



Kris Coad, *journey series...*, 2020, handformed porcelain
1270°C, h.38cm, w.45cm, d.28cm; National Small Sculpture
Awards & McClelland Sculpture Park Gallery; photo: artist

FINDING EMPATHY IN LIMINAL SPACE: KRIS COAD'S RECENT SCULPTURAL WORK WHERE THE PERSONAL TURNS TO THE POLITICAL

by Robyn Phelan

Kris Coad's recent work quietly niggles at our political consciousness. Her ongoing series *journey...*, initiated in 2019, asks us to be politically aware of recent world events, in particular the displacement of people due to the climate crisis, war, colonisation, or bushfire, and to be empathetic to the plight of all people who are homeless, forced to 'bundle' lives into carriable parcels.

Coad challenges the material and formal possibilities of bone china and porcelain and explores the nature of human movement – be it physically or spiritually, through choice, by force, or through dire and uncontrollable circumstances. Coad's *journey...* works have appeared in many awards and curated exhibitions, and their presence demanded my attention. There is a quality of uncertainty in these sculptures that resides in the liminal, the in-between space where a maker's intention and interpretation reside.

The *journey...* series are works of personal self-expression and are deliberately non-figurative. In their abstraction, they personify the rallying call that the 'personal is political'. This slogan was championed by second-wave feminists arguing that the lived experiences of sexism, oppression, racism, or inequality, can direct and will demand political action and change. The works utilise the cool white attraction of porcelain and its similarity to stone and bone. The incorporation of woven, textural fabric is both connotatively rich and domestically familiar. The works' construction intimately connects us to the maker through the visible action of repetitively wrapping, tying, and securing slip-soaked fabric into individual bundled forms. We have all tenderly (or brusquely) applied this action to the things we own and love. These forms are not simply an exercise in process and skill. The material quality of the *journey...* series is nuanced and complicated. Each *journey...* conjures discarded rags, worn clothing, human remains, hunkered and impoverished bodies, bone, and improvised luggage; the everyday things of human life that is in a state of



Kris Coad, *journey series...*, 2019, handformed porcelain, slab-formed chamotte clay furniture, 1270°C
h.70cm, w.100cm, d.50cm; *Manifest*, Australian Ceramics Triennale Tasmania 2019; photo: artist

suffering. Coad's intangible, untouchable, solid masses are animate, human in scale, inducing empathy. The provocation is to feel and think deeply.

Those of you who attended the 2019 Australian Ceramics Triennale in Hobart will have wandered through the impressive selection of work presented in *Manifest*, curated by Damon Moon. I sought out Coad's work: it was quiet, so quiet and humble that I made a point to return to it. In her artist statement she explained that she had:

... been thinking about the moment when and if you have to leave your place, hurriedly taking only what you can carry. What do you take and how do you carry it?¹

For many of us, I hope, this is a situation that we only experience on news reports. Close to home and in recent memory we have watched and empathised with Australians fleeing from Black Summer bushfires or living from luggage whilst stranded in quarantine. Globally, and locally, the



Kris Coad, *journey series...*, detail; photo: artist

ongoing plight of refugees is ever-present in the media. Imagery of forced migration is filled with weary people, coping with bundles of fabric containing the remnants of what was once a stable life. Coad's sensitively-constructed sculptures of bundled fabrics, fired into permanency through the ceramic process, reminds us of how precarious the state of being homeless can be. The *Manifest* exhibition was presented on Princes Wharf 1 (PW1), a location that expanded the metaphoric potential of *journey...* by connecting to the wharf's transportation history which is both pre- and post-colonial. This place and space (to borrow the theme of TACA's conference) buzzes with the energy of people's constant arriving and departing: a liminal condition fraught with uncertainty. Coad has placed two porcelain bundles alongside a chamotte stool, objects seemingly discarded or lost.

I am drawn ... [to] that in-between moment where the object sits quietly in a place or space of reflection and contemplation. There is an incredible stillness within this liminal space where things transition from one to another and reminds me of the space between a breath, and I reflect on the gap or space between a breath and a prayer.²



Another *journey...* work was featured in the 2020 Biennial North Queensland Ceramic Awards. Here again Coad used a combination of material and process to create an empathic connection to the viewer. She explained, "I have been thinking about how we protect the fragility of life. Do you wrap and bundle, keeping safe?"³

In this work, a pair of bundles exist in a gentle but cooperative relationship. Perhaps this is a call to action, a call to care.

I interpret Coad's work as an evocation to political responsibility. As the artist, Coad is diligent and takes care not to create imagery of literal suffering. Her work includes no text, is not figurative and her artist statements pose questions in general, conceptual terms. Coad presents *journey...* for us to experience an in-between place between the object and the effect. But are her works directly political?

Kris Coad, *journey series...*, 2020, handformed porcelain, 1270°C, h.25cm, w.45cm, d.46cm
Featured in the North Queensland Ceramic Award; photo: artist

Upsetting representations are frequently central to attempts to arouse our emotions and initiate political action. British academic Dr Naomi Head writes in relationship to historical testimonials from American slaves:

Yet, the evocation of emotion and, in particular, empathy, remains politically ambivalent. It does not necessarily lead to the acknowledgement of political responsibility or to actions to address the historically-constituted roots of contemporary structural injustices.⁴

I cannot measure your response to these works, however for me this series has triggered an empathetic reflection on the perils of human migration and homelessness. I can measure and find statistics to evidence the discomfort and concern that flows from observing these subtle but powerfully evocative works. Pertinent to the Journal's readership is the fact that:

There has been a 28% increase in Australians aged 55+ experiencing homelessness or that more than 116,000 Australians have no home.⁵

Or worldwide, the horrifying knowledge that there are ... "26 million refugees globally, half of whom are children, and 85% are being hosted in developing countries."⁶

Knowledge is the beginning of any political action and the *journey...* series has ignited my sense of the inhumanity in our world. While contemplating the beauty of Coad's ceramic objects, I have slipped into a liminal space from where my personal empathy has become indeed political. Now, to action!

Robyn Phelan

Artist, writer, educator

PhD Candidate and Lecturer at RMIT University

References:

1 Coad, K. (2019). 'Manifest – The Art, Craft and Design of Contemporary Australian Ceramics'.

The Journal of Australian Ceramics, 58/1, p. 7.

2 In-conversation with the artist, January 2021

3 Coad, K. (2020). *2020 Biennial North Queensland Ceramic Award Catalogue*, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, p. 31.

4 Head, N. (2020). Sentimental politics or structural injustice? The ambivalence of emotions for political responsibility.

International Theory, 12 (3), pp. 337-357.

5 Homelessness Australia. Access 4 February 2021, homelessnessaustralia.org.au/about/homelessness-statistics

6 Amnesty International. Accessed 4 February 2021, [amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts/) © Amnesty International 2021.