

SUBJECT / OBJECT: A SERIES OF EXHIBITIONS BY DAMON MOON

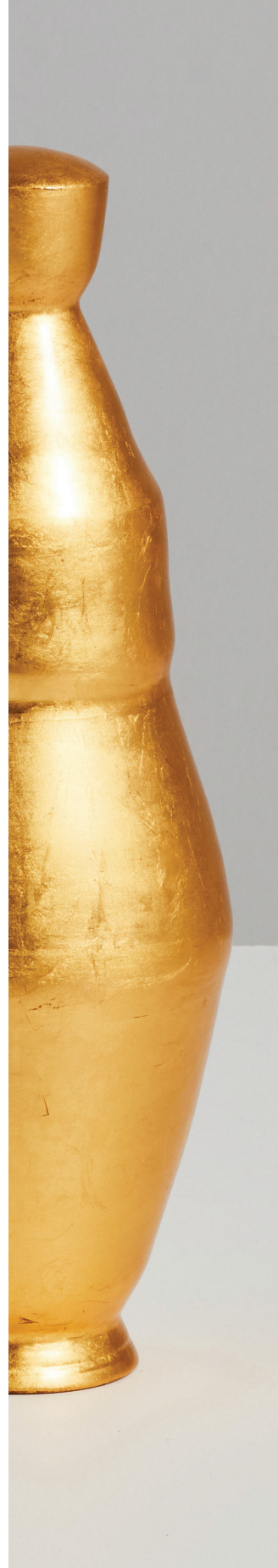
by Robyn Phelan

The forward slash symbol used in Damon Moon's project title strikes like a lightning bolt through two words: SUBJECT and OBJECT. Instantly, the '/' commands the reader to decide: this OR this. It is a delicious dialectic that Moon set in play across a series of venues in regional Victoria at the end of 2018.

Subject / Object's subtitle has a tantalising contention: *the known known, the known unknown, and the unknown unknown craftsperson*. Incorporating the historic craft collections of Shepparton Art Museum (SAM), Bendigo Art Gallery (BAG), Bendigo Pottery and the architectural envelope of the La Trobe Art Institute (LAI) in Bendigo, Moon 'offers a form of object-based conversation between his own ceramics works and works from each collection selected to reflect on each place's history of art and industry'.¹

A self-described 'second generation' maker, Moon's practice embraces design and studio art while utilising his enviable ceramics skill. Moon intimately understands the history of Australian ceramics in this region and is highly regarded for his comment and critique in this area. The subject and object of Moon's interrogation is an innocuous form, which he describes as a 'skittle'. These forms are slipcast, a commercial ceramics technique that allows for multiples and an exacting repetition of ceramic form. Moon's skittles are not 'finished' as functional vessels and the artist's intervening hand is evident as soon as the leather-hard form has been lifted from the plaster mould. Seam line and pouring lips are not fettled, exposing the technique of duplicate making. Moon destroys the perfect cast skin with punctures, tearing and crushing. Skittle surfaces boast an infinite variety of treatments such as coloured clay bodies, crafted surfaces and skilled ceramic glazes.

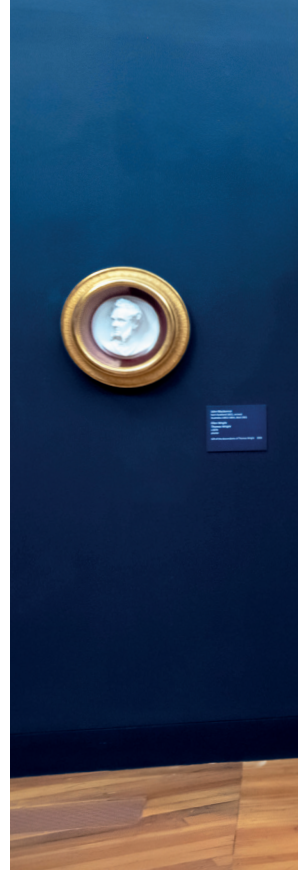
They stand alone, *en masse*, fractured or prone. They exist across all three installations and become significant points of reference for the context of each exhibition. If skittles are to be this artist's game of choice, then this writer will engage in a bit of sport: to determine the subject versus object 'contest' and reveal Moon's strategies, manoeuvres and outcomes across three fields of play.



