

# Paul Scott's Confected Landscapes and Contemporary Vignettes

Article by Amy Gogarty

PAUL SCOTT HAS ACHIEVED INTERNATIONAL RENOWN in the ceramics world as a teacher, curator and author of two widely-read books, *Ceramics and Print* (A&C Black, 1994/96) and *Painted Clay: Graphic Arts and the Ceramic Surface* (A&C Black and Watson Guptill, 2000). He also makes compelling work. Residing in Cumbria in rural northern England, he recently completed a PhD fellowship from Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design, Manchester Metropolitan University, England. The work discussed in this article relates to research conducted during the course of his PhD<sup>1</sup>, yet it embodies themes that have preoccupied him for some time. These include theories of picturesque landscape painting; the remediation and circulation in print form of such painting; domestic ceramic objects printed with landscape imagery and a host of contemporary issues concerning relationships between human civilization and the natural world.

In 2001, Stephanie Portico Brown reviewed Scott's work with computer-altered, collaged and virtual landscape imagery, wondering if

*The Scott Collection, Cumbrian Blue(s), A Millennium Willow for Sellafield (or Plutonium is forever, well 24 Millennia anyway. 2000. In-glaze decal collage and gold lustre on Royal Worcester bone china. 30 cm/dia.*



this new direction might ultimately lead him beyond "ceramic as a physical practice". She allowed, however, that his life-long engagement with "the critical potential of banal ceramic idioms" might yet "feed back into actual ceramics."<sup>2</sup> Fortunately for ceramics, Scott's new work confirms his commitment to material practice, manifesting the medium's effectiveness both to carry traces of the past and to sustain contemporary inquiry.

Scott constructs highly artificial, theatrical views and artefacts, compounding a miscellany of elements in a process he refers to as 'confecting'.<sup>3</sup> Mixing vintage and modern ceramic dinnerware with printed designs and hand-built sculptural elements, Scott's 'confectured' landscapes and contemporary vignettes generate meanings based on what he calls a "blue and white semiotic".

Originating with Chinese porcelain, "the most widely produced and distributed object of world commerce before the Industrial Revolution",<sup>4</sup> this semiotic migrated to Europe and became the standard for industrial transfer-printed tableware.

Scott's academic research focuses on historical archives of blue and white ceramic decoration in Britain, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, with a particular interest in print technology as it relates to picturesque European landscape painting.

The concept of the picturesque dominated artistic discourse in the 18th century. As defined by one of its chief theorists, Reverend William Gilpin, "Picturesque Beauty is that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture."<sup>5</sup> To clarify exactly what kind of picture he meant, Gilpin proposed rules and schema to organize any landscape into foreground, distance and second distance, such as one might observe in paintings by Claude Lorraine, Gaspard Dughet or Salvatore Rosa.

The transfer process was used to impart detailed imagery onto everyday ceramic objects, contributing to domestic visual environments in which these images circulated as powerful, if subliminal, markers of cultural values and norms. Scott uses the term "cultural wallpaper" to describe the ubiquitous, if unacknowledged, presence of these objects. Like wallpaper, they contain and define an environment while functioning largely outside the purview of serious art history, which purports to value originality and uniqueness over mechanically reproduced multiples. Museums have not always seen fit to preserve mass-produced objects, a situation Scott criticizes as failing to appreciate the significance these objects hold for ordinary people. He insists that "industrial ceramics are still used by many people as an art form" having "relevance to their lives".<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging its intrinsic and subversive power, Scott adopts the visual style of this outmoded, discredited aesthetic to produce thoughtful and critical works.

