The Melbourne Art Fair

A Survey of Ceramics | author Inga Walton

[comment]

{gallery}Nov08/wealleans:160:130:1{/gallery}

{xtypo_dropcap}E{/xtypo_dropcap}stablished in 1988, the biennial Melbourne Art Fair began as part of the bicentennial celebrations to highlight the cultural contribution of Australian artists. In addition to its invitation-only and closely vetted selection criteria, arguably the most important contribution made by the Art Fair is the stipulation that 80% of exhibited work be from living artists, with only original contemporary art post-1970 admitted. It remains the pre-eminent event of its type in Australia, allowing private and corporate collectors, dealers, curators, and public institutions to view and acquire work from both established and emerging artists, and to gauge the merits of that work within a broader regional context.

The eleventh Fair1 was attended by some 30,000 people (a 16% increase on 2006) and generated A$12.1 million in sales (up from A$10.5 million in 2006), with the majority of works sold (81%) costing less than A$10,000.2 The substantial expense incurred by participating galleries (and the implied requirement to bring a variety of work which will appeal), contrasts with the increasing popularity of single (or paired) artist showcases.3 Ceramics at this year’s Fair leaned towards what could best be termed a ‘smatter-pattern’, with seven galleries having a small- to mid-size representation, and only four galleries making it a major component of their display.

{gallery}Nov08/uchida:220:310:1{/gallery}

Disappointingly, of the twenty-two international galleries and project rooms, only one brought ceramics. Kouichi Uchida made an emphatic Australian début with an impressive installation of large-scale works from his on-going Swollen Vessel series, and over a dozen tea bowls. It was a bold decision to bring such an imposing selection from an artist largely unfamiliar to the local audience, but Uchida’s subtle, tactile, and contemplative works were undoubtedly a highlight of the event. Perennial favourite Ryoji Koie was represented by five of his streaked Oribe Vessel (2004) works, and numerous tea bowls.

Penny Byrne has established a reputation for subverting the constrained, static decorativeness and cringe-inducing kitsch of traditional ceramic figurines. In a medium not known for provoking controversy, or eliciting comment, Byrne alters and reconstructs existing, vintage, and broken works to reflect current political and social concerns.

{gallery}Nov08/byrne_murphy:130:180:0{/gallery}

With Collateral Damage she addressed such pertinent issues as climate change, Aboriginal reconciliation, the so-called ‘War On Terror’, animal cruelty, the avian and equine influenza outbreaks, and religious fundamentalism. “There are so many worldwide issues that continue to bug me – I’m never short of ideas,” Byrne admitted, but despite the concerted focus on weighty issues she still found time to lampoon Prince Harry’s thoughtlessness, and envisage Frida Kahlo as a voodoo doll.4

Reinhardt Dammn: Anytime Baby follows the artistic wanderings of Scott Redford’s eponymous character, the sometimes fickle 22 year-old surfer, painter, and (impending) rock star, with his band Honey Pump. Redford has been working on video installations and writing a screenplay about Dammn for ten years. “Reinhardt is not an alter ego, [but] an experiment in art to test the limits of current notions of originality and authorship,” he explains. The ceramic works act as promotional devices for Dammn’s music career, designed to be point-of-sale items to accompany his launches and must-haves for his ‘fans’ to collect.

{gallery}Nov08/redford:180:130:1{/gallery}

In 1999 Redford found a small blue ceramic polar bear in an antique store, and has revisited the charm of that discovery in a series of works called My Beautiful Polar Bear. Modelled to Redford’s exacting specifications by Michael Littler at Lustre Ceramics (QLD), they are fired individually and minutely scrutinised by the artist. An entire table of these lusciously glazed, irresistible creatures was unabashed eye-candy. The more overtly rock-and-roll Star Skull (2008) was cast in three parts from a human skull Redford acquired from a former medical college collection. The unusual spiked formation on which the skull has been impaled, with the mandible draped over, was actually a Moroccan lantern – a shape which appealed to Redford because of its resemblance to a virus structure.