ART & OBJECTS

Previous page: **Damon Moon**, *Skittle*
2018, slipcast ceramic, 24-carat gold leaf
gilder Bernard Goble, h.40cm, w.14cm
Photo: Andre Castellucci

Opposite: **Damon Moon**, *Subject / Object*
installation view (left hand case)
Bendigo Regional Gallery, 2018, with *Skittles* and
kiln detritus, various treatments,
various dimensions; photo: Bill Conroy
Subject / Object, Bendigo Regional Gallery
18 October 2018 – 21 January 2019



Bendigo Art Gallery, *Subject / Object* context (game) 1 – ceramic skittle as signifier
A single label is placed on the shelf beside a group of archetypal Bendigo Pottery honey and white coloured storage jars:

In the gloom, the gold gathers the light around it. Ezra Pound Canto 11

For the installation of skittles and collection pieces, Moon selected two handsome 19th century wooden display cabinets and incorporated them into one of Bendigo Art Gallery's exhibition spaces known as the *1857 Gallery*, formerly the Rifle Brigade practice room. *Subject / Object* expands across many binaries in this installation – high and low art, what is found over and underground, what is of the air and of the earth – and asks what is precious and what is spurned. Moon has shunned BAG's collection of historical decorative arts, chock full of European hard paste porcelain, donated by the gold-wealthy patrons of Bendigo. "Too frivolous!" shout these cabinets and the echo of this statement ricochets off 19th century paintings of still lifes and pastoral scenes like a rifle crack. The subject of this installation is a local story, told in grubby but honest ceramics, revealing the dirty business and hard work of digging for gold and colonising of a place. Outside these cabinets is the presentation of Bendigo as a town that has risen out of the mud and clay, and banished the army from its halls, to bask in the cultured experiences that fine art brings. Inside these cabinets are carefully arranged ceramic objects, industrially and handmade, labour and skill intensive. They are designed to serve a function: brew beer, conduct electricity, pickle, transport shit, hold potions, be watertight, be anti-bacterial and, of course, hold molten gold. To craft this 'other' story, Moon has used vernacular ceramics from the collection of a neighbouring museum, the Bendigo Pottery. There is no doubting Moon's curatorial and aesthetic pleasure in these objects.



The inclusion of his skittles amongst what could simply be a display of historical applied arts is the necessary punctum to expand the reading of this installation. Fragments of clay crucibles, still covered in soot, are paired with a skittle of bisqued clay that appears as if densely smoked with carbon. Flattened, punctured terracotta skittles hover like roof tiles above kiln remnants and debris. These interactions remind the viewer of the semiotic dialectic of this exhibition's title. The insertion of skittles with collection pieces, within a fine art museum, provides a resonant context and this framework offers many potential meanings and exciting conversations about class, status and privilege.

Moon's use of Ezra Pound's quote arouses a perception that gold runs radiantly through the veins of Bendigo's cultural history. Installed in a grouping are five unglazed skittles in subtle clay tones from white to pale terracotta. Each vessel has a punt knocked into its mid-section, evoking a group of figures bowing. Central to this action is an exquisite 24-carat gilded skittle, its material so precious in comparison to its ignoble company on the lower shelves. Meaning shifts from object (clay vessel) to subject (icon of spiritual devotion). Altar/shrine, heaven/earth, index/icon – Moon's combinations ask us how meaning can be made.

As the skittle form becomes more familiar with repetitious use, it reveals Moon's articulate design. Moon's skittle is the last incantation of an anthropomorphic vessel derived from a series of English historical references. William Staite-Murray's 1930 pot called *The Bather*, inspired his student Robert Washington to make a similar vase in the mid-1900s. Moon has created a slippery signifier which can read as being the thing itself, indexicality as a universal vessel form, as symbolic, and as a narrator and expander of meaning.



