

BOUKE DE VRIES MATRIX 180 WAR AND PIECES

OCTOBER 4, 2018 - JANUARY 6, 2019
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

FIGURE 1. BOUKE DE VRIES, *WAR AND PIECES*, 2012. 18TH-, 19TH-, AND 20TH-CENTURY PORCELAIN, PLASTIC, SPRAYED PLASTER, ACRYLIC, STEEL, ALUMINUM, GILDED BRASS, AND MIXED MEDIA, 300 X 60 IN. (VARIABLE). COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FERRIN CONTEMPORARY. PHOTO CREDIT: TIM HIGGINS.



Futility. Bravery. Senselessness. Nobility. Randomness. Sacrifice. Tradition. Glory. Myth-making.

—Bouke de Vries

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sculpted sugar table decoration and its porcelain successors, especially at Meissen, Germany, fascinate artist and ceramics conservator Bouke de Vries. Elaborate figural ensembles decorated banquet tables during the dessert course. Knowledgeable dinner guests would have been familiar with the complex narratives and political messages that they often conveyed (fig. 2). One ornate example is the Wadsworth Atheneum's Meissen *The Judgment of Paris* table center (fig. 3), which was originally part of an ensemble that included other mythological figures.

COVER: BOUKE DE VRIES, *WAR AND PIECES*, 2012 (DETAIL).

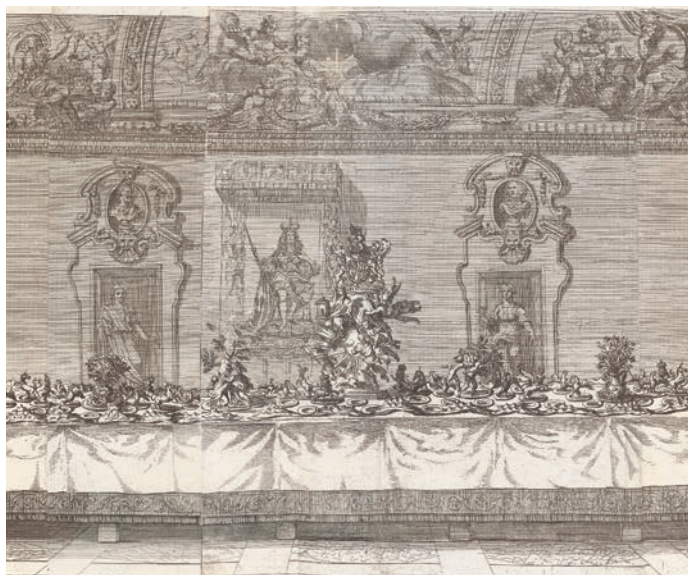


FIGURE 2. ARNOLD VAN WESTERHOUT, *TABLE SETTING FOR A BANQUET GIVEN IN ROME BY ROGER PALMER, EARL OF CASTLEMAINE*, c. 1687 (DETAIL). ETCHING FROM "AN ACCOUNT OF HIS EXCELLENCE ROGER EARL OF CASTLEMAINE'S EMBASSY, FROM...JAMES THE 11TH...TO HIS HOLINESS INNOCENT XI." GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (83-B3076).



FIGURE 3. *THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS*, c. 1762. GERMAN, MEISSEN PORCELAIN FACTORY. HARD-PASTE PORCELAIN. WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF J. PIERPONT MORGAN, 1917.1482.

War and Pieces, Bouke de Vries' first large-scale installation, offers a contemporary interpretation of this tradition. According to de Vries, it is a "war banquet, staging a battle royal between ancien-régime sugar and revolutionary porcelain, referencing the 18th- and 19th-century tradition of grand banquets given on the eve of battle."¹ The artist had read William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and was struck by the scene of the Duchess of Richmond's ball, held on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo. During the ball, the Duke of Wellington and his generals were suddenly called away to fight Napoleon, who had just crossed the border into Belgium. And so de Vries decided to stage a battle on the table, not to celebrate war but to expose its inevitable chaos and futility.

In the center of a twenty-six-foot table is a nuclear mushroom cloud composed of miniature porcelain figures and fragments. Porcelain skulls and broken figures of the Chinese Buddhist goddess of compassion, Guanyin, join unfinished Hummel porcelain figures of children. Fragments are brought together that are sourced from dealers and flea markets, or found in containers of wasters at the old German Hummel factory site and sold on eBay (figs. 4–5). Porcelain figures of the crucified Christ hang from two sides, and the top is a figure of a crying angel. For de Vries, the mushroom cloud is the ultimate centerpiece, an image that is both beautiful and horrible at the same time.



FIGURE 4. BOUKE DE VRIES, *WAR AND PIECES*, 2012 (DETAIL).

FIGURE 5. "JUST DUCKY," 2018. GERMAN, RÖDENTAL. M. J. HUMMEL MANUFACTORY. PORCELAIN. © HUMMEL.



