

Christopher Headley

War Spoils

Article by Joe Pascoe

THE SLOW REVEAL OF CHRISTOPHER HEADLEY'S NEW CERAMIC installation *War Spoils* exposes the viewer to deepening layers of horror. Here is an artist who deliberately has left himself open to the putrid news that pours forth every day from the media. People being ceremonially beheaded on YouTube, taken off a bus and shot, or hit by drones – such events have become commonplace.

We are all familiar with the term, 'The Spoils of War'. It legitimises the looting, pillaging and rape as a right of the victors after battle. It is a term that has resonated throughout history. By turning it around into *War Spoils*, a totally different meaning emerges; we identify an ambiguity. This other meaning is the driver behind this exhibition.

War Spoils is a major installation that is the endpoint of Headley's capitulation of his inbuilt censorship screen, which we all have, to deliberately allow his mind to process these events without pity or anger. The form of the work, arranged as an eternal circle, combines the nostalgia of his youth in post WWII York, England, with the sci-fi reality that contemporary war has become.





Facing page: **War Spoils: Spoils.** 2015. Slipcast white earthenware with underglaze colours and platinum lustre. 16 x 8 x 15 in. Photo by Andrew Barcham (Screaming Pixel).
 Above: **War Spoils (Installation View).** 2015. Slipcast white earthenware with underglaze colours and platinum lustre. Photo by the artist.
 Inset: **Chris Headley.**

The venue Headley chose for *War Spoils* was the Angela Robarts-Bird Gallery in Melbourne. It is an uncomplicated square space with a polished wooden floor. The pieces were arranged in a circular format directly on the floor in the middle of the space. Delicate shades of black contrast with platinum gloss to play out on surfaces that are both smooth and sharp, in an emotionally scorching work. It offers no relief, except for its presence as static art. And it offers no humanity, as the faces within have metamorphosed to warlike zombies. Instead, a patina of pain camouflages the central sculptural elements, encircled by a ring of toy-like Stealth fighter jets.

Metaphorically, we all exist at the centre of this arrangement because it represents the reality of our shared perception of being caught in the 'new history' which joins the past with the future and blurs the present in an avalanche of confusion. The artist asks a question to which we have no answer, namely, when will it end? While glib TV commentators compare the various wars like football finals, it is the work of artists such as Headley that help us see the bizarre oddness of it all. Art is sometimes a whore, working for whoever has the money, so it is important to salute the independent artist working for the motherly good.

When Headley set out to make this new body of work he deliberately began without a set plan, no specific project in mind. He simply wanted to get back to basics – form/colour/surface. He 'pushed out the boat' to see where it would take him. He also wanted to move away from his recent preconceived works where the concept is clearly worked out before commencing. Headley wanted to take on a more spontaneous, intuitive approach. I suppose he was allowing himself to become a 'lightning rod' of sorts. The daily broadcasts of war atrocities, Syria,

ISIS, Ukraine, a civil aircraft being shot down killing hundreds of innocent people and terrorist attacks and schoolgirls being kidnapped in Africa, were being conducted down that lightning rod. Individual pieces emerged in his studio. With time the work began to gel into a powerful installation, reliant on the fourth basic component – space.

Headley's use of an arrangement that crosses Star Wars with a mandala, is naturally understandable, given his background. As a young English artist in the 1970s, he graduated from the conceptually based Central School of Art, London, with interests ranging from post industrial ceramics practice through to Pop.

Headley first started making installations after viewing Antony Gormley's early terracotta work, *A Field for the Art Gallery of New South Wales*, 1989, with its use of 1100 small clay figures. They were deliberately set out on the floor to direct the viewer towards the centre of the space where viewers, such as Headley himself, found themselves at the epicentre of a 'field of energy'. In fact the viewer became the focal point of the work. The tension created at this point was so great that no one could manage to stay at the centre for more than a few seconds. He was fascinated by this work and by the experiential nature of installation art as it sets up an almost physical interaction between the viewer and the work. The nature of installation art is transient yet experientially precise and is often used by artists as a point of reference in order to evoke a memory, a personal experience, to include a sense of spirituality or to establish an accessible language



War Spoils: Spoils. 2015. Slipcast white earthenware with underglaze colours and platinum lustre. 16 x 8 x 10 in.
Photo by Andrew Barcham (Screaming Pixel).

through their work. Art provides us with a visual language. An artist can express concepts and complex ideas that would be difficult, if not impossible, to put into words. I suppose they often do appear to be revealed gradually because the viewer has to learn this new language. The only way this learning can be done is by engaging with work on a personal level. As an established installation artist, Headley believes this is where the experiential nature of installation art provides some fluency.

