



The Narrative Knot

FOR CENTURIES CLAY HAS GIVEN MAN THE PERFECT material by which to express himself. In this exhibition, *The Narrative Knot: Stories in Ceramics*, Curator Gerry Wedd is keen to maintain the link between ceramics and narrative and to show how clay lends itself, still, to a myriad of stories.

In fact, this exhibition reaffirms contemporary ceramics as the wide-ranging discipline we know it to be. In the hands of the 26 artists selected, it is possible to see a continuum of Wedd's thesis, which is:

A Review by Brett Ballard

as we embody forms with stories, these forms in turn talk back to us, the stories ever so slightly different, the perceptions altered by context and time. Wedd lays claim to an historical perspective that begins with Greek Attic ware of the 7th century BC and continues upward to mirror other points in ceramics history where narrative has a role to play.

The exhibition includes many artists who take landscape and the environment as their theme. Representations of landscape are a rich repository





of stories and no less in Australia where the natural world is ever present. Janet Mansfield and Barbara Campbell-Allen are ceramics artists who in their different ways use clay to comment upon nature.

Mansfield's forms reference landscape and their elegant earthiness speaks of place and of tradition. Barbara Campbell-Allen approaches landscape tangentially and her works of this exhibition, the *Construct* series, have the feel of museum fossils. They are of course painstakingly made and fired and each is 'perfectly' imperfect. Ultimately they are like Chinese scholars' rocks; wonderfully contemplative, saying much of time and geological strata.

Liz Low's installation, *A Pebble Tale*, combines both thrown and shaped pebble forms in stoneware and porcelain. Low takes a scatter approach to landscape and, having carefully crafted the pebbles, is willing to roll the dice, as it were, on the environment. Each pebble quietly assumes a kinship with another or sits huddling in a group. Likeness and disparity are what we find in nature but also in society and here her arrangement parallels how individuals seek kinship in groups or tend towards isolation.

Ashley Fiona's *Four Thousand, Two Hundred and Ten*, also uses a cluster arrangement but for different ends. Here Fiona's title refers to the number of days between the death of her mother and the opening of *The Narrative Knot*. This is a personal



Facing page, top: Liz Low. *A Pebble Tale (Detail)*. 2011. Thrown and shaped stoneware and porcelain. 30 x 160 x 60 cm.

Facing page, left: Janet Mansfield. *Rock Box*. 2010. Woodfired, Anagma kiln. 11 x 16 x 15 cm.

Facing page, right: Barbara Campbell Allen. *Orange White Construct*. 2011. Stoneware paperclay and slip with natural ash glaze. 24 x 26 x 14 cm.

Above left: Ashley Fiona. *Four Thousand Two Hundred and Ten (Detail)*. 2011. Porcelain, handbuilt. Various dimensions.

Above right: Julie Bartholomew. *Endangered flowers 1 (Detail)*. 2011. Porcelain, slipcast, handbuilt, decals and glaze. 10 cm/ea.

statement; of loss, yet, one that places the vessel and the production of vessels at variance to sorrow. Time permeates this arrangement, each concavity an impression of longing.

To continue with the environment and the effect man makes upon it, Julie Bartholomew has fashioned an exquisite set of porcelain dishes that reference scientific experiment. The series, *Endangered Flowers 1*, looks at endangered Australian flowers and the combination of text, handbuilt and slipcast elements is well handled; the argument convincing.

Robyn Phelan has a point to make about vulnerability in her piece, *Cloud Dreaming Game*. Above us, high on the wall, clouds hover, protruding outward, their forms seemingly clutched from a Pop Art painting. They are a humorous representation



Above: Robyn Phelan. *Cloud Dreaming Game (Detail)*. 2011.

Stoneware clay and glaze, hand coiled and pinched.

50 x 160 x 15 cm/various.

Below left: Honor Freeman. *Scrapings and Gratings*. 2011. Hand-built porcelain and found object. 16 x 30 x 26 cm.

Below right: Lynda Draper. *Home Alter*. 2010. Porcelaneous Stoneware, multiple glaze firings.

and add to the mix in the gallery below and to artists such as Christopher Headley who also takes a Pop turn in *Solo Tango*.

Headley's expression is rooted in his childhood memories. He grew up in a small Yorkshire village

in the 1950s and it is the abandoned airfield of his youth, played on by he and other children, that is the subject of *Solo Tango*.

