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Paul Scott

Blue and white ware with
a political edge



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by Welsh culture

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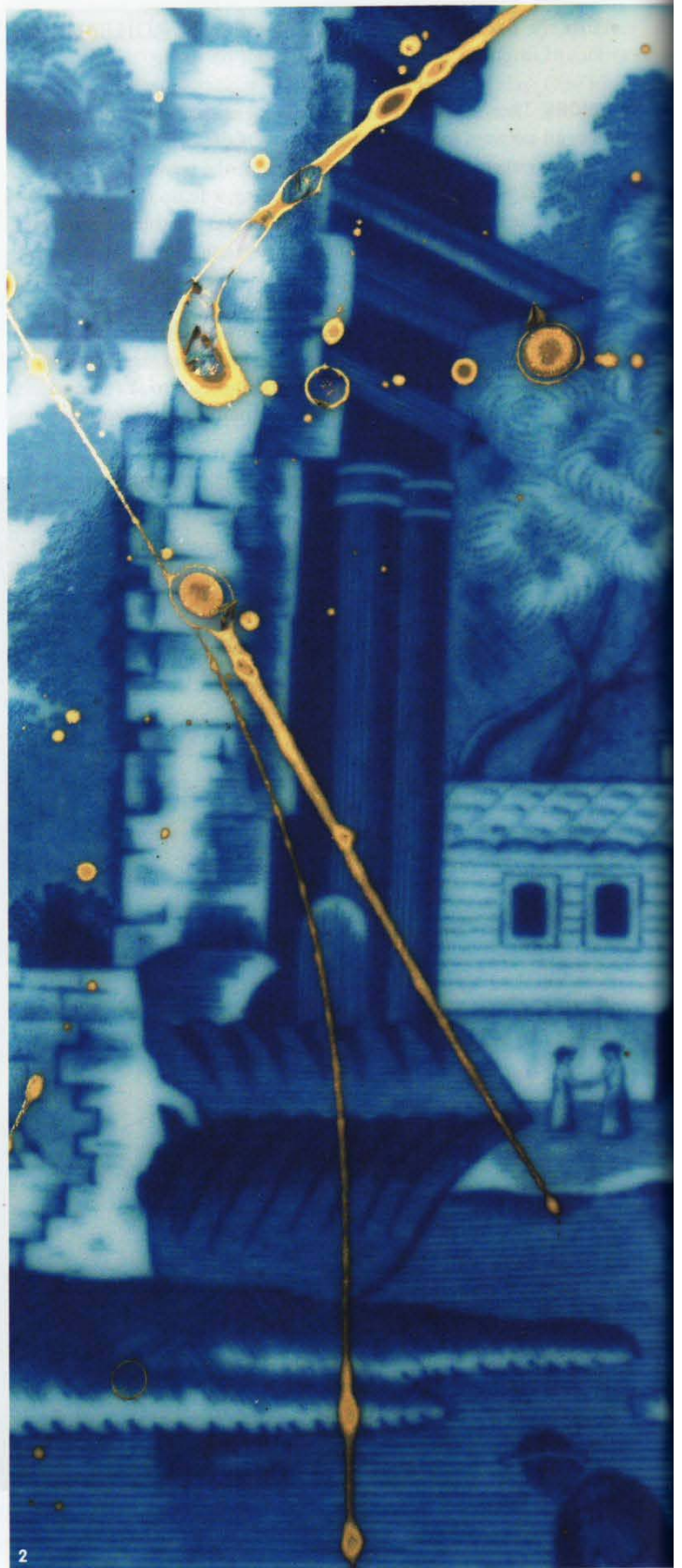
The Wild and the Natural

Andy Christian is inspired by the political context of Paul Scott's blue and white ceramics.

