

# FRAGILE FLESH

The Works of Andrew Nicholls  
Nathan Beard and Susan Flavell  
by Travis Kelleher



**Andrew Nicholls, *Brent with Porcelain Skull* (portrait of Brent Harrison)**  
2016, digital print, various dimensions; photo: artist

## Focus: The Body Issue

Despite the closure of major learning facilities across Australia during the past decade<sup>1</sup>, recent years have seen a resurgence of ceramics practice internationally, in particular by artists from non-craft backgrounds approaching the medium from a conceptual perspective<sup>2</sup>. Nathan Beard, Susan Flavell, and Andrew Nicholls are three such artists who particularly draw on the medium's historical context in relation to race, gender, and class.

Nicholls, whose practice is largely centred on ink drawing, owes his aesthetic sensibility to a Spode 'Italian' platter that hung on the wall of his childhood home, its enduringly popular blue and white pattern – in continual production since 1816<sup>3</sup> – working its way into his psyche from an early age. At university he first came to appreciate its cultural lineage, reflecting the economic rivalries of East and West during the 18th century as Europeans developed the techniques to produce their own fine ceramics, rather than having to import wares from Asia<sup>4</sup>. In 2004 he undertook a residency at the Spode factory in Stoke-on-Trent, the first of many international pilgrimages he would curate for himself and others, seeking to unpick the darker historical motivations of aesthetic legacies we commonly consider benign. "Of all the great British china factories, Spode more than any other has always glorified its colonial roots,"<sup>5</sup> Nicholls states. His *Australian Sporting* series, produced with the factory's centuries-old copper plates, presents an Australian colonial drama set on stark white bone china, in dubious homage to Spode's iconic 'Indian Sporting' designs depicting violent hunting expeditions from the British Raj, the enduring popularity of which he considers "staggering".

For Nicholls, Britain's ceramics industry is inescapably linked to violence and death and driven by the racial tensions inherent to colonial expansion. Nothing embodies this better than the ubiquitous Willow Pattern, still frequently assumed to be Chinese, but actually Chinoiserie, invented by the English to undercut Asia's domination of the ceramics market<sup>6</sup>.

The pattern, and Nicholls' fascination with George IV's orientalist Royal Pavilion, inspired his current group curatorial project:

*Chinoiserie remains something of a guilty pleasure, via its aesthetic charm, but intensely problematic and kitsch appropriation of Asian culture. It reflects the worst excesses of imperialism, yet reflects a level of fascination for the 'other' that can be read as (albeit naively) cosmopolitan in spirit*<sup>7</sup>.

The project, currently in progress, invited 14 artists (including Beard and Flavell) to interrogate this legacy, informed by residencies at the Royal Pavilion and in Jingdezhen, China<sup>8</sup>.

Nicholls' series of skulls and crossbones were produced for the project in Jingdezhen. "I liked the idea of taking a symbol as cringe-inducingly overused as a skull to symbolise the violence of British imperialism," he explains. "As such, I hope the works speak more broadly about aesthetic decline and failure<sup>9</sup>." A photograph of his friend, artist Brent Harrison, staring wistfully at one of the skulls is a contemporary Vanitas, where Harrison's supple body contrasting with the bone-like appearance of the porcelain recalls medieval 'Death and the Maiden' motifs.

Andrew Nicholls, *Bitter Heritage (for Randolph Stow)*  
2013, decal print on recycled Wembley Ware dinnerware  
h.1.5m, w.2.5m; photo: artist

