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Visual art

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OUTSIDE THE MOULD

A show of contemporary ceramics reveals feats of clay that transform craft into art.

*No definition of "contemporary art" is acceptable to everyone. Is it simply the art being made today, or is it something else? The chronological definition holds scant appeal because artists would like to believe their work has a special quality that sets them apart from the amateurs and the traditionalists. With all the charm of an advertising slogan, that *je-ne-sais-quoi* is often referred to as "cutting edge".*

It may be even more difficult to define "contemporary ceramics". Every potter, young or old, has a relationship to tradition that stretches back to the earliest days of civilisation. Every potter needs a modicum of expertise to shape and fire a work. With a kiln involved, there's limited scope for spontaneity.

What many students of ceramics like best is the feeling of moulding clay in their hands. In a world in which a computer can paint a picture or print a 3D sculpture, this is one of the tactile pleasures still exclusive to human beings.

According to Lesley Harding and Glenn Barkley, co-curators of *An Idea Needing to be Made: Contemporary Ceramics*, at

Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art, "ceramics as an art form, as distinct from a craft form, is currently undergoing a steady re-evaluation."

Barkley has contributed to this process with an outpouring of ceramic works that have seen him complete a successful transition from curator to artist. Others who have made ceramics from an artist's perspective include Brendan Huntley, Peter Cooley and Nell. Their work supports Barkley's contention that the artist-ceramicist is drawn primarily to the vessel. One might balance this with the work of a potter such as Honor Freeman, who has evolved into a maker of porcelain sculptures in the form of worn cakes of soap or fire sponges, often arranged as installations.

In the Heide survey six exhibitors are Australian: Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Ernabella Arts, Simone Fraser, Pippin Drysdale, Kirsten Coelho, and Nicolette Johnson. Of the other six, Alison Britton and Kate Malone are from Britain; Laurie Steer is from New Zealand; King Houndekpinkou is French-Beninese; Kang Hyo Lee, South Korean; and Kathy Butterly a New Yorker.

The title of the show comes from a line by Alison Britton, probably the most celebrated living potter in the group. Don't bother looking for a second-hand copy of the book in which it appears unless you're ready to splurge \$2000 on a paperback - which I take as an index of how influential Britton has been. She is represented by a small selection of expressive, freely painted vessels with a playful appearance which belies the time and skill that went into their manufacture.

If the Heide exhibition has a touchstone it is the work of the late Gwyn Pigott. While Peter Rushforth was probably the most influential figure in Australian pottery in the 20th century, it was Pigott who did most to remove the invisible barrier between "art" and "craft" that saw potters looked down upon by the art crowd as makers of functional, commercial objects.

It was a silly act of condescension because a great pot is as unique and aesthetically satisfying as any painting. Pigott made this point, not with heroic, singular objects, but with collections of bowls, cups and bottles in still life arrangements reminiscent of the

pictures of Giorgio Morandi. The serene nature of Pigott's pieces, with their play of refined, muted colours, saw her work included in major art surveys and exhibited by leading galleries.

She has a worthy successor in Kirsten Coelho, who has created her own ensembles of porcelain objects, but with a very different style and palette. Like Pigott, Coelho has been embraced by art dealers from Philip Bacon to Sullivan + Strumpf, and has found admirers both at home and abroad.

In New York last week I visited Sotheby's to see the exhibition *Treasures from Chatsworth*, the seat of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. Amid the display of Old Master paintings there were groups of work by Coelho, and by Pippin Drysdale. The latter was especially startling because Drysdale's ceramics are directly inspired by the red desert landscape of Australia. It was an anomaly that looked sensational - a rare moment when one sees items from different eras, places and traditions combined in ways that tend to their mutual advantage.

The purity of Drysdale's work, with its dry surfaces and pristine colour, was set off by



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page 2 of 2

the ornate interiors of Chatsworth reproduced in the Sotheby's show. Incidentally, the imagination that went into this exhibition design was in contrast to the tired, complacent nature of the displays in some of New York's better-known museums.

For the Heide survey John Wardle Architects was invited come up with something special. The result is a massive table made as a composite of 45 secondhand tables; and a room of shelves on which each artist, and the architect and curators too, have been invited to place objects from their studios.

I can applaud the attempt to escape the convention of pots on plinths, but Wardle's design is so over-the-top it tends to distract from the actual works. Pippin Drysdale in the Chatsworth show had the element of surprise, but when there are too many surprises one begins to hanker for old-fashioned elegance and simplicity.

Thankfully the *Very Big Table* (which will find its next home in the showroom of Sydney's Hub Furniture) has been painted a neutral shade of grey. This is important for the vividly coloured pieces by artists such as Simone Fraser, King Houndekpinkou, Kathy Butterly and Kate Malone. The first two are also notable for their fluid, metamorphic forms. Malone employs formal shapes while Butterly is almost a conceptual ceramicist, if you can imagine such a thing. Her oddly shaped vessels owe a debt to Cubist collage and abstract expressionism.

The Ernabella potters, who might be expected to produce highly colourful work, have done the opposite, with dry black coolamons, seeds and twigs made from stoneware. The impression is disarmingly stark – and *chic*. Nicolette Johnson's



From far left: *Black Rock, East Kimberley* 2018-19 (detail) by Pippin Drysdale; *Snapdragon Seed Bank*, 2015, by Kate Malone; *Multi*, 2018, by Kathy Butterly; *Trilogy*, 2018, by Simone Fraser. PHOTOS: COURTESY HEIDE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

monochrome vessels are covered in uniform half-spherical shapes that resemble metallic seed-pods. Laurie Steer creates compact, heavily glazed objects with both organic and mechanical associations, many of them sprouting a full set of piranha teeth. Not for the first time I'm left wondering what it is that makes New Zealand art so incorrigibly Gothic.

That leaves only Kang Hyo Lee, whose three large-scale stoneware vessels have a power and presence unmatched by anything else in the show. These imposing water jugs conjure up memories of Korean moon jars, although they are rough country cousins to those refined masterpieces.

Lee's work has a directness – dare I say “an honesty”? – that prompts one to forget

all about the “art versus craft” debates. When a work makes such a strong impression there's no incentive to fuss over definitions.

An Idea Needing to be Made: Contemporary Ceramics is at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne until October 20.