{gallery}Nov08/huang:180:130:1{/gallery}

Katherine Huang’s intriguing works were made out of porcelain and found objects over a two-month period, juxtaposed, and then encased as if in a time-capsule or museum display. “The balloon motif ties together a collection of travel experiences that I have had ... and the book Colour by Victoria Finlay, where she goes searching for the source of colours around the globe,” Huang comments.5 “As a whole, the pieces explore the properties of clay as balloons go from flat to full and flat again, and how different materials look when placed together, such as plastic against porcelain, and porcelain on glass,” she observes. “I was also thinking about where ideas come from, and what the most generic thought-balloon might say ...”

{gallery}Nov08/boscacci_draper:180:130:1{/gallery}

The refined works of Louise Boscacci are concerned with exploring the possibilities and challenges associated with what she calls the “ceramics of place and time”, and how this otherwise ephemeral notion might be visually realised. Several of her bowls and jars are decorated with simple hand-drawn lines and cross-hatching, but her wall vessels are often more densely embellished. The darkly elegant Bowl For 264 Species (2007) is covered with enigmatic white text, which winds like rope into an ever-tightening coil across the stoneware surface.

Renee So uses the formal portrait bust as the basis for a series of punchy, rounded, almost cartoonish heads balanced on squared-off necks. Although her characters are lacking various features, and seem ‘unfinished’, they have an appealing warmth and humanity to them. It’s as if So has left an interpretative space within the works which might even induce the viewer to think they know someone who ‘looks’ like that.

Carol Murphy skilfully employs positive and negative space to enhance her minimalist, elongated, and somewhat androgenous figures. Intimate in scale, the pale tone and clean undulating lines lend them a weightless almost ‘floating’ quality.

{gallery}Nov08/esson_so:130:180:0{/gallery}

Merran Esson’s rambunctious, angular containers have a distinctive ‘corrugated’ surface

suggestive of water tanks, grain silos, feed buckets, and corroded metal equipment found on rural properties. Though her work is superbly finished, Esson reminds us of the vital utilitarian function of the vessel in farm life, its battered form becoming a metaphor for toil and persistence. She has a strong affinity with the environment of southern New South Wales: the strata-like patterns of Yarrangobilly Lines (2008) refer to the river, limestone caves, and thermal pool located within the Kosciuszko National Park.

In the same space, Esson’s vivid blues and greens contrasted with the delicate sweetness and snowy quietude of Lynda Draper’s Wonderland. Draper’s works revisit the picture-book innocence of childhood: flowerbeds, swans, prancing ponies, kittens, rabbits, and butterflies, which look as though they were made of royal icing. In less accomplished hands, this exercise in nostalgia could easily be cloying and cutsie. Instead, Draper achieves a wistful tone, expressive of romance, simple pleasures, and halcyon days.

Rohan Wealleans’ bizarre, grotesque, and uproarious works provoke anything but indifference. The acid colours and unsettling biomorphic shapes seem derived as much from plant and insect forms as they do B-grade science fiction films. Vampire Pineapple Bomb (2008), with its bulbous body, swirling barnacle-like surface and halo of broken skewers, is punctuated by gaping mouths but no other discernable features. Spore Holding Pod, Stage 4 (2008) reflects the artist’s preoccupation with layering, surface, and containment, though it’s hard to tell whether this specimen has emerged from a deep-sea trench or crash-landed from outer space.

Arts Project Australia is a Melbourne-based not-for-profit association committed to supporting people with disabilities to become practitioners in the visual arts. It provides career support and ethically promotes their work as a viable part of the broad spectrum of contemporary arts practice. Ceramics has been integral to the workshop program for over ten years, and this was evident in the varied and confident pieces on show. Alan Constable’s beautifully realised Movie Cameras (2008) have a terrific malleability and a sense of fun. Chris Mason’s previous figurative works have suggested an homage to the Venus of Willendorf6 but his striking Woman and Snake (2007) had more recognisable biblical allusions.