"I always find it fascinating how these ugly things can have a strange beauty about them as well. So I'm trying to make this mushroom cloud beautiful like porcelain with little figures. Everything is being sucked up into it—all the figures, animals, the Guanyins, everything is being sucked up."²

The war turns the table into a wasteland. Six battle scenes flank the centerpiece, and white porcelain shards are strewn everywhere. In the role of conservator, de Vries usually repairs porcelain, but in this case he made the shards by breaking inexpensive IKEA plates, which are mass-produced in China. The irony of how much the value of porcelain has changed since the eighteenth century is not lost on the artist. He shares that with the viewer by putting one of the fragments upside down to reveal the IKEA logo.

The battles are fought by myriad miniature figures, the larger ones made of sugar-coated plaster, molded from eighteenth-century figures of Mars and Minerva made at the Derby Porcelain Factory in England (figs. 6-7). Yet there is something amiss: the battling figures have mutated into cyborgs with colorful, plastic "bionic" limbs and heads from broken Transformer toys. They create a striking contrast to the white sugar and porcelain and signal that the battle is between sugar, porcelain, and plastic.³ These plastic elements—modern interlopers—underscore the toxic effects of this non-biodegradable material.

While MATRIX 180 *War and Pieces* marks its debut in the Americas, it has been on view before. The artist customizes the display to fit each venue, working with the curators and collections, responding to each site's region and its history, and interacting with the interior settings. At Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin (2013), the tabletop installation was augmented by eighteenth-century cutlery decorated with scenes from Catherine the Great's campaign against the Ottoman Empire, creating an encounter between the new centerpiece and one of its historic precursors. At the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (2016-17), de Vries created custom cutlery with resin handles fashioned like

FIGURES 6-7. FIGURES OF MINERVA AND MARS, c. 1765. ENGLISH. DERBY. WILLIAM DUESBURY & CO. SOFT-PASTE PORCELAIN. VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, 768-1877 AND 28-1874.



Khaleshnikov AK-47 rifles. At the English National Trust property Berrington Hall, Herefordshire, England (2016), de Vries decorated simple white plates with transfer-printed images of ships, echoing the many maritime battles being fought in the paintings on the adjacent dining room walls. At another National Trust house, Belton Hall, Nottingham, England (2017), the artist had the cutlery cast in bronze and then gold plated—the ultimate status symbol (fig. 8).

In Hartford, the artist called for a room bathed in dark green, the walls hung densely with mirrors and empty frames from the collection, the table covered in a matching dark green cloth and set with Chinese plates and his gilded cutlery. The white porcelain sculpture glimmers and is reflected in the surrounding mirrors. Displaying porcelain in front of or on mirrors was common in the eighteenth century, when the only light in the evening came from candles. The reflective nature of the porcelain and mirror glass enhanced the candlelight, while the flickering candlelight enlivened the porcelain and mirrors, combining to create a magical dining setting. But the porcelain creations on earlier tables would have been either lighthearted fantasies or symbolic presentations imbued with political narratives. None would have confronted the horrors of war, the subject of Bouke de Vries' *War and Pieces*.

FIGURE 8. BOUKE DE VRIES, KHALESHNIKOV CUTLERY, 2016 (DETAIL). BRONZE, GOLD PLATE. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FERRIN CONTEMPORARY.



Bouke de Vries' *War and Pieces* is the artist's most ambitious work to date. The piece is layered with meaning. It is about historical table culture of the European elite and the eighteenth century's new luxury material, porcelain. It is about our current culture of waste and mass production, and the clash between traditional materials and new contaminating interlopers. It is about reuse, repurpose, and renewal, as the artist uses broken ceramics to create something entirely new, bringing these once beautiful pieces back to life. And it is a commentary on the follies of war and the continuing impact of violence in our lives.

LINDA H. ROTH

Senior Curator and Charles C. and Eleanor Lamont Cunningham Curator of European Decorative Arts

BOUKE DE VRIES

Born 1960, Utrecht, Netherlands
Lives and works in London

Bouke de Vries began his career as a textile designer before becoming a ceramics conservator, and more recently, a contemporary artist. He now uses his skills as a restorer to take broken ceramics and present them in a new context. He has called his process "the beauty of destruction." Instead of reconstructing pieces, he deconstructs them. Instead of hiding the evidence of "this most dramatic episode in the life of a ceramic object," he gives it a new status, instilling new virtues, new values, and moving its stories forward.⁴

Every day in his practice as a private conservator de Vries was faced with issues and contradictions around perfection and worth. The artist wrote: "The Venus de Milo" is venerated despite losing her arms, but when a Meissen muse loses a finger she is rendered virtually worthless; where even an almost invisible hairline crack, a tiny rim chip or a broken finger render a once-valuable object practically worthless, literally not worth the cost of restoring. There's something incongruous about the fact that such an object, although still imbued with all the skills it took to make it—be it first-period Worcester (English, 1751-1783), Kang-Xi (Chinese, 1662-1722) or Sèvres (French, 1756 to the present)—can so easily be consigned to the dustbin of history."⁵

EDUCATION

1978-1981 Design Academy, Eindhoven, Netherlands
1981-1982 Central School of Art, London, UK
1989-1992 West Dean College, Chichester, UK