Damon Moon

Subject / Object
installation detail

2018, various
dimensions

each object

h.43cm, w.14cm

Photo: courtesy
Shepparton Art
Museum

Subject / Object

Shepparton Art
Museum, August –
November, 2018

Shepparton Art Museum, *Subject / Object*, context (game) 2 –
the multiple and migration

The regional city of Shepparton in north-eastern Victoria has a well-regarded collection of Australian studio pottery and contemporary Australian art. At the same time as the Bendigo Art Gallery exhibition, a second and simultaneous iteration of *Subject / Object* was installed in the Shepparton gallery's full-wall display cabinet. Moon populates this space with close to one hundred skittles and a selection of utilitarian, Chinese historical ceramics from the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) collection, gifted by the Shepparton International Village in 1996.² These modest pieces, by makers unknown, signify time and place from which meanings expand and affect this narrative tableau. The scene reads in two parts, like chapters in a history.

At SAM the use of skittles is at its most multitudinous and symbolic. A mass of skittles ranging in body colour from rich terracotta slipcast skins to chalky white, graduate from the left towards the middle of the cabinet, in rows, evenly spaced, and 'double-staged' on plinths. The skittle-form demonstrates its inimitable indexical range, alluding to the physical form of the human body with head, neck, shoulder, waist, hip and foot. This corporeal visual language is common parlance amongst potters to describe parts of a pot. The skittle form tacitly understands itself as universal and figurative and this arrangement seems to mimic the behaviours of large bodies of people to form into lines, gather and group.

Central to this installation are two disconcerting skittles that balance precariously on the edge of a plinth, the last two skittles at the end of long, repetitive lines. Literal concern for the breakage of fragile objects increases the tension of rising metaphorical readings of the work.



The writer interprets comments on Australia's cultural policies, beginning with the disembarkation tax which so affected Chinese people migrating to the goldfields, the White Australia Policy, assimilation and multiculturalism. Coincidentally, it was during the development of this project that the Victorian Government made a formal apology to Australian Chinese for discriminatory government policies during the era of the gold rush. Chinese migrants were forced to land elsewhere, after the Victorian government imposed an enormous £10 tax per Chinese passenger landing in Victoria. The Chinese were the only nationality subject to the tax.³

A sense of a 'long march' as symbolised here, evokes a primary historical account of the scale of Chinese migration during the Australian gold rush by a traveller in 1854. He describes a group of Chinese people, "... between six and seven hundred coming overland from Adelaide. They had four wagons carrying their sick, lame and provisions. They were all walking single file, each one with a pole and two baskets. They stretched for over two miles in procession. I was half an hour passing them ..."⁴

Could these gold rush migrants have found their way to Shepparton to utilise their farming skills, establishing market gardens in one of Australia's most fertile agricultural areas?

And so, to the final chapter of this narrative. On the right-hand side of the tableau, modest ceramics are paired with Moon's skittles. Might these historic water drippers, ginger jars, and storage pots have been carried from the port of Canto to Hong Kong and then onto Robe, SA, with optimism and hope for a better life? Each of Moon's skittles has suffered a trauma while the old Chinese forms remain stoic and robust. Moon's 'I' or 'or' is again in play generated by the placement of skittle next to artefact: functional/not functional, old/new, craft/art, Chinese/Australian.

La Trobe Art Institute, *Subject / Object* context (game) 3 – Considering site

There are many places in which ceramics can work beautifully, interrogatively and architecturally, rather than just having things on the mantelpiece, De Waal, 2018[5]

Moon emerges as designer and potter in the *Subject / Object* iteration at La Trobe Art Institute (LAI). Skittles have been cast out into the LAI infrastructure, pervading corridors, galleries, courtyards, plinths and street front windows. Without the dominance and associative influence of historic collection pieces, these installed interventions assert themselves in a different way. Moon's designer eye has scanned for architectural features, built ceramic vernacular and mimicked these finishes.

