



(From left) Martin Halstead, *Gate to the Sea*, porcelain; Belinda Ransom, *The Kitchen & Dining Room*, woven tapestry; Elizabeth Charles, *Urban Relic I*, porcelain.



## Sanctuary of delicate balances

A little old church is the perfect setting for an exhibition of new work by artists living in and around Tanja, writes **Kerry-Anne Cousins**.

For those who haven't visited, the Narek Galleries in Tanja, on the far south coast, are in an old decommissioned church. The little church is surrounded by a native bush garden, which is a perfect site for sculpture, and music is provided by the constant chime of bell birds. The artists in this exhibition all live and work in the area.

Poppy Benton is a young artist with a true instinct for design. The collections of her beakers are displayed sympathetically in the former sanctuary of the church – one group on a black painted table and the other on a black floor plinth that provides a neutral background.

The 129 cups or beakers are in slightly different shapes and sizes. They are made from fine porcelain ornamented with earth-coloured slips, oxides and glazes. Some are decorated in warm terracotta that provides one of the visually unifying elements in the arrangement.

Benton likes working with groups so that she can establish relationships of form and decoration. The graphic designs on the cups are variations on a theme using a design vocabulary of lines, circles, stripes and squares.

However, the free-flowing lines, which are organic rather than stylised, and the clever use of a restricted palette bring a sense of order to these very pleasing little cups and give them an importance that transcends their unpretentious shape.

Alan Watt was a mentor for Poppy Benton when she won the first Far South Coast Living Artist Scholarship in 2007. Watt is a former head of ceramics at the ANU School of Art but now lives and works in Tanja. Watt's small ceramics are much larger in concept than their size suggests. Flat-like clay fragments are carefully positioned together to make a delicately balanced sculptural form.

In this search for the perfect balance of elements, I am reminded of the sculptures of Robert Klippel (1920-2001).

Both Klippel and Watt achieve delicately balanced assemblages of materials that have a sense of completeness, so that each element is dependent on the other and nothing can be added or removed without detriment to the whole.

In a like manner to the Japanese use of rocks in their traditional gardens to suggest the immensity of the landscape, these small sculptures embody the rocks and escarpments of the local area. The play of light reveals depths of subtle colouration in their beautiful smoky and tactile surfaces.

Watt moves into larger sculptural works with ease. His large sculptures are sited sympathetically in the gallery garden. Among them, his bronze work, *Gateway*, has the same sense of completeness as the small ceramics and suggests the torii or temple gates traditionally found at the entrance to Japanese Shinto shrines. These gates symbolically mark the transition between the profane world and the sacred area of the temple.

An Asian influence is also present in the work of Elizabeth Charles. The artist's intricate ceramic sculptures were seen in Canberra last year at the exhibition *Vessel as Metaphor* at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery. The current series of ceramic works has an affinity to household shrines that one finds in Thailand, where the figures of the household gods are usually surrounded by fruit and other domestic objects. The ribbed surfaces of marrowns and the roundness of melons add interest to her forms, which are arranged generously to suggest the accoutrements of domestic life.

Charles uses slips and rubbed back dry glazes to unify her assemblages and achieve a distinctive surface that evokes the patina of weathered wood and stone.

Belinda Ransom's series of small tapestries deal with interior and exterior architectural space – its structure as well as its intimate detail. Ransom has a reputation for

her skill in working with tapestry. Originally from New Zealand, she has lived in Tanja for more than 40 years.

One of her tapestries in this exhibition is based on memory snapshots of Launceston translated into a carefully constructed design of architectural detail. While this is a well-planned and well-executed work, it is in the more intimate scenes of interiors where her real skill as an interpreter of the life around her is so skilfully translated into her weaving. The small works – *The sitting room window*, *The front door* and *The sitting room screen door*, demonstrate the delicate nuances Ransom can achieve through a mastery of the weaving process.

These works convey a spatial sensibility; yet suggest intimacy. The representation of life beyond the window in the delicately suggested forms of trees, the urn in front of a door and the view beyond the screen door all convey the presence of the artist in her domestic surroundings.

Martin Halstead's abstract porcelain forms are created to provide multifaceted, corrugated surfaces for the artist's orchestration of his rich, lustrous glazes. In *Gate of Bay and Bay Series II*, the forms are open, so that the gold used in their interiors glows in the light.

Like fellow ceramicist Alan Peacock (1943-2007), Halstead has been influenced by the lustre glazes and traditional decoration of Middle Eastern ceramics. His ceramic forms are woven about by black and gold bands and calligraphic patterns that trail over lustrous multi-coloured layered backgrounds.

The artist uses 23-carat gold leaf, which must be difficult to work with, but he shows that he is in command of this technique. His work provides an exotic note not out of place in the gentle light of the gallery building.

✦ Tanja Central, an exhibition of new work by Poppy Benton, Belinda Ransom, Alan Watt, Martin Halstead and Elizabeth Charles. Narek Galleries, Tanja. Until April 21.