Developments in computer graphics software and technology revolutionized the remediation of existing images, altering the process significantly from that used during the heyday of transfer ware. First developed in the 18th century and thus contemporary with the rise of the picturesque, transfer ware fuelled the expanding middle class' desire for decorative ornaments. Transfer images

*Above: . Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) Stignsæs No:2. 2007. In-glaze decal collage on earthenware platter marked Kobenhavns Fajancefabrik Danmark and bought in a charity shop, Skælskør (two miles from power station). 42 x 32 cm. Below: Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) After the By-Pass. 2005. Partially erased Spode plate with in-glaze decal collage. 25 cm/dia.*



were created with engraved copper plates similar to those used to make prints on paper. In one process, gelatin bats transferred printers' oil to glazed ceramic objects, which were dusted with overglaze enamels and fired. Later, specialized transfer tissue was used to impart underglaze colour directly to a biscuit surface. This was then glazed and fired, resulting in a permanent decoration that became the industry standard.<sup>7</sup>

Scott conducted extensive research in the archives of various manufacturers, interviewing those few engravers who remained working into the early part of this century.<sup>8</sup> In the past, skilled engravers drew upon or 'cannibalized' printed images and copper plates in factory warehouses to create new compositions and genres including generalized views, souvenir plates and commemorative wares. In their often indiscriminate *pastiche* of unrelated images, Scott recognized parallels to contemporary image-making by digital means. Rather than dismissing these objects as banal, unoriginal or kitsch, he regarded the proliferation of genres as a bonanza, familiar forms to be appropriated, altered and vested with entirely new rhetoric and meaning.

Manipulating images digitally, he generates screen-printed decals that incorporate cobalt pigment suspended in a print base. The screened images are subsequently applied to glazed surfaces and fired at temperatures appropriate to the substrate material. The chemical properties of cobalt cause it to bleed slightly into the glaze melt, creating edges that are more subtly blended than those produced using other colours such as red and black. This quality contributed in part to the original popularity of blue and white, as the softened edges related the print more closely to painting.<sup>9</sup> Scott exploits degrees of melt in his work, combining materials such as tin-glazed earthenware, woodfired, hand-formed and store-bought porcelain into a single work. The substrate modifies the quality of the print – it sits most crisply in the surface of the tin glaze, softens and sinks beneath the glassy surface of the porcelain and bubbles, melts and moves in atmospheric firings.

These qualities exemplify what media theorists Jay



David Bolter and Richard Grusin term the “twin logics of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy”.<sup>10</sup> Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the content of any medium is always another medium, Bolter and Grusin define re-mediation as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms”.<sup>11</sup> In this instance, prints on paper re-mediate oil paintings to be re-mediated in turn by printed ceramics and printed ceramics by Scott himself. This chain or affiliation enables the original content of the paintings, landscape, to be continuously re-purposed and subjected to ongoing historical reflection and analysis. It also reiterates the central role of ceramics in carrying and explicating this content. ‘Immediacy’ extends the promise of ‘access to the real’, a condition aimed at through such ‘realistic’ mechanisms as linear perspective, oil painting, photography, film and virtual environments. Scott identifies aspects of immediacy in the highly detailed representations of landscape created by the copperplate transfer process. Running counter to this, ‘hyper-mediacy’ calls attention to the medium itself, substituting for the singular thrust of immediacy, its promised access to the real, heterogeneous spaces and multiple acts of representation.<sup>12</sup> The slight blurring of the cobalt trace beneath the glaze not only heightens the similarity of the printed ceramic to the continuous tone of oil painting and thus its immediacy, it calls attention to the particular qualities of the printed surface and its constructed or ‘connected’ nature. This tension between reality and representation heightens the aesthetic response to these works, multiplying potential references and meanings available to what seem on first glance to be everyday functional objects.