Headley grew up in the 1950s in a village on the flat farmlands of the Vale of York, England. There was an abandoned airfield, left from the war that came right up to his back fence. Wellington bombers were based there once. It became a playground for the village kids, with the concrete bunkers as hiding places. The watchtower and runways turned them into Spitfire pilots. Playing there with his elder brother one time, they found a hand grenade. Tiring of play, it was tossed away and it exploded. Turning around, they saw a great big hole in the ground. After looking at each other for a few moments they bolted for home, too terrified to tell anyone about this.

Having completed undergraduate studies, Headley and his girlfriend travelled with a college mate, catching the tail end of the hippie trail. With a photocopied nascent version of the *Lonely Planet* guide, that journey became an odyssey that lasted about a year, though culturally it traversed the millennia, as he and his companions became engrossed in the cultural extremes we see rendered

as clichés in travel brochures today. Various thin and fat, scared and safe, they travelled and travelled, treading old paths and eventually flying to Australia from Bangkok. He treasures the wealth of experiences from this journey.

Within Australia Headley found himself in academic positions working in art schools in Darwin, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, gaining first a master's degree, then a doctorate. All the while he continued to reach out to the world through residences and free-form travel.

It is a 'non-pattern' that became a template for many Australian ceramics artists of his generation. Small idyllic rural houses were sometimes acquired, as he created a variable lifestyle – variable in that the need of a roof was balanced by the desire to experience other cultures. A ceramics artist also tends to leave behind a trail of projects, exhibitions, teaching posts, pots, kilns and people.

Countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, when he travelled through them, were safe, exotic places, loaded with rich histories, traditions and culture. The people were hospitable, including an invitation to a traditional wedding. Today they constantly stream images of horror. Then three years ago he travelled to Cambodia, primarily to visit the temple complexes of Angkor, but also to expand his repertoire of images. There were signs here and there: "landmines", "do not stray from the pathways." He recalls a troupe of musicians playing to the tourists at one temple site. Some of them had been blinded and most of them had limbs missing. He came across a group of nine or 10 year old orphans, all excited about



their brand new donated soccer outfits. A woman with young children sitting by the side of the road pointed at him as he walked past, saying, "There's a grandpa". There are few grandpas in Cambodia. These memories and experiences stay with him and they filter through to his work.

In summary, we stand at a precipice signposted by an artist, in this case an artist using one of the ancient media, clay, which in itself poses the question – is this the final abyss we confront? In Australia we have something of a privileged position, due to our watery barriers, against trauma, but we have an equal responsibility as a society to support artists like Christopher Headley. It is important that Australia expresses its sophistication through great art, of which *War Spoils* is undoubtedly an example, so that we can collectively peer forward and see how to avoid sliding into a future of black despair.



Joe Pascoe is a ceramics researcher and director of Insect Arts Management, Melbourne. In 1995 Pascoe curated *Delinquent Angel: Australian Historical, Aboriginal and Contemporary Ceramics* for the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza, Italy. He has recently curated an exhibition entitled *Dada lives!* for the Hatch Contemporary Art Space, Ivanhoe, in homage to the centenary of the foundations of Dada art in WWI.

The installation *War Spoils* is a product of the constant streaming of information from war affected places today. It was shown at Angela Roberts-Bird Gallery, Gasworks Arts Park, Melbourne, Australia. The exhibition was launched on Anzac Day, 25 April 2015, by William Kelly OAM, Peace Artist. Christopher Headley will be taking up the Australia Council Tokyo Studio Residency in 2016 (christopherheadley.net).

Above: *War Spoils: Spoils*. 2015. Slipcast white earthenware with underglaze colours and platinum lustre. 5 x 4 x 6 in.

Photo by Andrew Barcham (Screaming Pixel).

Below left: **Christopher Headley's Signature**.

Below right: *War Spoils (Detail)*. 2015. Slipcast white earthenware with underglaze colours and platinum lustre. Photo by the artist.

