

‘Father of Australian pottery’? A big call, but this exhibition is adventurous

By [John McDonald](#)

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When Bundanon received \$2.4 million in the federal budget, it was widely viewed as an endorsement of this rural arts oasis, gifted to the nation by Arthur and Yvonne Boyd in 1993. The unspoken reason for the grant was sheer survival: like so many institutions under the Morrison government, Bundanon, located in bushland near Nowra, had been the recipient of tremendous hype but inadequate operating expenses.

The new government is swiftly learning just how much it costs to fund major cultural assets, and the price of long-term neglect. The NGA has been stealing the headlines with its need for \$265 million worth of urgent repairs, but almost every institution has its own hard-luck story. The problem is that governments habitually look to art museums for trouble-free, good news stories, while funds are channelled into big ticket areas such as health, education, defence, and so on.



Merric Boyd's drawings and pottery at Fantastic Forms, Bundanon.

Labor has signalled a different approach with the release of a National Cultural Policy, and the appointment of MP Susan Templeman as Special Envoy for the Arts. Templeman was

present last weekend for the 30th anniversary of the acceptance of the Boyds' gift, and the launch of a new exhibition, *Fantastic Forms*, which features the drawings and pottery of Merric Boyd in association with the work of three contemporary artists.

Over the past three decades Bundanon has provided residencies for hundreds of artists, writers, musicians and other performers, welcoming more than 50,000 visitors since two new buildings were opened last year. It's the property's huge potential that encouraged CEO Rachel Kent to leave her previous job as senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

There was a similar attraction for chief curator Sophie O'Brien, who has relished the opportunity to put together the kind of edgy exhibitions one rarely finds in the major art museums. The challenge is to build an original show around a permanent collection that contains thousands of pieces by Arthur Boyd, friends and family. The first dedicated exhibition, *Impulse to Action*, drew on Arthur's designs for the ballet *Elektra* (1963) and incorporated multimedia works by 13 contemporary artists. This was a radical beginning when one might have expected a softer, more user-friendly opening.



Stephen Benwell's *Finger to Lip*, 2016.

In *Fantastic Forms*, O'Brien and Boe-Lin Bastian have taken another adventurous turn, by asking three diverse artists – Nabilah Nordin, Stephen Benwell and Rubyrose Bancroft - to respond to the work of Merric Boyd (1888-1959).

On the strength of this exhibition, Merric deserves to be much better known, or at least better remembered. An obituary referred to him as “the father of Australian pottery”, which is a big call. He was a pioneer of “art” or “studio” pottery in this country, meaning that everything was done by hand, by himself. Although much of his work was functional, he could not be described as anything other than an artist.

In Christopher Tadgell’s 1975 monograph on Merric Boyd’s drawings, he quotes John Yule, who argues that Merric was not only “our first and most original art potter, but struck nearer to the heart of the Australian condition than did any of the more classical poetry of Streeton and his school.”

It takes a writer of the Angry Penguins generation to see the Heidelberg painters as classical poets rather than would-be Impressionists. One might relate the impulse behind Boyd’s early pottery to the Arts and Crafts movement, but he was too eclectic and individualistic to be pigeonholed. Looking at the drawings in this show one sees elements of Symbolism, Art Nouveau, and his own brand of home-grown absurdity. If his trees come across as abstract blobs, his animals are anthropomorphised, with hands and other human features.

This becomes less puzzling when we learn that Merric had animal nicknames for members of the family. His wife, Doris, was “Pussy”, a creature that appears with great frequency.



A still from Rubyrose Bancroft’s stop-motion and claymation film, *7 Deadly Sins*, 2020.

Merric drew prolifically throughout his life, but never more than in his final decade, when a couple of debilitating strokes made it too difficult to throw pots. He was a long-term sufferer from epilepsy and famously eccentric in his habits. He had tremendous energy, exquisite manners and a love for all living things that was unnerving in its intensity. He had fought in the trenches of World War I and carried the psychic scars typical of returned servicemen. In his youth he had studied for the priesthood, and sampled the life of a farmer, but art was his only true vocation.

Merric's compulsive creativity would be passed on to Arthur and his other children, but he was much more than the progenitor of an iconic painter. The works in this show are a revelation in their freedom of form and colour. They represent snatches of life, but also great upsurges from the unconscious, as the artist's imagination overwhelms the evidence of the senses. He may be the closest approach to Symbolism in all Australian art.

That free-flowing verve and imagination has left its imprint on the three contemporary artists in *Fantastic Forms*. Nabilah Nordin – whose work may also be seen in the lobby of the Art Gallery of NSW, as part of *The National* - has made three abstract sculptures in which forms have multiplied like a rapidly growing vine. These sculptures, which defy the viewer to discern any logical structure, sit upon enormous plinths the artist calls "stages". One piece is draped in waxy rags, another stands like Hamlet, ready to deliver a soliloquy. A third looks down upon us from a great height. One can see how Nordin may have appreciated the way Merric Boyd recognised no rules, but by moving into abstraction she takes an easier option. Her sculptures have great quirkiness and vitality, but it remains to be seen if they have staying power.



Nabilah Nordin's *Treasuredome*, 2022.

Stephen Benwell is the epitome of the “art potter”, and an excellent choice for this show. Having given up on functional pots, Benwell now makes small, sculptural figures that are fired and refired in the kiln, taking on a molten appearance. For such minuscule works these statues have a lot of character, with personality being conveyed by stance and gesture. Benwell’s colouring is so haphazard it looks as if he has simply grabbed a handful of pigment and thrown it at a piece before shoving it back into the kiln. Yet, the cumulative effect of a row of these figures is persuasive. They act as hybrids of classical statuary and the decorative ornaments and figurines made by Meissen or Wedgwood. They are parodic but also celebratory. Benwell has joked that he makes “mantelpiece art”, but these pieces would be a talking point on anyone’s mantelpiece.

The third and youngest artist is Rubyrose Bancroft. Her contribution to the exhibition is a two channel claymation film in which figures and forms are built up and taken apart in rapid succession while a frantic electronic beat burbles away in the background. It was inevitable that someone would take the word “deadly” as used in Aboriginal slang to mean something really great, and apply it to the Seven Deadly Sins. Bancroft, who is Indigenous, has done the deed. *Her 7 Deadly Sins* is fast-moving and funny, crude and unfussy. As a devout Christian, Merric Boyd might have disapproved, but as an artist he would surely have recognised a late echo of his own brand of aesthetic anarchy.