

*By Emma Crichton-Miller*

# PAST TENSE PRESENT GAME





As you come through the door of the London home artist Bouke de Vries shares with his partner, writer and jewellery designer Miles Chapman, you are confronted by a great wall of china. Beautifully mounted, with a nod to the famous porcelain displays of Daniel Marot, interior designer to the Dutch King William III of England, are dozens of pieces of white Delftware, from the 18th through to the 20th century. Plates, colanders, little pigment pots with pigment still inside them, china cows, water cress dishes and apothecaries' alberellos, candle sticks and sweetmeat dishes, these are pieces that, unlike the prized blue and white Delftware, would have been bought for humble homes, and, once damaged, tossed into the rubbish. As you look more closely, you see that most of the pieces have been broken and delicately repaired, some with gold leaf, transforming them from trash to precious objects, and that far from a uniform colour, their white glazes range from experimental bluey grey through to almost pink. The wall, created by de Vries, is a love poem to ceramics, and above all, to the ceramics of his birthplace, Holland. As he explains, in his soft Dutch voice, 'Pottery is one of the only things that a culture leaves behind, because it survives. And then every culture is identifiable by their ceramics, they all have a style.'

De Vries, originally a fashion designer, working alongside Zandra Rhodes, John Galiano and Stephen Jones, is today a highly-skilled conservator of ceramics, working for museums, dealers and collectors, and regularly entrusted with everything from a Han dynasty figure to a Grayson Perry vase. Over the last four years, however, he has won growing recognition for his art works. With these, far

from pursuing the redemption of restoration, he instead takes delight in disaster, turning broken ceramics of many kinds – Meissen, Kang-Xi Chinese porcelain, continental bisque from the 19th century, Worcester soft-paste porcelain from the 18th century – into beautiful, haunting, and sometimes mischievously irreverent sculptures. As he recounts 'Some people would say, that's not worth restoring, a little Meissen figure three hundred years old, too damaged to repair. But I started thinking, rather than throwing it away, what can I do with it, to give it a new story and a new life, to make something positive of the accident, which is perhaps the most dramatic thing that has happened to it?' Starting with *Portrait of the Artist 1*, (2008) a poetic arrangement of fragments of a 20th century white bisque figure of a Dutch boy, a tiny red heart hanging in their midst, de Vries has turned his skills increasingly to the creation of extraordinary exploded ceramic sculptures, often placed in vitrines or bell jars, created from broken porcelain and other found objects and materials. In *No No No* (2009), for instance, the broken pieces of a French 19th century Samson porcelain figure are rearranged, the porcelain hair extended into a beehive, the figure's lips painted red, to create a dancing Amy Winehouse figure, the lyrics 'NO NO NO' from her song 'Rehab' inscribed on the glass dome. In *Dead Nature 4* (2009), the broken segments of a 16th century Chinese Wanli bowl are propped on perspex, and draped with drying rosehips, a dead scarab beetle nestling in a corner, in an abstract composition which evokes the original bowl but offers, instead of mere repair, a meditation on mortality and a reinterpretation of the great Dutch tradition of the still life.





In a more contemporary vein, de Vries works gleefully with damaged 20th century porcelain portrait busts of Mao Zedong, turned out in their millions in the 1960s, filling in broken sections with tiny porcelain skulls or green plastic soldiers. As de Vries comments: 'I have done horrible things to him.'

De Vries's first inspiration is the ceramics themselves: 'Even if it is broken, it still has all the skills of the original craftsman in it.' But the second is history. As he explains, although born in Utrecht, home to a significant school of Dutch painters, it is only in England that he has discovered more: 'There were all these paintings, but no teaching about Dutch history.' He has evolved his own contemporary 'vanitas' iconography of beetles, butterflies, poppy seed heads, syringes and flowers made from broken porcelain or dried petals. Encouraged by significant collectors – among them, Kay Saatchi and Anita Zabłudowicz – and substantial commissions from The Holburne Museum in Bath and Pallant House in Chichester, with the prospect of a solo show at Shizaru Gallery in Mayfair next year, de Vries's ideas are proliferating faster than he can realise them. On the floor as we leave is a curious panel of Dutch tiles. One in the middle is missing. Working with a computer animator, de Vries has made a small screen for this space, which shows a spooky animation of a pendulum with the face of a doll which ages with every tick, from baby to a skull: 'Tempus Fugit! This collaboration opens a whole new area of work. I just wish I had more time.'

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Pallant House Gallery: Stairwell commission (using the Geoffrey Freeman collection of Bow china), June 2012

The Holburne Museum:  
September 2012–January 2013

Shizaru Gallery London: solo show in January 2013, working title at the moment is Armageddon

