



Robyn Phelan, *Celadon Landscape*, 2008, handbuilt, Jingdezhen-sourced stoneware, tissue decals, celadon glaze
h.10cm, w.22cm, d.11cm; photo: Christopher Sanders

Delivering on the Long Look

Roisin O'Dwyer considers the recent work of Robyn Phelan

So much of what we see in exhibitions requires the viewer to do a fair bit of detective work to understand what it is that the artist is intending, and whether they have delivered. Sometimes it's frustrating to find yourself working hard in an exhibition to unpack its message, and sometimes it is a pleasurable part of viewing artworks to follow an artist's subject and relate it to a broader network of ideas. The exchange between the viewer, the artwork and the exhibition is changeable and, to be of real value, the viewer needs practice at looking. Curator and writer Naomi Cass once described this pursuit as the 'long look', an effort that requires the viewer to take in all the information the artist is presenting and to then think through what you are seeing and what ideas you are bringing with you when you look.¹ Ceramicist and writer Edmund De Waal has linked the time required to make something and the time it takes to see something as two parts of the same activity.²

To experience the long look you need to find yourself in an exhibition that is engaging to you and that has some layers to it. I found one of these in a small exhibition by Robyn Phelan in the Mailbox 141 space in the foyer of an historic textiles building in Flinders Lane, Melbourne. The allocated space consists of 19 glass-fronted timber mailboxes of the kind where letters were slipped by hand into a slot in the top of the box. Robyn made 17 hand-shaped porcelain forms that each bore the name of a woman, a mountain she had climbed, and the date of the climb. The exhibition, *Ain't No Mountain*

View II

High Enough – Milestones for Two Centuries of Women Climbers, was based on research Robyn did in the State Library of Victoria using the Vic Spitzer collection of rare books on mountaineering that included a book on women climbers. Robyn's exhibition notes contained a list of the mountaineering achievements of 15 of these remarkable women who took the cause for women's equality to the mountain.³

Previously Robyn had developed an interest in the presence of mountains during summer holidays spent in alpine Victoria. She felt that nearby mountains and their commanding views encouraged reflection, particularly on our relationship with nature. The subject gained another thread following a residency in 2008 in China at the Jingdezhen Pottery Workshop and Experimental Sculpture Factory. In China there is an ancient tradition of landscape painting that includes mythologies about the spirituality of mountains, and exploration of the complexity of depiction and looking. Traditional Chinese artists have reflected that reducing the mountain silhouette to a small scale to depict it means sacrificing detail but can bring the eye and the spirit together in appreciation of the landscape's attributes.⁴ In the 15 days of Robyn's residency, her daily view was the silhouette of the nearby Pan Long mountain range. The pinched forms she made in Jingdezhen, when placed all together, depicted the outline of Pan Long. Nearby, is Mount Gaolin, the now exhausted source of the kaolin that is an important mineral in

Robyn Phelan, *Ain't No Mountain High Enough – Milestones for Two Centuries of Women Climbers*, 2012
Southern Ice Porcelain, cobalt oxide, h.46cm, w.286cm, d.14cm; photo: Christopher Sanders



Jingdezhen's pure white porcelain. From this experience comes the *Depleted* series where cobalt glaze bleeds from mountain forms. Mountain ranges had become a green screen for the little histories Robyn discovered as she pondered their silhouettes.

When you stepped forward to look at the forms for *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* in the glass-fronted mailboxes, you examined each of them, noting the name of the climber and possibly checking their achievement in the notes before moving on to the next box. Edmund De Waal uses vitrines in some of his installation pieces and has observed that "objects behind glass are suspended from their everyday life".⁵ It is an effect that brings the viewer back to the world of the objects, rather than bringing the artwork into the present. The arrangement of the Mailbox 141 displays demand that the viewer take in the collective effect of the multiple cases before moving in for a closer look at each box. It is a structure that works well for the story that Robyn tells of the individual achievements of the mountaineers and the collective impact of their effort on the status of women. Robyn notes what the climber Louise Shepherd refers to as "equality on the rock".⁶ The choice of porcelain for the forms recalls the domesticity of fine china but it is presented in Robyn's work without prettiness but with the solidity of something worked and built by hand. The subject of mountains and the activities they engender partner well with the solid ceramic forms of Robyn's work.



Robyn Phelan

Depleted Series, 2010

Southern Ice paperclay
cobalt glaze, tallest h.36cm
Photo: Christopher Sanders



Robyn has employed the peculiarities of the exhibition space to cultivate the viewer's interest in the historical inspiration for these tactile objects. The amorphous shapes have great individual character but can be clustered to form another vista and a story worthy of a 'long look'.

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***Ain't No Mountain High Enough – Milestones for Two Centuries of Women Climbers* was at Mailbox 141 in October 2012. Robyn's work was included in the *Tooth and Nail* touring exhibition at Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, 3 May – 28 June 2013. The work will also be shown at Wangaratta Exhibitions Gallery, 24 August – 22 September 2013.**

1 Naomi Cass, *I'm Not an Authority on Art: An Exhibition of Work by Elizabeth Newman*, City Gallery, May 1990. Naomi Cass is Director of the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne and a curator and writer.

2 Edmund De Waal, *Time on His Hands*, *The World of Interiors*, November 2012, p200

3 The soundtrack to this must surely be: "Now, Lord, don't move my mountain, but give me the strength to climb. And, Lord, don't take away my stumbling blocks, but lead me all around." Mahalia Jackson, *Lord Don't Move the Mountain*

4 The Significance of Landscape, Tsung Ping (375–443) in *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, Susan Bush & Hsio-yen Shih, 1985

5 Edmund De Waal, *Time on His Hands*, *The World of Interiors*, November 2012, p200

6 Louise Shepherd quoted in the exhibition notes for *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* from an interview at www.chockstone.org/interviews/LShepherd.htm