Paul Scott works in Cumbria in the north of England. For many people that county name recalls the lakes and fells and wild edged rural landscape. When Paul Scott, who was born in 1953, was beginning his exploration of ceramics the last coal mines were closing and the forgotten and scarcely visited towns, which skirt their way down to Bowness-on-Solway and the sea to the west of the Lake District, were in deep decline. The Windscale nuclear plant was the object of such scary stories and leaks that it eventually tried to rid itself of its discredited past by changing its name to the more emollient sounding Sellafield.

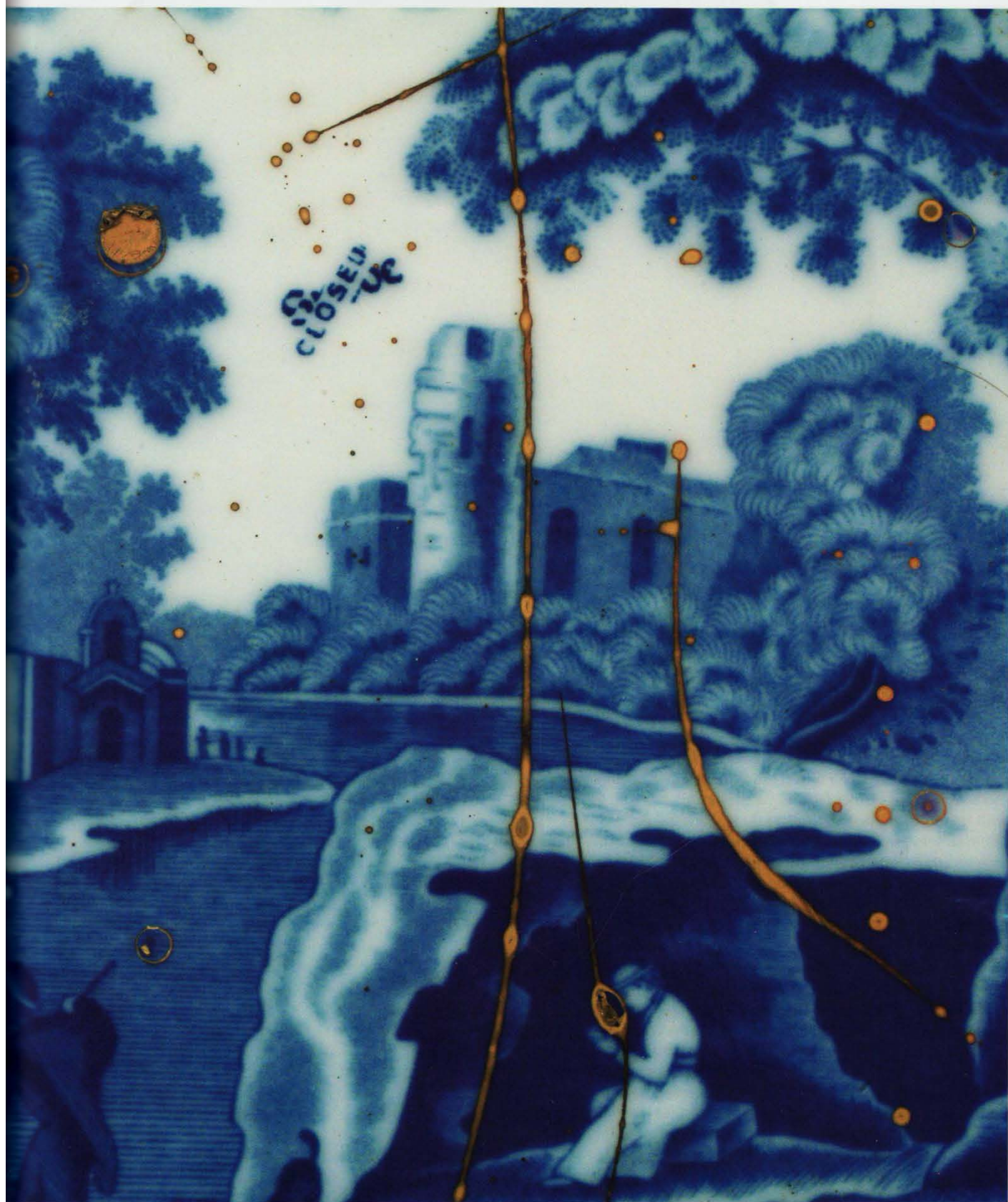
To the north of the county is Carlisle, near the border with Scotland and where the Roman Wall skirts the city and snakes its way down to Bowness-on-Solway in the west and right across to Newcastle upon Tyne to the east. Here England is at its narrowest point and the fells mark the northernmost edge of the Pennines. This is a county of huge contrasts. The Lake District has become a tourist honeypot summoning up Wordsworth's daffodils but conveniently ignoring the radical political views he held as a young man. The towns to the west and north-west of the Lakes have been marginalised and are inhabited by many who suffer severe rural poverty. The Lake District visitors are sheltered from the bleak realities of the county's fringes.

