nuske from his garden over the years, have been pressed into damp clay to form ‘negatives’, which, after firing, act as small moulds in which to form the ceramic leaves to be applied to his work. With further manipulation, detailing and carving by Nuske, the leaves on these teapots acquire a wonderful, soft fleshiness as they wrap around the form and press against or overlap with one another. The extravagant fitted lids, each with their own character, equally delight.

The title of the essay ‘Living up to one’s teapot’ derives from an inscription printed underneath the famous Worcester *Aesthetic (Patience) Teapot* (1882). The teapot satirically references the British Aesthetes, some of whom—like Oscar Wilde—were also dubbed ‘Chinamaniacs’. Nuske, who has taken inspiration from industrial ceramics and the aesthetics of beauty, can claim a new centrality for the teapot as beautiful and useful.

Can you live up to a Nuske teapot?

Robert Reason

Robert Reason is museum director of The David Roche Foundation, Australia’s preeminent private museum for European fine and decorative arts. He is recognised as one of Australia’s leading decorative arts authorities and has over twenty-five years of experience working in the arts sector.

¹ All quotes interview with the author 15 November 2023 unless otherwise stated.

² Wendy Walker, curator, *Australian Contemporary at COLLECT*, JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design, Adelaide, 2006, p. 17.

³ Adrian Sassoon, ‘Bruce Nuske’, accessed 24 November 2023, <https://www.adriansassoon.com/artists/bruce-nuske/>



Bruce NUSKE *ceramics* with exhibition furniture and design by Khai LIEW, installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, 2024 Adelaide Festival. Photograph by Grant Hancock.



Bruce NUSKE *ceramics* with exhibition furniture and design by Khai LIEW, installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, 2024 Adelaide Festival. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

SAMSTAG PARNATI SEASON

Bruce Nuske with Khai Liew is a Samstag Museum of Art, exhibition for the 2024 Adelaide Festival.
1 March — 10 May 2024

Exhibition Curator: Erica Green
Catalogue Author: Robert Reason

Published by the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art University of South Australia
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ISBN: 978-0-6452560-6-2

Essay by Robert Reason

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Samstag Museum of Art
City West campus, University of South Australia
55 North Terrace, Adelaide
Friday 1 March — Friday 10 May 2024
Open 10am — 5pm Tuesday to Saturday or by appointment.

Images: Bruce Nuske with Khai Liew for the 2024 Adelaide Festival, installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, 2024. Photograph by Grant Hancock.