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1981-83 with Stephen Jones Millinery
1983-85 with John Galliano, Fashion Designer
1985-89 with Zandra Rhodes, Fashion Designer
1992-present independent ceramics conservator
2009-present practicing artist

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 *War and Pieces*, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL
2018-2019 *War and Pieces*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT*
2018 *Nieuw Amsterdams Peil*, Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Sometimes I Look East and Sometimes I Look West, Officine Saffi, Milan, Italy
2017-2018 *UN-Damaged*, Museo della Ceramica di Mondovi, Mondovi, Italy
2017 *War and Pieces*, Belton Hall, Nottingham, UK
Fractured Images, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, UK
2016-2017 *War and Pieces*, Harley Gallery, Workop, UK
War and Pieces, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Netherlands
2016 *War and Pieces*, Berrington Hall, Berrington, UK
Studying Human Activity Through the Recovery of Material Culture, Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2015 *War and Pieces*, Castle d'Ursel, Hingene, Belgium

2014-2015 *War and Pieces*, Château de Nyon, Switzerland
2014 *Threads of My Life*, Gloria Maria Gallery, Milan, Italy
2013 *Art South: Collaborations*, Southampton Art Gallery, Southampton, UK
War and Pieces, Outset Netherlands, Amsterdam, Netherlands
War and Pieces, Alnwick Castle, Alnwick, UK
War and Pieces, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, Germany
2012-2014 *Bow Selector*, Pallant House, Chichester, UK
2012 *War and Pieces*, The Holburne Museum, Bath, UK
2011 *Signs (Metamorphosis)*, Gloria Maria Gallery, Milan, Italy
Precious, Art at Anoushka, London, UK
Fire, Works, Vegas Gallery, London, UK
2010 *Pieces, Super Window Project*, Kyoto, Japan
A Grand Tour of My Mind, Gloria Maria Gallery, Milan, Italy
Deconstructions, Galerie Ron Mandos, Amsterdam, Netherlands

*First American showing of *War and Pieces*, which will then be exhibited at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, February 2-May 12, 2019.

Bouke de Vries/MATRIX 180/*War and Pieces* is presented in conjunction with *Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s*, October 20, 2018 to January 13, 2019.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

War and Pieces, 2012. 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-century porcelain, plastic, sprayed plaster, acrylic, steel, aluminum, gilded brass, and mixed media, 300 x 60 in. (variable). Courtesy the artist and Ferrin Contemporary

All plates, mirrors, and frames are in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

War and Pieces detail installation images superimposed onto images of the Hiroshima bombing. Printed vinyl mounted to acrylic mirror, site-specific installation

Plates, 18th century. Chinese. Porcelain, 9, 9 1/8, 9 1/4, and 10 1/2 in. diam. Gift of Dr. Horace S. Fuller, 1905.459, 461, 469, 472, 481, and 483

Plate, 19th century. Chinese. Porcelain, 9 1/8 in. diam. Gift of Dr. Horace S. Fuller, 1905.480

ARTIST GALLERY TALK

BOUKE DE VRIES
Thursday, October 4, 6 pm
Free with museum admission to *Art After Dark: What's on Your Dinner Table?*, 5 - 8 pm

RECEPTION AND LECTURE

Wednesday, October 10
5 pm reception and exhibition viewing
6 pm lecture
Listen to Sequoia Miller, chief curator at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, and Leslie Ferrin, director at Ferrin Contemporary, North Adams, MA, discuss contemporary ceramics. Free

CURATOR GALLERY TOURS AND FILM

LINDA H. ROTH
Sunday, October 14
1:15 pm tour
2 pm film *Vanity Fair* (2004)
Free tour with film admission
Thursday, November 8, 12 pm tour
Free with museum admission

Plate, c. 1750. Chinese. Porcelain, 9 in. diam. The Stephen Terry Collection, Gift of Mrs. Stephen Terry, 1905.676

Plate, 18th century. Chinese. Porcelain, 9 in. diam. The Stephen Terry Collection, Gift of Mrs. Stephen Terry, 1905.682

Plate, Chinese. Porcelain, 10 in. diam. Gift of Samuel P. Avery Jr., 1918.546

Plate, c. 1750. Chinese. Porcelain, 9 in. diam. Bequest of Mrs. Gurdon Trumbull, 1934.263

Plate, c. 1750. Chinese. Porcelain, 10 in. diam. Bequest of Miss Adele Kneeland, 1938.395

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

600 Main Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
(860) 278-2670

thewadsworth.org

The MATRIX program is generously supported by the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition.

Additional support for MATRIX 180 has been provided by Ferrin Contemporary.

Sustaining support for the Wadsworth Atheneum provided by Newman's Own Foundation and the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

NEWMAN'S OWN FOUNDATION
GREATER HARTFORD ARTS COUNCIL

¹ Bouke de Vries, "War and Pieces #1," The Holburne Museum, Bath, in Bouke de Vries, *War and Pieces*, 1917, p. 3.

² Interview with the artist, June 2018.

³ Bouke de Vries, *War and Pieces*, p. 3.

⁴ Bouke de Vries <http://boukedevries.com/biography/>, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.