Headley is nicely poetic. His imagery: planes, books and the blue and white tops of the village homes are the stuff of dreaming and they sit, in this arrangement, beneath the mythical spitfire. For any young boy of the fifties and sixties, the spitfire is resonant in miniature modelling and comic books. What is also dazzling is Headley's technique of moulding and slipcasting and, appropriately, his use of decals.

The home of course is a realm of stories without end. Families are bound by words and these words





become the fabric of experience. The home is where we have our beginnings; live with our families and return to with children of our own. Not surprisingly a number of artists in this exhibition work with domestic imagery. Indeed, how can ceramics/pottery not be associated with the domestic and, by extension, narrative? If these walls could talk, seems less an apposite metaphor than if these cups or bowls could talk.

And this is where the installation *Spin a Yarn: Shirl Polishes the Silver in Preparation for a Special Afternoon Tea*, by Dee Taylor Graham comes to the fore. It is a mixed media piece with sofa, arm chairs and a variety of gewgaws that invites one to sit quietly or join friends for a pot of tea. It is sitting room Australian vernacular and a lot of fun.

Honor Freeman's, *Scrapings and Gratings* and Jan Howlin's *Tools of Engagement*, each make comment on domesticity. Honor Freeman is keen to replicate domestic objects in porcelain but in *Scrapings* she adds a found grater that further subverts domesticity. Imagined conversations emanate from this arrangement. The setting is commonplace but our shared psychology suggests we find the extraordinary in the everyday.

Helen Earl's installation *Safe Harbour* is intriguing for the fact that it plays the domestic realm against the environment. Her objects combine ceramic

Above left: Helen Earl. *Safe Harbour*. 2011. Installation: porcelain and found driftwood. 175 x 152 x 7.5 cm.

Above right: Dee Taylor Graham. *Spin a Yarn: Shirl Polishes the Silver in Preparation for a Special Afternoon Tea*. 2011. Performance, found objects and porcelain. 2 x 2 x 1 m.

Below: Christopher Headley. *Solo Tango*. 2011. Moulded, slipcast, joined white earthenware, customised ceramics decals and gold lustre. 50 x 40 x 30 cm.

spoons and ladles with found pieces of driftwood. There is fragility at play here reminding the viewer that we are the interface between the inner sanctum of the home and the greater natural world: our implements a scant defence.

Howlin plays irony against the domestic object by overlaying her plates and pans with camouflage and giving a set of three bowls the title *Cereal Encounters*.





*Steve Davies. Alone Garden Psychopath
in Blood Feud (Two Pieces). Handbuilt
porcelain clay and oxblood glaze fired in
reduction. 45 x 24 x 34 cm.*



Jan Howlin. *Cereal Encounters*. 2011. Stained clays, press moulded, fired to 1180°C glazed inside only. 6 x 21 x 21 cm/ea.

In relating this, it seems glib, but this is humour we all understand. Perhaps humour is the defensible factor against an unhappy home life and the gloss that families spin when predicaments occur.

The family gets even deeper and stranger in the hands of Lynda Draper. Her piece, *Home Alter*, is a *tour de force*, complex and overloaded with symbolism. It relates, she says, “to the metaphysical aspects of the domestic souvenir”, and these souvenirs are the basis of *Home Alter*.

These small, kitsch memorabilia are painstakingly transcribed into porcelaneous stoneware and with multiple firing, Draper has achieved a white, slightly cloying surface. More is more, in this case, as Draper makes her point by excessively piling parts together. There is even an image of the home captured in a Kodachrome portrait. Its location is universal and the suburb to which it refers is all too real.

Steve Davies takes the personal and gives it a further twist. His figures are extraordinary and slightly ghoulish. These confronting spectres are conglomerates of memory and frustrated desire. They invite conflict and stark contemplation, coming as they do from a darker place, perhaps within childhood, but now grown up and mobile.

Five of the six works in this exhibition begin with

the title *Alone Garden Psychopath...* and are often rabbit-like forms with porcelain glazes and ceramic decals. This *melange* of techniques makes for complex surfaces and more complex meanings. Words and thoughts bubble up from the surface and then disappear again.

Alone Garden Psychopath in Blood Feud combines two figures coated in shiny oxblood glaze. They stand face to face; arms forward – bits out – seemingly in confrontation. They are the gruesome twins set on mayhem and their own retribution. Made mad by the world they are both ‘mad for it’ and mad about it. It is a common condition in contemporary society. Joined by mutual interest and causality individuals match what they know against what they perceive the greater world – of stories – to be.

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