

## **Biographical information**

Stephen Wilks was born in Somerset (GB) in 1964. He obtained his Bachelor of Fine Arts and English Literature in Canterbury (Kent) in 1987. In 1990, he went to the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris and four years later received a scholarship for the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam. In 1999, Wilks eventually settled in Berlin after being invited as an artist in the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD).

Stephen Wilks thinks nothing of criticizing modern society with his art work. He often draws comparisons between man's relation with the animal world, invariably inspired by literary sources. Inverting the traditional roles and power structures between man and beast. For example, he created a number of cloth donkeys that travelled throughout Europe on people's backs. Stephen Wilks works with numerous materials and in a range of disciplines: drawing, textile sculpture, photography and ceramics.

## **BOTTLE RIVER**

In itself, a plastic bottle is not an object to which people attach value. The bottle's contents are drunk and then thrown away. It is the epitome of consumption. We see these plastic bottles all over the world: empty, compressed, crushed or still on sale complete with contents. But what if this bottle changes its material? What if it is made from fragile, beautiful pottery? The plastic bottle and its meaning is transformed, although it retains its shape and appearance. A mechanically manufactured product remolded as a crafted work of art. This is what Stephen Wilks achieves with his *Bottle River (Vessels)*. The mass-produced, everyday object is transformed into a thing of uniqueness and beauty; from disposable object to meaningful art.

In his Berlin studio, each ceramic bottle was individually crafted. No automated process, no outsourcing, where thousands of bottles are produced simultaneously. Attention was paid to every single piece (a monumental undertaking in itself). This is easy to see in this work. Each bottle has its own character and is a unique being. Meandering through the space of the Hedge House, it looks like a tide of water as if the Kleine Geul has burst its banks and flowed into the space. But on closer inspection, we see a river of people – individuals and groups. The bottles, each one a person in itself, seem to be communicating with one another. But one or two stand in isolation. Are they escaping? Are they leaving en masse? Is this an exodus through an arid wilderness? Or are we looking at today's society, with inclusion and exclusion? The mass culture where those who do not fit in are cast out and left to their own devices. People who just have to follow the crowd. Yet even within this mass culture, everyone is a unique individual, with their own forms, their own shortcomings and their own life lines.

Wilks has represented these life lines beautifully with craquelé. He worked the ceramic objects by hand individually, giving rise to fine lines and cracks. Zooming in on the bottles and studying the craquelé closely reveals a personal cosmic space. A space within a space – times a thousand objects. A whole universe has been created.

And a wide universe at that. The work refers to a broad range of subjects. To begin with the Kabbalistic text, Zohar portion Acharei Mot chapter 4:33, stating "And a river went out of Eden". Next to that, we can see clear similarities with the terracotta army of Qin Shi Huangdi. In all its quietness, the flowing movement appears to be a ceramic army; a sort of line-up of soldiers waiting to be found and dug up. The general momentum of the tide heaving the mass slowly onwards through the space.

The work also refers to contemporary art. To Tony Cragg, who combines mass production and small unique elements, creates wonderful sculptures and also criticizes society. And to Richard Long, who places his art in nature and represents the simple movement of walking in silent actions.

For thousands of years, we have been harnessing water, trying to find a balance between nature, mankind and our living environment. The river we see here appears to be made of plastic bottles, which pollute the oceans and destroy nature, casually thrown away by mankind. But they also contain water. The bottle protects, preserves and allows transportation. Filled with water, which keeps us alive and is one of the primary necessities of life. Is the plastic bottle itself worthless or valuable?