



laughing MAYBE

**Martin Poppelwell tells MARY SHANAHAN
why his art is “a bit of a shambles”.**

Photography by RICHARD BRIMER.

hawke’s Bay artist Martin Poppelwell is interested in incorporating art, and particularly his art, into everyday life. So he paints and draws, using domestic ware – and sometimes domestic wear – as his canvas.

His pottery pieces – bowls, jugs, plates – are typically handpainted with abstract linear patterns or quirky messages. The ceramics may be linked to his wallpaper and carpet designs to create an entire decor.

In a further step towards breaking down barriers between art and the consumer, his designs are also incorporated into fashion garments:

“Working with ceramics, carpets and wallpapers, treating them as art, is kind of pushing ideas quite forcefully into people’s lives if they choose to buy them.”

This applied – or function – art suits domestic spaces, he says, making it more saleable. “The artist cynically makes art that looks good on people’s sideboards,” he observes, with characteristic self-irony. Not that he would ever sneer at people who buy his work. They are taking a punt, he says, making the same leap of faith required of him in creating it.

Poppelwell welcomes opportunities to collaborate with creative people working in other fields. “It just takes



the ego out of it," he says. "You can respond to others' ideas." He was commissioned by Marilyn Sainty to produce a series of prints called "fashion advice" which appear on garments bearing the Auckland fashion designer's label. He also collaborated recently with another Aucklander, Lillian Budd, on a range of ceramics.

While the seaside settlement of Whirinaki, north of Napier, is his home base, he recently moved to Wanganui for several months so he and painter Peter Ireland can collaborate on work that will be exhibited at the Tairawhiti Museum in Gisborne. That will be one of a number of exhibitions featuring his work early next year.

Poppelwell enjoys "occupying the space of surprise". He concedes he is perverse, enjoying contradiction.

in exhibition titles such as *One Idea A Year If You Are Lucky, Busy Is No Excuse* and *Who's a clever dick then?*

He is disparaging about seriousness in art. "My work often has things written on it that deny, on one level, the value of it being an artwork. Yet it is presented in a way that is artwork."

After two years at Auckland's Elam Art School, Poppelwell left New Zealand in 1991 to teach at an art school in Harare, Zimbabwe. Also employed by the national gallery, he coordinated the Zimbabwe pavilion for the World Expo in Seville. Africa taught him to be flexible in his use of materials: with no paint available in tubes, for example, he mixed pigments and paints.

Poppelwell's signature abstract linear designs developed from responses to much of the work he saw in Europe, when he was steeped in art and architecture—space and "the way

the energy of a work by Picasso – broken pottery with a bird drawn on it. That piece and other European art influenced the direction his work was to take on his return to New Zealand.

In the early 1990s, Poppelwell began designing rugs for original rug-makers Dilana Rugs in Christchurch. Creating rugs was "dead easy," he says, "when you didn't have to make the carpet." He found the same true of pottery and is determined to become more skilled, studying for his diploma in ceramic design and production with Ross Mitchell-Anyon at Wanganui Polytechnic.

Work with clay in New Zealand, he says, and people call you a potter. "I make a lot of pottery, but I would not call myself a potter." Valuing the presentation, form and content of pottery, he continues to be challenged by the basics such as mixing glaze ingredients and firing a kiln. If he

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drawer. He sees the medium he chooses for applying those skills as less important. "I don't want people to like my work, but I do want them to respond, to feel it. I think most artists, regardless of their medium, are like that.

"Good art is powerful; it looks at the assumptions we make. My art is silly, funny, problematic, a bit of a shambles. My art is not serious, but I take my art seriously."

Poppelwell's work is available at Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, and Avid, Wellington.

His awards include a Creative New Zealand new works grant (1999), a Montana Emerging Artist Award (1998), a merit award, annual exhibition, Sergeant Gallery, Wanganui (1995) and a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council project grant (1991). This year's awards were: National Art Awards finalist, Hamilton Gardens Pavilion, Art Waikato National Contemporary Art Award finalist, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

