

ART COLLECTOR

MELBOURNE ART FAIR 2025 SPECIAL EDITION



SMALL SCULPTURES, GRAND VISIONS

From his Melbourne studio, ceramic artist **Stephen Benwell** has spent fifty years transforming clay into intimate sculptures that speak to both classical traditions and contemporary desires.

WORDS: EMMA-KATE WILSON





Melbourne-based artist **Stephen Benwell** says that his artworks are open to be whatever his audiences would like them to be, but for him, they are simply ornaments to be added to the mantelpiece, though he laughs and wonders if anyone has mantelpieces anymore. Made from large slabs of clay and painted post-firing, Benwell carves lone figures balanced upon their footings. Or crafts tree-like sculptures, a thicker base travelling up to a tip with little stubs as anchors—small enough to be displayed on a mantelpiece.

A practising artist for over 50 years, Benwell shows his *Statues and Trees* with LON Gallery at the Melbourne Art Fair alongside fellow queer artist **Jeremy Eaton**. Adam Stone, director of LON Gallery, says that Benwell's artworks invites the poise and grandeur of Greco-Roman statuary while capturing a sense of the male nude and contemporary desire within the traditions and images of masculinity.

Stone adds, "Benwell is part of a small group of international trailblazing artists who introduced the post war/contemporary art world to the potential of a genre that had until then been predominantly recognised

as craft. Despite his practice being so heavily influenced by classicism, it somehow manages to feel both contemporary and timeless — his sophisticated works seem to get to the core of representing what it is to be human."

Showing consistently over five decades with accolades such as multiple Sidney Myer Awards and group exhibitions at the likes of Heide Modern and Bundanon Museum, the artist shows no signs of slowing. Along with Melbourne Art Fair, he's showing with emerging artist **Raphy** at Craft Victoria and, later in the year, a solo with LON Gallery. With minimal forms revelling in line, colour, composition, and texture, Benwell's sculptures invite a *je ne sais quoi* to the domestic; quiet and still, small and decorative.

"I try not to make my work express things," says Benwell. "I don't like too many ideas or even expression. I like them to be quiet, still, and not really saying anything in particular, just to be what they look like."

Juxtaposing the ornate, the back of the sculptures are abstract. And so, at the Melbourne Art Fair, they are presented on mantelpiece-like plinths in the middle of the space, offering the visitor 360-degree

OPPOSITE: Stephen Benwell, *Trees*, 2023. Glazed Earthenware, tallest: 26cm, smallest: 22cm

ABOVE: Stephen Benwell, *Trees*, 2023. Glazed Earthenware, tallest: 17cm, smallest: 9cm

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LON GALLERY, NARRM/MELBOURNE.

views. "It's like placing my favourite objects along a mantelpiece at home," says the artist. The objects offer a subtle link to Benwell's research into the queer pastoral elements of Arcadia. The audience is welcomed to imagine the sculptures in, say, the romantic parklands of Italian 18th century palazzos, or an old romantic English estate with rambling gardens. The sculptures are props for fantasy, a dreamy sense of desire outside of reality.

"Stephen's statues are modest in scale, yet grand in their ability to articulate a gamut of emotions under the human condition," concludes Stone. This presentation for the Melbourne Art Fair is a delight for new collectors and those with a longstanding interest in the artist's oeuvre.

Stephen Benwell is exhibiting at LON Gallery, Booth C2.