This attention to aesthetics and process, seemingly at odds

*Above: Scott’s Cumbrian Blue(s), Foot and Mouth series: Spode’s Blue Room, Milk Maid No:3. Partially erased Spode plate with in-glaze decals. 25 cm/dia.*

*Below: Scott’s Cumbrian Blue(s) Countryside No:2 (1/3/12/10/07). 2007. Inglaze decal collage and gold lustre on Enoch Wedgwood Countryside earthenware plate. 23 cm/dia.*



with work that incorporates and/or simulates commercial china, points to an interesting paradox or problem at the heart of Scott’s practice. Conflict between hand and machine processes dominated craft discourse of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as witnessed by declarations such as Oscar Wilde’s “Let us

have no machine-made ornament at all; it is all bad and worthless and ugly.”<sup>13</sup>

Bernard Leach similarly decried the use of mechanical reproduction on ceramic surfaces, asserting it lacked the “continuous vital interpretation” necessary for authentic work.<sup>14</sup> Such categorical claims raised red flags for Scott, who believes the material context and use make objects dead or alive, not the specifics of either print or brush.<sup>15</sup> As a young painter, he was drawn to ceramics’ capacity to communicate social and political content rather than to technique or self-expression.

He clarifies his position, unusual for a studio ceramist, stating, “I operate within and on the edge of studio ceramics – and completely outside it.” Digital processes allow him to make ‘meaningful’ forays into the field of studio ceramics, broadening its purview in the process. While appreciating the importance of Leach, he identifies with colleagues working in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia who “draw on much greater and diverse ceramic practices and traditions... their relationship to industry is much more engaged, thoughtful and productive”.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Scott is driven by a desire to develop a working theory of surface, one that exploits the expressive language or semiotic of blue and white ceramics. How he does this is as varied as the project facing him at the time.<sup>17</sup>

For much of his professional life, Scott’s work has been recognized as political.<sup>18</sup> Early on, he engaged issues of apartheid, the environment and social justice. Later, he began to address nuclear energy and waste, combining images of the Sellafield nuclear power plant near his home with traditional motifs from the blue willow pattern. Due to the nearly seamless combination of motifs, subversive aspects of these works emerge only with close scrutiny. Other pieces revive an older tradition of featur-

ing industrial landmarks, factories and other structures set in bucolic surroundings, recalling a time when such structures were objects of picturesque tourism. In some cases, Scott prints the image across the ceramic plate, ignoring conventions of framing; in others, he deliberately encircles views of smokestacks and cooling towers with traditional borders such as the willow or *Marseillaise* pattern to create ironic disjunctions. Some pieces use the process of erasure, mechanically removing areas of pattern from vintage plates and replacing them with collaged commentary. For example, Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s) After the By-Pass* (2005) overprints an erased segment from a fanciful Spode landscape with a collage of automobiles caught in a traffic jam. The politics and irony are explicit in these works, leading some to wonder if Scott's latest work has traded in politics for politesse. Such a view misses the subtlety and sophistication of this newer work.

One might argue that all landscape, in that it is a representation, is inherently political. As W.J.T. Mitchell asserts in *Imperial Landscape*: "Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package."<sup>19</sup>

Scott's confected landscapes embody the disjunctions mentioned by Mitchell but from the position of one who lives in the country rather than one who looks at it. This is an essential difference in terms of who is speaking and for whom. A series addressing the terrible outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease



Above: Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s) Cumbrian Hedgerow No:1* (1/8/20/10/07). 2007. In-glaze decal on porcelain plate. 30 cm/dia.  
Below: Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s) Sellafield No:9*. 2006. In-glaze decal collage on Royal Worcester bone china, with gold lustre. 40 x 30 cm.



in Britain in 2001 becomes more affecting when one realizes Scott's home district of North Cumbria was particularly hard-hit: it was his neighbours losing their livestock and his air filled with the acrid fumes of burning corpses.<sup>20</sup> While some examples from this series are so disturbing as to leave little

room for nuance, others, such as Scott's *Cumbrian Blue(s) 2001 Foot and Mouth No:3* (after Thomas Bewick) 3/02 (2001), in which the image based on Thomas Bewick's wood engraving *Tees-water Improved Breed* is rendered with the body of the animal left blank, or *Foot and Mouth* (2003), an altered and partially erased *Spode Blue Room, Milk Maid* plate in which the figures of a cow and two sheep have been mechanically removed, introduce pathos and sense of loss that transcend irony or outrage.

