

# PENNY BYRNE

> BRUTAL

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Penny Byrne is a Melbourne based artist whose work is deeply engaged in the world in which we inhabit. Both alarmed and shocked by contemporary culture's blasé response to atrocities around the world, Byrne creates work that asks us as viewers to ponder the way in which we latently consume images from the daily news and our social media feeds, turning away or flicking past when we are overwhelmed by the atrocities.

## INTRODUCTION

Byrne comes from a background in ceramics conservation – indeed, many of the works on display are carefully conserved before they are re-appropriated & re-commissioned into new works of art – coupled with a fine art and legal background. She embraces this rich personal heritage to create new works filled with humour and sometimes horror. And it is this tightrope that Byrne carefully exploits - seeking to balance within this space. She simultaneously seeks to occupy the position of astute social and political commentator with the wry and witty humour of the comedienne.

There is also an element of cheeky vandalism inherent in her work – as if the conservator finally gets her revenge on the ceramic figurines she salvages from op shops and e-bay by contorting them, adding, subtracting and layering them with paint, plaster and epoxy. As Edward Colless' writes, "What attracts her to these decorative fantasy figures is their attitude of jilted pomposity, their disowned cultural pretensions of elegance and etiquette". Reconfiguring the ornaments of others is in a way a kind of homage to the discarding nature of contemporary culture – at one point, in their lives, these figurines were once sitting proudly on someone's mantle or locked behind a glass cabinet as an object of beauty. With Byrne's intervention they get to come out and play, to challenge and to disarm with their own voices.

Byrne's modified figurines force us to stare back at children who become collateral damage. Caught up in a conflict not of their making, they are forced to face horrors that we would protect our children from. She uses images that saturate the public domain as her source material, recreating certain moments that capture her attention. On our TVs, phones or computers, these all too frequent stories arrest our attention and shock us with the horrors being experienced by children in conflict zones. Yet equally as shocking is how accustomed we are to seeing these atrocities - so much so that many of us simply swipe, scroll or switch channels without any real concern.



*Omran* (detail), 2016.  
Photograph: Matthew Stanton.

In *Ohmran*, a boy covered in blood and dust sits silently staring back at us. In *Aleppo*, a child is carried to safety. The children covered in blood, look towards us, hopeful and unsure about their futures.

These frozen figures make us uneasy – we can turn away from these images on our nightly news but these small domestic figures have a pull and remind us that for many, this is lived. They can't turn away and their silence is the only response to the horror and trauma of what they have witnessed.

These children sit in unnerving contrast to the machinations of the battlefield as aptly caught in *Mother Russia vs. Uncle Sam*. Here Mother Russia demurely looks away from her male suitor to focus on the gun in her hand, while Uncle Sam stares poker faced back at her whilst tightly gripping a toy soldier in his hand. A small Syrian flag sits atop a vase on the table surrounded by other toy soldiers poised in a bitter game of chess. Here, Byrne aptly captures the game of cards being played on the international political stage, with the horror of the daily impact of war on the people living in such places seemingly overlooked.

This exhibition, *Brutal*, explores tough issues from the ongoing conflict in Syria, the lives of refugees held in detention, to institutional abuse of children and the shaming and silence of victims suffering at the hands of perpetrators. These works make us feel uncomfortable and awkward. They remind each of us that behind every image on the screen there are people who are simply born into a war torn country, or placed in a position where trust was betrayed; our fellow humans whose lives have not remained untouched.

As viewers of this work, we are left to ponder how it is that this artist can ask such big questions of us by using these disarming and unpretentious ceramic and plaster figurines. Finally, out from behind the glass cabinets of our grandmother's houses, these figures enter a new space where they take centre stage to show up the inadequacies and failings of humanity.

Melinda Martin  
Director  
Linden New Art  
January 2017

<sup>1</sup> Edward Colless, "Penny Byrne: The Porcelain Vandal", *Art Collector*, Issue 64, April-June 2013.

Cover Image: *#EuropaEuropa* (detail), 2015. Photograph: Angela Baily.



*Aleppo* (installation view), 2017.  
Photograph: David Marks Photography.



MOTHER RUSSIA



*Mother Russia vs Uncle Sam, 2017.*  
Photograph: Matthew Stanton.

Penny Byrne was born in Mildura, in the top north-west corner of Victoria. Her mother's family first settled in the area in the 1880's. The Mildura Sculpture Triennials had a significant influence on Byrne during her childhood in 1970's, as these exhibitions exposed her to artworks that pushed the boundaries of popular taste and aesthetics.

Now based in the northern Melbourne suburb of Thornbury, Byrne works both as an artist and as an Objects Conservator, specializing in ceramics. She has achieved a Bachelor of Arts (Ceramics) at RMIT University, Melbourne, a Graduate Diploma in Ceramics Conservation and Restoration at West Dean College, United Kingdom (during which she undertook an internship at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and a Bachelor of Laws Degree, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Byrne's art career started at Linden New Art, when she entered an artwork into the 2005 Linden Postcard Show! Her work *It's Murder on the Dance Floor* won a prize and was reproduced on a postcard available for sale at Linden.

Her career has had numerous highlights since that first exhibition, including her participation in the 2015 Venice Biennale (where she enjoyed the opportunity to work with glass maestros at the Venetian island of Murano), a collaboration with Urban Art Projects in 2014, with whom she produced some large bronze works, and participation in Melbourne Now, 2013-14.

