



Exhibition installation of "Vessel as Metaphor" at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

VESSEL AS METAPHOR

ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 30 March – 5 May, 2013

THIS exhibition is one of the proliferation of events celebrating Canberra's centenary year. Curated by Karen O'Clery, it also brings together works by three artists with strong links to the region. Elizabeth Charles and Simone Fraser studied together (both graduating in 1981) at the (then) Canberra School of Art with Alan Peasod (1943 – 2007). Indeed, Peasod's teaching and influence play a significant part in the present practices of both artists. Gail Nichols lives outside Canberra and currently teaches

ceramics at the ANU School of Art. The Canberra connection is also strengthened by curator Karen O'Clery's long-term championing of local artists (among others) both when she was a resident of Canberra and since her move to the far south coast of NSW.

The vessel is ubiquitous throughout the history of ceramics. In a contemporary context it continues in its diverse manifestations to provide a base for a multitude of aesthetic and conceptual approaches. In this exhibition it becomes the vehicle for interrogative explo-

ration of form, surface, concept and individual philosophy. For the curator the expressive potential of the vessel to create works that are metaphorical and sometimes ambiguous in their reference to function, is the premise of her choice of artists and the 29 works which represent them.

Elizabeth Charles' art is characterised by the insinuating presence of what Philip Rawson eloquently phrased as ceramic echoes, that is the acknowledgement of the continuum of ceramic history in her work. Her acknowledgements are wide but her quiet allusions to the art of Islam continues. These however are absorbed into wider cultural expressions but always

clothed and integrated with her signature dry glaze. In this show the powerful and enigmatic sculptural objects of, for example, the Baule and Senfo peoples of West Africa, have provided both formal and conceptual exemplars for the artist. Their abstract presentation of offered dynamic alternatives to the prevailing art forms for the pioneers of modernism in the Western world during the early 20th century. For Charles they offer a seductive ambiguity, a play between abstraction and figuration that comfortably sits with her earlier formal and aesthetic concerns without diluting the unique aesthetic tension between form and surface which exemplifies her best work. They also speak of the importance of all cultural voices and the ability of Charles to allude to these and intimate their presence in her own work as ways of questioning and expanding her underlying aesthetic and that of her viewers.

The above is beautifully exemplified in *Untitled 1*. This is a proudly assertive piece. Standing only 43 cm high, it commands the space around it. The main formal motif pushes priapically upwards with a powerful thrust. This is neatly constrained by the leaf-like appearance at the back that pulls in the opposite direction towards the slabs of the base. Colour is held back to underscore the dynamism of the forms. The artist skillfully plays with the idea of resemblance. The viewer is offered a number of paths towards interpretation. The initial gestalt presents us with some sort of hybrid zoomorphic entity. Or does it? We could just as easily say that the zoomorphic is biomorphic or vegetal. No single interpretation is delivered as correct. Meaning here is individual and subtly intimated. Singular cultural reference is never a given in Charles's work where echoes of Asian cultures often impinge in tantalising ways.

Each of her works is intimate and enclosed yet conversely quietly assertive in its role as cultural reliquary, holder of memory, spirit and the traces of individual experience. Each form is idiosyncratic, redolent and evocative of her real and imaginative embracing of her personal world. The layering is simultaneously formal and philosophical. Viewers must embrace the tensions inherent in her challenging and aesthetically resolved ceramic forms.

The elegance of Simone Fraser's formal language is exemplified in "Vessel as Metaphor". The forms in this exhibition share a familial morphology yet each is distinctive and asserts its individual character. Each piece reveals a quietly determined character reflective

of the technical skill of the artist allied with her finely honed aesthetic intelligence. The combination of the manual with the mental in her work imbues it with both spirit and sensuality that speak of her fascination with the medium of clay and its ability to contain and convey through the vessel form notions of history, of time passed and time passing. In *Contained Impressions 1* the simple eloquence of the form is played off against the tonally modulated agitations of the surface. The agitation though is a restrained one, activating the surface and guiding the viewing eye around and across it. The relatively restricted palette and clever chiaroscuro games imbue a wonderful feeling of slow enveloping movement as the surface wraps itself around the form. More pointedly this accumulative activity is contrasted with the interior of the form. Here, the "vessel" as both container and contained, is given aesthetically articulate expression.

The same resolution is evident in *Contained Impressions 8*, where the palette is expanded with splashes of orange jumping energetically across the surface, playing with the purple-blue, greens and yellows that constitute the overall palette. The gentle curve of the pot's belly imparts a sensuality to the form whilst imbuing it with those haptic qualities that invite touch.

Gail Nichols's work is concerned with the expressive qualities of glazes and the exploration of the sculptural qualities of both closed and open forms. The vessel form is the perfect vehicle for such investigations which is clearly evinced in this exhibition. *Mist Descending* is a rich form covered in a lush glaze which spreads sensuously around the body emphasizing the latter's fulsome proportions. The wrapped surface also highlights the interior space contained by the walls of the pot. The combination



Simone Fraser, 'Contained Impressions 5', 2012-13, ceramic, dry glaze, three firings, mid-fired, 61 x 19 cm



Gail Nichols, 'Red Hill', 2012, stoneware, soda vapour glaze, 35x17x17cm

of kinesis and stasis – movement and stillness – is perhaps one of those insistent qualities possessed by the ceramic vessel which has allowed it to remain of contemporary relevance throughout history. The use of these contrasts imbues Nichols's works with an alluring aesthetic tension, a tension which embraces medium, form, surface and space.

Her use of glaze and her understanding of its technical qualities and expressive potential are consummate. This is exemplified in *Mist Descending* where a spherical form is enveloped in a veil of glaze which seems to be falling as it is viewed. The clever and dexterous technical and conceptual subtlety of this marks this piece as particularly appealing.



Elizabeth Charles, 'Urban Relic I', 2012, slips, dry glaze on porcelain, 42 x 18 x 10 cm



Simone Fraser, 'Contained Impressions 2', 2012-13, ceramic, dry glaze, mid fired, 55 x 23 cm



Elizabeth Charles, 'Elmwood Relic II', 2013, slips, dry glaze on porcelain, 43.5 x 28.5 x 11.5 cm



Gail Nichols, 'Mist Descending', 2012, stoneware, 35 x 42 x 42 cm



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