The most minimally altered works carry the most punch, as the moment of recognition is suspended until well after the work is first encountered.

One contemplates and becomes implicated in his altered *Enoch Wedgwood English Countryside* plates for some time before one notices the wire fence bisecting the rustic image or the cloud-piercing low-flying military jet.

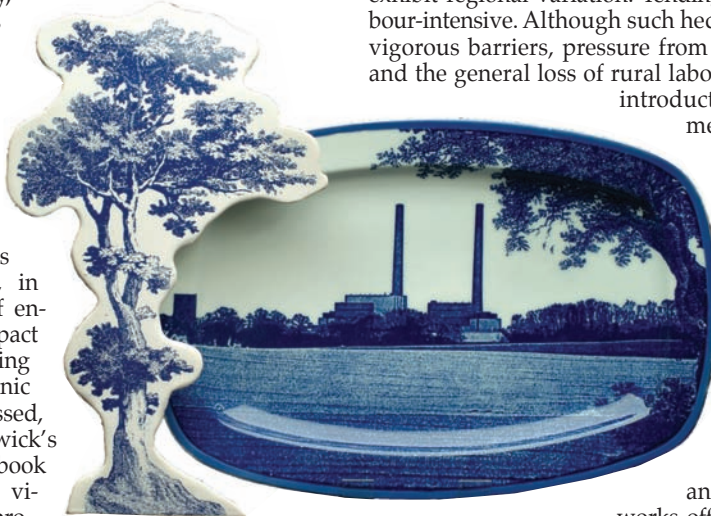
Insight into the fact that seemingly innocuous images could be perceived as political came to him from an unusual source. Researching transfer ware in Norway and Sweden, he encountered a complex history of foreign designers and decorators brought to the region in the 19th century to assist local factory production. Images that appeared generically pastoral to him were perceived by locals as political examples of imported 'English style'. Today they are regarded as embarrassing departures from a larger history of the region's embrace of modernism and modern design.

Yet whether acknowledged or not, these works remain as a record of a particular time, influence and political force impacting both nations' history.<sup>21</sup>

This led Scott to re-examine pastoral imagery in

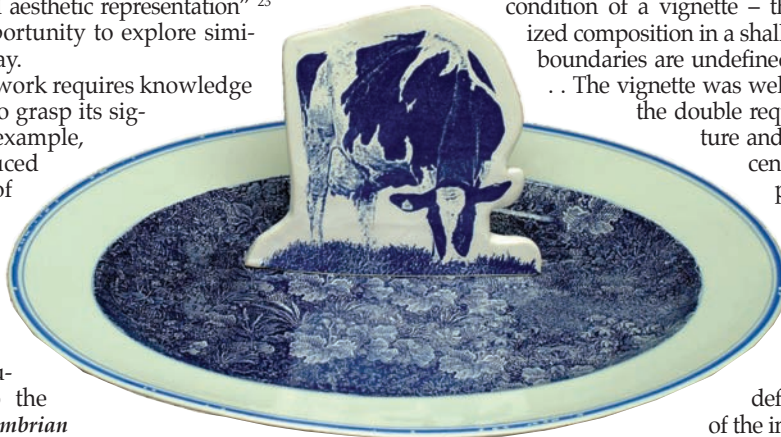


Britain with a new understanding of its potential for political content. Living in what appears to many to be an Arcadian village, he is aware of the degree to which his surroundings are industrially formed: farmers compete in industrial economies and use industrial machinery and industrial farming methods to alter the topography of the land. Increasingly, industrial structures such as nuclear power plants and factories encroach on farmland. Scott began to pay attention to the longer history of these encroachments as evidenced in paintings by John Constable, in which the effects of enclosure and the impact of industrial farming after the Napoleonic wars can be witnessed, and in Thomas Bewick's wood-engraved book illustrations and vignettes.<sup>22</sup> Images produced by these artists



are more properly termed pastoral or rustic than picturesque, as they depict agrarian landscapes marked by human labour. As Ann Bermingham describes them, rustic landscapes portray "country lanes, farmlands and river scenes," evoking "the countryside and rural life" rather than famous views or monuments. What Bermingham calls the "contradiction between the social reality of the countryside and its idealized aesthetic representation"<sup>23</sup> presents an opportunity to explore similar conflicts today.