In an open-air courtyard, a skittle mirrors the wood-stained walls but its reflection does not include us in the encounter. The skittle absorbs and reflects the context from which it is sited. On a traditional plinth installation three crafted skittles morph, chameleon-like, into the wall paint. The vessels do not disappear but begin to disintegrate, not through the ceramic process but through intentional damage. It is curious that Moon insists on mutilating his skittles, but only when they are at the leather hard stage. Like a boy cracking a chocolate Easter egg, the sensation must be immensely satisfying. In a corridor, an orange-capped skittle sits alongside orange-coloured signage. The confidence and humour of this simple semiotic is glorious: sign/signified, subject/object.

The LAI exhibition nods its head to the canon of studio pottery and rejects a rarefied installation paradigm. Moon entices us with vessels that could be condemned as reductive due to the constraints of the form and its repetitious use. The display of Moon's mastery of glazing could be criticised as indulgent and boastful, yet the experience of searching for each skittle, taking cues from architecture and interior design, and making connections to material and site through process is playful and liberating.

Moon⁶ explains in his exhibition catalogue essay, that "(t)he known (that would be me) and the unknown (that would be craftspeople) overlap in time and place".(1) This overlap or connection is richly and respectfully investigated by Moon and his inquiry is activated by his sophisticated selection of artefacts. In each *Subject / Object* iteration, a corresponding skittle has been created to open dialogue. The affect is a series of experiences that might seem fixed and finite through the repeated use of a single vessel but is essentially fluid and constantly transforming through process, site, and encounter.

Robyn Phelan is a Melbourne-based artist, writer and educator.

An exhibition developed by Shepparton Art Museum in partnership with Bendigo Art Gallery and La Trobe Art Institute, *Subject / Object* was a feature project of Artlands Victoria, Australia's largest regional arts gathering, held in October 2018 in the City of Greater Bendigo and Mount Alexander Shire.

***Subject / Object* showed at Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) 25 August – 11 November 2018; Bendigo Art Gallery, 10 October 2018 – 21 January 2019, and La Trobe Art Institute (LAI) from 10–14 October 2018.**



1 **Damon Moon**, *Subject / Object*, 2018, installation at La Trobe Art Institute, white shelf, slipcast ceramic, various dimensions
 2 **Damon Moon**, *Skittles*, 2018, installation at La Trobe Art Institute, rooftop; slipcast ceramic, various dimensions
 3 **Damon Moon**, *Skittles*, 2018, installation at La Trobe Art Institute, toilet slipcast ceramic, various dimensions
 4 **Damon Moon**, *Skittles*, 2018, installation at La Trobe Art Institute, courtyard, slipcast ceramic, various dimensions
 Photos: Robyn Phelan; *Subject / Object*, La Trobe Art Institute, October 2018

Next page: Vinyl images of *Skittles* in windows of La Trobe Art Institute with columns of the Capitol Theatre across the road reflected 2018; photo: Rebecca Coates



1 Shepparton Art Museum Exhibition Profile: *Subject / Object*, 2017, viewed 15 January 2019
<http://sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/event-details/!/488/event/subject-object>

2 The Shepparton International Village was originally built as a tourist attraction and work creation project in the 1970s. The village began to need renovation, and the local government commissioners decommissioned the site in 1996. This short video is a fascinating look at 1990s cultural stereotyping and the marginalisation of indigenous culture. Gerrard Allemand 2017, *International Village Promo* Vic TV 1993, YouTube, 25 May 2017, viewed 13 January 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQGBNfhhWaQ&feature=youtu.be

3 Razak, I, 2017, Victoria apologises to Chinese community for racist policies during gold rush era, 25 May 2017, *ABC News*, viewed 10 January 2019
www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-25/victoria-apologises-to-chinese-for-racism-during-gold-rush-era/8558998

4 SBS Stories 2017, Part of the Immigrations and Populations series of stories, *The Walk to Robe* viewed 4 January 2019, www.sbs.com.au/gold/story.php?storyid=57

5 De Waal, E, 2018, 'Edmund De Waal on a Craft Revival', in T Morris (ed), *New Wave Ceramics*, Frame Publishers, Amsterdam, p.9.

6 Moon, D, 2018, *Subject / Object*. Damon Moon, SAM exhibition catalogue, 2018, p.