It is in this county that Paul Scott works at his own political stance in the ceramics he produces. His work unfolds slowly. There is something beguilingly disarming about the traditional blue and white ware with which he works; something that wrong-foots us. It reminds me of the story Wilfrid Roberts, an earlier Member of Parliament for Carlisle, told me. He was a radical Liberal but later



1 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Spode Works
Closed, Shops Closed, inglaze decal
 and gold on bone china salvaged from
 abandoned Spode factory, 2009-10, Ø30cm
 2 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Spode Works

Closed, Casserole (detail), inglaze decal
 and gold lustre on Spode's Italian porcelain
 casserole dish (marked 'Made in Czech
 Republic') salvaged from kiln area at
 abandoned Spode factory, 2009, L30cm





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changed to Labour. At an election meeting, after making public his change of allegiance, he noticed the front row had been taken by a robust line of his farmer friends. As they sat silently and grim faced with their arms folded he thought there was something odd. It was not until some way through his speech that he realised they were each wearing their coats inside out. As he realised this their deeply wounding blow was far worse than being heckled.

BLUE AND WHITE Paul Scott's work lands similar punches. By choosing to work with industrially produced blue and white ware he has elected to undermine the cosiness, the decorative conceit that these wares can represent. But the commentary he makes is necessarily more complex. The history and the origins of blue and white wares cannot be ignored, nor can the current state of its production. The overriding irony is that the West was so enamoured of the imported Chinese blue and white ware in the seventeenth century that Meissen began to make it in the early 1700s. By the middle of the century it was 'copied' in Delft and in Worcester.

Today few British industrial potteries make blue and white ware and we are importing it from China once more.

Taking the traditional comforting blue and white plate as his starting point Scott has manipulated it to give it his own political charge. These plates were already political in representing a complacent conservatism, a celebration of an imaginary rural idyll in portraying a cloistered vision of the English countryside. In the case of the Willow Pattern it was a story of Chinese mythology, the lives of two lovers, invented in the West two hundred years ago. Art and craft is inevitably political because it is made by those whose blinkered vision denies the harsher realities of this world.

Amongst others Grayson Perry, like Scott, has chosen to bring this to our attention. Scott chooses his canvas carefully. The imagery of ruralism sits there on the blue and white plates and, just like the Lake District itself, it blanks out the low flying jets, the slag heaps, the threat of nuclear fallout and the dangers of foot and mouth disease. To this Scott either adds imagery or erases parts of it. These acute alterations and additions are the backbone of his work. More

3 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Spode Works Closed, Tianshan/Xingye, inglaze decal collage and gold lustre on Chinese porcelain bowl from abandoned Spode factory, 2009, Ø20cm 4 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Spode Works Closed, Kiln, inglaze decal on Spode's Italian porcelain

casserole dish (marked 'Made in Czech Republic') salvaged from kiln area at abandoned Spode factory, 2009, L30cm 5 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Willow (after Bernard Leach), screen-printed, handbuilt form, wood (salt) fired (at ICS Kecskemét Hungary) with gold lustre, 2008-10, H20cm



recently he has used the fragments and part-printed plates rescued from the now closed Spode factory to mark its passing.