Just over a month after the conclusion of this year’s event, the Art Fair Foundation announced that the much-debated decision had been reached to take the Fair annual from next year. It is being suggested that this approach will mean more galleries can be accommodated, exhibitor fees will be reduced, and running the event will be more cost-effective.7 Several international galleries have already indicated to this writer that the change will not induce them to attend more frequently at this stage; Melbourne would remain a biennial event due to freight costs, and other similar events on their schedule. Whether international galleries take a wait-and-see attitude to next year’s event or not, the annual approach may well encourage local galleries to give their ceramicists an expanded or leading role. Practitioners undoubtedly need and deserve a greater opportunity to exhibit stand-alone bodies of work at this level – certainly more than has been evident at the Fair in recent years. By all accounts, ceramic work remains popular and continues to sell well for the galleries who exhibit it. Therefore, it seems overdue to have the medium gain a wider acknowledgement of its high standing from the industry and public at large.

{xtypo_info}Inga Walton is a writer and arts consultant based in Melbourne. She contributes to numerous publications, both in Australia and internationally. Special thanks to Daniel Dorall for generously contributing his time in producing artist and installation images for this article. He is represented by Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Fitzroy, VIC.

www.diannetanzergallery.net.au {/xtypo_info}

Artist Credits

Alan Constable, Chris Mason & Paul Hodges are represented by Arts Project Australia; www.artsproject.org.au

Louise Boscacci is represented by Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Woollahra, NSW; www.rexirwin.com

Penny Byrne is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Paddington, NSW; www.ssfa.com.au

Lynda Draper is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art, Waterloo, NSW

www.2danksstreet.com.au/stella.downer.fine.art/index.html

Merran Esson is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art, Waterloo, NSW; www.merranesson.com

Steve Harrison is represented by Legge Gallery, Redfern, NSW; www.leggegallery.com

Katherine Huang is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne, Victoria; www.neonparc.com.au

Carol Murphy is represented by Brenda May Gallery, Waterloo, NSW; www.brendamaygallery.com.au

Scott Redford is represented by: Gould Galleries, South Yarra, VIC; www.gouldgalleries.com

Breenspace, Waterloo, NSW; www.breenspace.com; Jan Manton Art, South Brisbane, QLD; www.janmantonart.com

Criterion Gallery, Hobart, TAS; www.criteriongallery.com.au

Renee So is represented by: Uplands Gallery, Prahran, VIC; www.uplandsgallery.com

Kate MacGarry Gallery, London, UK; www.katemacgarry.com

Kouichi Uchida & Ryoji Koie are represented by Yamaki Art Gallery, Osaka, Japan; www.h2.dion.ne.jp/~yamakig

Rohan Wealleans is represented by: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Paddington, NSW; www.roslynoxley9.com.au

Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, NZ; www.hamishmckaygallery.com

Footnotes:

1. 30 July – 3 August 2008; Royal Exhibition Building, Carlton, VIC; www.artfair.com.au

2. Figures supplied by the Art Fair Foundation media release, “Record attendances and sales for 2008 Melbourne Art Fair”. See also, Gabriella Coslovich, “Fair paints picture of healthy art mart”, in The Age, 5 August 2008, p.16.

3. Nineteen galleries and six project rooms had single-artist or paired exhibitions. There seemed to be a growing preference for fewer artists generally, with other galleries following this trend by exhibiting only three or four artists.

4. Iconic Mexican painter and activist, born Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón (1907-54), wife of Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and the subject of Julie Taymor’s Oscar-winning film Frida (2002).

5. Victoria Finlay, Colour: A Natural History of the Palette, Ballantine Books, New York, 2003.

6. The Venus of Willendorf (c. 24 – 22,000 BC) is carved from oolitic limestone, and was discovered in 1908 by Austrian archaeologist Josef Szombathy (1853–1943), founder of the Department of Prehistory at the Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna. He died in a Nazi concentration camp, but his discovery lives on as one of the most profound and mysterious artifacts ever found.

7. See Gabriella Coslovich, “It’s official: Melbourne Art Fair to go annual”, in The Age, 6 September 2008, p.22.