Much of this work requires knowledge of country life to grasp its significance. For example, Scott has produced a number of very beautiful prints of hedgerows and fences stretched the length of oval and rectangular platters. To the



Above: *Scott's Cumbrian*

**Blue(s) Stignæs No:1, assemblage.** 2007. In-glaze decals on tin glazed earthenware form (Eden Tree) and Bavarian porcelain platter bought in charity shop, Skælskør (2 miles from power station). Tree – 33 cm, platter – 38 x 26 cm.

Below: *Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s), Cow in a Meadow, assemblage.* 2007. In-glaze decals on tin glazed earthenware form (cow) and old Danish earthenware platter, marked Denmark, KF 88 bought in Skælskør, Denmark 11/06. Cow – 14 x 15 cm, plate – 35 cm/dia.

knowing eye, these hedges are degraded products of industrial methods. Previously, hedges were cut and 'laid', the branches laid flat at the base where they fertilized the plant and formed a barrier to hungry sheep and cattle; new growth sprang from the bottom.<sup>24</sup> Hedgerows can be hundreds of years old, are comprised of numerous plant species and exhibit regional variation. Tending hedgerows is labour-intensive. Although such hedges present thick, vigorous barriers, pressure from global economies and the general loss of rural labour have led to the

introduction of mechanical methods, resulting in the thinning and degrading of hedges over time.<sup>25</sup> The hedgerows depicted on these plates are straggly remnants, elegant in their spiky silhouette yet indicative of neglect and decay. These works offer mute protest as

they record changes in our environment and way of life.

Many of Scott's concerns with the environment, sustainability and the impact of industry and progress on rural life come together in his confected landscapes and contemporary vignettes. Vignettes can be understood as the perfect manifestation of the picturesque ideal. Ann Bermingham writes: "In general, the picturesque landscape aspires to the condition of a vignette – that is, a centralized composition in a shallow space whose boundaries are undefined or shade off . . . The vignette was well fitted to satisfy the double requirements of nature and imagination: its

centralized composition focuses on objects and natural details at the same time that its undefined borders suggest an indefinite extension of the imagination."<sup>26</sup>

Literally de-constructing the picture plane, Scott pares away the distinct divisions of foreground, middle and background proposed by picturesque formulae, rendering them as stand-alone printed forms. Not only does he freely mix found and printed plates with hand-formed components, he mixes realistic and fantasy elements, tin glaze and porcelain materials, 'straight' images and 'confectured' collage. He draws on strategies used in both commercial kitsch, for

example souvenir wares, sophisticated graphic art, for example cubist collage, and digitally rendered images. Processing and reading these works requires an exchange of ordinary logic for a more fluid, heterogeneous approach that engages the imagination.

In the 18th century, following the examples of America and France, British gentry feared democratic revolution and the loss of privilege based on conservative values and land ownership. Pastoral images sought to soothe these fears with reassuring images of stable country life. Today, we have different fears: global warming, genetic modification, radiation poisoning and unfettered capital that operates independently of local control. These are fears Scott aims to explore rather than soothe. Standing a romantic graphic tree against a realistically rendered power plant or posing cows, complete with genetic identification tags and monstrosly engorged udders on delicate beds of printed forage, Scott forces us to acknowledge the degree to which we repress, naturalize or simply fail to notice the ubiquitous presence of industry and capital in our midst.