THE INDUSTRIAL DEVIL Most of the pottery factories in Stoke-on-Trent that Bernard Leach railed about in a letter to Leonard Elmhirst in the 1930s as being 'the home of the industrial devil' have now gone. And with them have disappeared all the skill, technology and craft that these 'devils' held. Leach's letter was occasioned because Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst sponsored his son David Leach to attend a Pottery Manager's course at North Staffordshire Technical College to gain the technical and practical knowledge the craft movement so sorely lacked. In yet another irony the knowledge David Leach acquired at Stoke put the Leach Pottery in St Ives on a much more technically sound and efficient footing, probably preventing its closure and allowing Bernard Leach to carry on with his invective.

Scott has little sympathy for the affected orientalism of the Leach tradition. Recently he has handmade and even wood-fired a series of free-standing trees including a 'Bernard Leach Tree'. Some of these are placed by the plates like stage props, sentinels or sentries in his altered worlds. In the plates recalling the devastation and horror of foot and mouth he has simply removed the cows, leaving a white



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6 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Vindsäter – Windmills, inglaze decal on Rörstrand Vindsäter plate (made c.1938), 2009, Ø21cm 7 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) Foot and Mouth series – Spode's Blue Room, Milk Maid No. 3, partially erased Spode plate, with inglaze decals, 2004, Ø25cm 8 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Spode Works

Closed, inglaze decal and gold lustre on Spode's Italian porcelain casserole dish (marked 'Made in Czech Republic') salvaged from kiln area at abandoned Spode factory, 2009, L30cm 9 Scott's Cumbrian Blue(s) – Vindsäter – Jet, inglaze decal on Rörstrand Vindsäter plate (made c.1938), 2009, H16cm

Exhibitions *Cumbrian Blue(s)*, CAA, London, 22 July–22 August 2010; *Fired Up: Ceramics and Meaning*, Gallery Oldham, Lancashire, 17 July–14 November 2010; *Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Movement*, Millennium Court Arts Centre, Portadown, 4 August–25 September 2010

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For an aural version of the story of the Willow Pattern visit www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/audio/willow/



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shadow. Inserted factory chimneys loom over water meadows. Screaming jet fighters blast their way through scudding cotton wool clouds and modified cows with swollen udders graze for our gratification. Sentiment, for Scott, is the very least of his concerns. While studio ceramics, among other sorts of making, are lauded in the new galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the skilled industrial workers of the Potteries have been laid off, three hundred years of expertise has seeped away. No plaudits for their workers, just the dole queue.

TRUTH TELLING Much of the power of Scott's work lies in the accuracy of his alterations. It is in his truth telling. The tendency of cobalt to bleed helps to invoke that filleted mysticism of nature's idyll that he so effectively undermines. It stirs memories of the paintings of Corot and Claude. The romance of the Willow Pattern story, invented by an English manufacturer as a marketing device, has endured, and it is probably the most widely recognised ceramic decoration of all time. Not everyone knows the narrative on the plates but they know the

name of the pattern and, oddly, these are regarded as unquestionably and comfortably English as a game of cricket or a cup of tea.

In his own terms Scott has contributed by 'confecting'; bringing together the vintage and the modern. He subverts successfully, contributing a line of enquiry and a political stand that has won him few friends either with craft potters or with fashion-smitten collectors. The ceramics he makes hold the power to make us uncomfortable in posing questions about our complacency over the loss of industrial skills and the economic and social consequences for those people who were engaged in production. The ideas of 'wild and natural landscapes' are challenged by Scott, who prefers to focus on our ill-considered interventions and our exploitations.

In this post-modern context the question might be who is the radical? Is there radicalism still in studio potters expressing themselves through the hand-wrought or is that now a romantic dream world as we head for increasing nuclear madness and laying waste to the earth's scarce resources? Paul Scott will surely have something to 'confect' about that. 