

A Real Working Crafts Hero

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By: Joakim Borda-Pedreira

Inspired by popular culture and commercial advertising, Nils Erichsen Martin proves that ceramic pop art has revolutionary potential, even though it favours form over content.

Nils Martin's works might at first appear to be spray-painted fibreglass plates, somewhat resembling the finish on skateboards, but on close examination one discovers that they are actually hand-drawn ceramic objects. Over the past few years Martin has experimented freely with fairly traditional ceramic techniques and given his works an unusually graphic and innovative form.

Martin typically begins by mould-casting a plate-shaped object, often a highly stylized relief or a geometric shape. He re-uses the mould, sometimes with slight variations, to produce a series of supports for sophisticated pop paintings. His images have a distinctive style that mixes elements from graffiti, skateboard culture and commercial advertising. His figures sometimes seem vaguely familiar; at other times they clearly appropriate from popular imagery and advertising. A case in point is the Liquorice Allsorts mascot Bertie Basset, who appears in the triptych *Working Craft Hero* from 2012.

In his triptych Martin uses his figures as a sort of iconographic repertoire of statements. Similar to how figures have been used by advertisers and political propagandists to sell an image or present an argument, Martin's figures convey an emblematic, if ironically ambiguous, message. Pop artists have been seen as reflecting society's values rather than challenging them, so it may be dangerous to read a political message in Martin's art. Nevertheless, notable art historians and theoreticians such as Sarat Maharaj have pointed out the revolutionary potential of pop art, which "appears as a subversive force emanating from within the very consumerist myths and representations that it calls into question".^[1] If not engaging with pop art per se, Nils Martin can at least be said to employ some of its strategies; this he does by creating his own vernacular from the visual language of advertising and emulating the characteristics of mass production. The impulses for pop art in 2013, however, are less drawn from mass-culture and more drawn from urban sub-cultures. This may also be one of the reasons why Martin's works seem so difficult to decipher.

Take for instance the triptych entitled *Stance_1* (2011): here we see hands laying out a rebus of sign-language, but is this the language of the deaf or a secret cipher used by criminal gangs? Another triptych is entitled *Keramikk eller Stål* (Ceramics or Steel), which paraphrases the famous motto of the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar: 'Silver or lead', meaning bribe or death. In any case, Nils Martin seems to have a revolutionary impulse to champion crafts and call to arms in its defence, by the very attitude of celebrating form above content.

Nils Martin, through his ceramic pop, seems also to challenge the handmade tradition of crafts by obscuring and flattening his own technique.. His precise pencil drawings appear to be spray-painted and his ceramic forms have a mass-produced look, too smooth and perfect to reveal the presence of an artist's hand. Depending on the firing temperature, Martin decorates

his ceramic objects by drawing with pencil over- or under-glaze, much like traditional ceramic decorators of faience and porcelain would do with paint and enamel. On some of the under-glaze decorated porcelain, he finally paints flat geometric shapes in ordinary acrylic paint. It is as if he wants to disrupt the skilful perspectival illusions of his drawings, flattening out the images and making them more superficial. This, it would seem, is the perfect cover for a deliciously militant attitude to crafts. In a time when the borders between crafts and fine art are increasingly blurred, Nils Martin embraces his identity as a crafts artist and invests it with rebellious spirit. In this sense Nils Martin is a true working crafts hero.

[i] Sarat Maharaj (1991). Pop Art's Pharmacies. Kitsch, Consumerist Objects and Signs. In M. Livingstone (ed.), *Pop Art: An International Perspective*. London: Royal Academy, pp. 20-23, there, p. 22.