Her new exhibition at Linden New Art, Penny Byrne – Brutal is a response to how she presently views the world around her. As the title suggests, Byrne addresses some hard-hitting subject matter in this exhibition, including issues such as the ongoing Syrian war crisis, the mishandling of pedophilia within the Catholic church, climate change, Australia's treatment of refugees, the migrant crisis in Europe and 'slut shaming' on social media.

Byrne says that she is pleased to have returned to smaller scale works following the large bronze and glass works that she produced in Venice and Shanghai in recent years. She says that while her new works may be smaller in scale, they "still pack a punch, but with a healthy dose of humor thrown in for good measure."





(L-R) *Narco Trafficantes*, 2017; *Trunk Call*, 2017; *Bird Flu H5N6*, 2017; *Iceberg Water*, 2017 (installation view).

Photograph: David Marks Photography.



(L-R) *#EurpoaEurpoa*, 2017; *Omrán*, 2017 (installation view).  
Photograph: David Marks Photography.



(L-R) *Putin's Poodle*, 2017; *Mother Russia vs Uncle Sam*, 2017 (installation view).  
Photograph: David Marks Photography.

Penny Byrne's sculptural works are politically charged, highly engaging and often disarmingly humorous. Using materials such as bronze, glass, vintage porcelain figurines and found objects, Byrne's work presents an ongoing inquiry into popular culture and international politics. Her background in ceramics conservation and the law informs her practice.

Byrne's ability to work across varying mediums exemplifies how she challenges the boundaries and assumptions around her art.

## BIOGRAPHY

In 2015 Byrne exhibited in Glasstress Gotika a collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale.

Born in Mildura in regional Australia in 1965, Byrne now lives and works in Melbourne.

[www.pennybyrne.artist.com](http://www.pennybyrne.artist.com)



PENNY BYRNE in her studio, 2015.  
Photograph: Penny Stevens.

## LIST OF WORKS

### *I Heart Nauru*, 2017

Repurposed porcelain figurine & enamel paints, 140 x 90 x 90mm

### *#EuropaEuropa*, 2015

Repurposed antique ceramic blue & white serving platter, vintage porcelain figurines, epoxy putty, epoxy resin & enamel paints, 280 x 720 x 380mm  
Courtesy Michael Reid, Berlin

### *Omran*, 2016

Repurposed vintage ceramic figurine, enamel paints, French chalk, epoxy resin, orange spray enamel & child's chair,

580 x 320 x 380mm

### *Shame*, 2016

Repurposed vintage plaster figurine, epoxy putty, vintage Action Man sunglasses, epoxy resin, acrylic paints, enamel paints & vintage crucifix, 410 x 120 x 110mm

### *Narco Trafficantes*, 2017

Repurposed vintage figurines, vintage Action Man machine guns, plastic zip lock bags, Paraloid B72 resin pellets, assorted bits of bling, epoxy resin & enamel paints, 370 x 280 x 140mm

### *Trunk Call*, 2017

Repurposed porcelain wall-mounted elephant head, epoxy putty & enamel paints, 330 x 240 x 220mm

### *Bird Flu H5N6*, 2017

Repurposed vintage porcelain figures, epoxy putty & enamel paints, 140 x 110 x 60mm

### *Iceberg Water*, 2017

Bottled Iceberg Water, porcelain polar bear, Swarovski teardrop crystal, epoxy resin & glass dome, 530 x 340 x 430mm, Edition 1 of 2 plus 1 Artist Proof

### *#SlutShaming*, 2017

Restored and repurposed antique plaster figurine, 420 x 160 x 140mm

### *Aleppo*, 2017

Repurposed antique plaster figurine, enamel paints & spray fixative, 480 x 210 x 140mm

### *Putin's Poodle*, 2017

Repurposed antique bisque porcelain figurine, re-painted Donald Trump bobble head, epoxy resin, enamel paints & Russian badge, 440 x 170 x 120mm

### *Mother Russia vs Uncle Sam*, 2017

Repurposed vintage figurine group, plastic soldiers, plastic machine guns, Uncle Sam, Syrian & Russian badges, epoxy resin & enamel paints, 170 x 280 x 130mm

### *Operation Falconer (Iraq Campaign)*, 2015

Repurposed vintage ceramic figurine, found materials for prosthetic limbs, Operational Service medal, epoxy resin & enamel paints, 720 x 400 x 400mm

### *Sands of Gallipoli (Gallipoli Porn?)*, 2015

Repurposed vintage ceramic urn, donated ANZAC Day badges, collected ANZAC Day memorabilia, Rising Sun hat badge, miniature Gallipoli campaign badges, paper collage, emu feathers, ANZAC Day poppies, custom plinth, PVA & epoxy resin, 1900 x 700 x 330mm

### *Operation Slipper (Afghanistan Campaign)*, 2015

Repurposed vintage ceramic figurine, rivet repairs, found materials for prosthetic limbs, Operational Service medal, epoxy resin & enamel paints, 720 x 400 x 400mm

All sizes measure height x width x depth. All images courtesy of the artist.



#EuropaEuropa (detail), 2016.  
Photograph: Angela Baily.

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