In an age of online friendships, carelessly spawned and severed by text and twitter, here is a glimpse of a 28-year professionally supportive relationship, fuelled by exchange of ideas, concepts, advice and material. Phil Eglin and Tony Hayward have been close friends since they met at the Royal College of Art in the 1980s. Eglin in Stoke and Hayward in South London speak almost every day and correspond regularly, by old-fashioned post, using stamps. Hayward, a magpie scourer of fleamarkets at home and abroad, supplies Eglin with a steady stream of notes, postcards, articles and ephemera. Eglin is the sounding board, consultant on nuances of type and spacing, text and meaning, and advice on hanging and presentation. Warm affection meets visual, intellectual, professional critique. The exchange is open, searching, brutally honest, always good-humoured, and conspicuously non-competitive.

Each artist revels in the ‘double take’ imposed on the viewer here by their differing yet curiously complementary views of the world’s idiosyncrasies and inequalities: things are not as they seem; there’s a mismatch between the preconception and the reality, the familiar and the alien, the resident and the intruder, the medium and the message. There are curious marriages of technique and they blur conventional distinctions between art and craft: here are meticulously crafted works of art; and craft objects which convey a greater message. Layers of meaning deliver moral shock or wry humour, a shared humour ranging from the gentlest of nudges to the frankly black. It is English and ironic. It provokes out-loud laughter and a sense of loss.

For Philip Eglin, the message has seemingly become more urgent lately. His preoccupations – with popes, prostitutes, and football, are rendered in many permutations of form and surface decoration, and sit together in startling proximity, whorish cheek by papal jowl. The exhibition happens to be occurring at a moment when the newspapers are full of lascivious detail of a footballer’s encounters with a Premier League call-girl; the controversy of a papal visit, its cost to the taxpayer; and ambiguity in the papal attitude to responsibility for abuses within the Catholic church; stories which all chime with Eglin’s concerns. He is angered by hypocrisy in all its forms, and fascinated by parallels between the church and the new religion, football, where strikers are ordained as role models, then found to be lacking in moral consistency. His pursuit of such themes - sex and money, corruption at the highest levels - follows the tradition of incorporating moralistic inscriptions within Staffordshire flatback figures. He works within, and occasionally deliberately without, the Northern European Gothic tradition. In an informed development of historic ceramic forms, his works marry formal delicacy with contemporary relevance of subject matter. His modelling of figures is exquisite, his glazed surfaces painterly and beguiling. At the same time, however, he seeks a kind of directness of delivery which is downright awkward. An accomplished draughtsman, he incorporates drawings in his work which he has rendered blind, or with his left hand; and he has routinely subcontracted drawings from his sons, particularly when they were very young.

The text which appeared on early works has moved from back to front, and is now graffiti, emblazoning invective across the fragility of the forms. This too is made awkward, by anagrammatic conceits in which the socially unpalatable message is disguised as foul-mouthed surrealism. Eglin says that the word paedophile is “almost taboo to include, so abhorrent and distasteful is it as a subject to make art about,” but he does not shrink from the task: ‘sly paedophile priests’ become ‘I spy stippled arsehole’. And the Pope is irreverently labelled Popeye. Identities are obscured by the newspaper convention of maxipixellation, or with smiley faces. Layered surfaces reflect layered and conflicting accounts of abuse, a collective obfuscation.

The connection between the different suites of Tony Hayward’s work may not be immediately obvious. But there is a common imperative. He works within the pictorial tradition, and he has an eye for the forgotten, the discarded, the outmoded. With a kind of creative affection he breathes new life into certain kinds of found objects, restoring and manipulating them, pushing around the space they occupy and the meaning they convey.

For his works on paper he sources postcards, which he describes movingly as ‘lost,’ and photographs which are already severed from all context, from boxes massed in Deptford market. He introduces one image to another, revelling in the dialogue or frisson created between their different histories. He sees it as ‘classic’ collage, where he attempts “to do something essentially and ridiculously simple”. This apparent simplicity is meticulously crafted. He uses a 16mm punch to excise heads from the postcards.
and family photographs, and replaces them with heads from others. These are not simply collaged, but inset, the one head
dropped in to sit neatly but incongruously on the same plane as its host body. The recurrent head of this kind in the Interloper
series is derived from the artists’ own photograph of a tailor’s signboard in India. Is it looking at its companion, looking out of its
own picture to the neighbouring one, or perhaps even beyond to the wider world?

Of the three-dimensional work, the landscape series starts from bulk-produced, hand-painted artworks, sourced from Belgian
flea-markets. In seemingly unpopulated landscapes, roads, houses and fences indicate human occupation. He manipulates them
into relief to emphasise their spatial qualities, to emphasise the track, the river, the Bend in the Road. They are reframed, in the
absence of the frame, and unlike the sense of ‘looking through’ delivered by the convention of the picture frame, we are invited to
‘look around’, to enjoy the passage of the eye along the newly-constructed foreground plane which juts out from the wall,
carefully wedge-shaped and tapered in perspectival recession. There is always an added found object, the Stump, say, ostensibly
observing the convention of ‘foreground interest’, which successfully reels us in. It echoes the tree in the main picture, but, as
Hayward says, has been cut down “in order to open up the view”.

The Loving Couples also begin as found objects, banal figurines accidentally or sometimes deliberately rendered unsaleable by
decapitation. Hayward takes them in and restores them, but with heads from other ornaments and playthings. What conversations
these new couples have, trapped together on their small bucolic islands.

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