Imparting images of machines that empower as well as threaten us on to dinnerware, he admits contagion into the domestic sphere, where ideology has its origin and most potent hold. That these works are also extremely beautiful heightens the ambivalence and conflict we experience viewing them. Scott makes us recognize the degree to which we are prepared to rationalize and compromise in order to preserve our fantasy intact. Although subtle, Paul Scott's confected landscapes and contemporary vignettes expose contradictions and critique ideological fallacies, making them most political works.

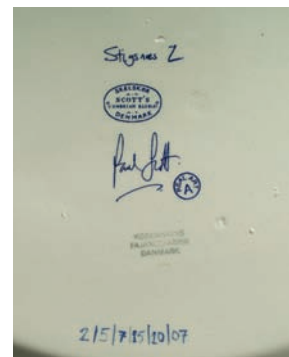
#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Scott exhibited *Confected Landscapes, Cultural Wallpaper and Contemporary Vignettes* alongside objects from the MMU Special Collections as part of his PhD requirement at the Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, Manchester, 19 November 2007 – 1 February 2008.
2. Stephanie Brown, "Pioneer Printer," *Keramik Magazine* 3 (2001), p. 33.
3. Paul Scott, Unpublished notes for PhD.
4. H. A. Crosby Forbes, *Hills and Streams: Landscape Decoration on Chinese Export Blue and White Porcelain* (Milton, MA: International Exhibitions Foundation and China Trade Museum, 1982), p.1.
5. Ann Bermingham, "English Landscape Drawing Around 1795," in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.8 6.
6. Quoted in Jo Dahn, *Remember me when this you see* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales and Ceredigion Museum, 2002).
7. Scott discusses these processes in *Ceramics and Print*, second edition, pp. 19-24.
8. Paul Scott, Personal interview, 17 July 2007.
9. Paul Holdway and David Drakard, Spode, Transfer Printed Ware 1784-1833 (Old Martlesham, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 2002) p. 77, quoted in Scott, note 3. *A Potters Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 101, quoted in Scott, note 3.
10. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation*:

*Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 21. I have used this text to discuss the concept of remediation and craft more generally in "Remediating Craft," in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice* ed. Ruth Chambers, Amy Gogarty and Mireille Perron (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007) pp. 91-110.

11. Bolter and Grusin, p. 273.
12. Ibid. p. 34.
13. Oscar Wilde, "Art and the Handcraftsman," in *Essays and Lectures by Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen and Co, 1908). 07 November 2008, <<http://www.burrows.com/founders/art.html>>
14. *A Potters Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 101, quoted in Scott, note 3.
15. Paul Scott, email to author 7 October 2008.
16. Ibid.
17. For example, Scott has used spray paint and stencils to apply willow motifs to buildings, an approach that permitted him to explore issues of scale and architecture not possible within the confines of domestic ceramics.
18. Fiona Venables suggests this in her essay accompanying Scott's exhibition *Paul Scott: Cumbrian Blue(s)* (Carlisle: Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, 24 May – 13 July 2003): "The exhibition incorporates Scott's *Sellafield* pieces, his *Foot and Mouth* works and a host of objects commemorating political situations and events that have moved the artist over the years, from Apartheid in South Africa to the treatment of Taliban and Al Qaida prisoners at Camp X-Ray in Cuba."
19. In *Landscape and Power*, note 5, p. 5.
20. Jo Dahn, note 6.
21. Personal interview 17 July 2007, Paul Scott has expressed agreement with a proposition put forth by Paul Mathieu that ceramic objects serve as essential archives of historical events and forces. See Paul Mathieu, "The Brown Pot and the White Cube" in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, note 10, p. 50.
22. See Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
23. Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, pp. 10-11.
24. Geoffrey Young, *Country Eye: A Walker's Guide to Britain's Traditional Countryside* (London: George Philip, 1991) pp 72-73.
25. Paul Scott, Personal interview 17 July 2007.
26. Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, p. 85.

Amy Gogarty is an artist and a writer based in Vancouver, Canada. She has published over eighty critical essays and reviews of visual art and recently co-edited *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007).



**Backstamp.** Paul Scott.