National Treasures

Contemporary Ceramics from Australia and New Zealand

23 March – 12 May 2019

Glenn Barkley ‘Rainbow Pox Pot’, 2019
The idea for this show was a simple but indulgent one. First, cherry-pick our favourite ceramic artists from Australia and New Zealand. Next, chuck them (delicately) together in a gallery space. And finally, see if the magic happens.

It did. Virginia Leonard’s international career is blossoming, so it’s especially fitting to show her work in Matakana, where her extraordinary ceramics journey began. Her monumental ‘Smoking in Bed, Queen Mary’s 1986’, glistening with darkness and oozing with vibrant energy, is a masterwork of brave exploration and punk irreverence. It offers a witty counterpoint to the work of another Aotearoa-born (but largely Japanese-trained) maker, Aaron Scythe whose ‘Meoto Iwa’ is a delightful interpretation of the ‘Married Couple rocks’ that can be found off the coast of Futami, in Japan.

From the other side of the Tasman, Sydney based Glenn Barkley’s joyful and elegant pots and plates are eye-poppingly seductive. His Australian counterpart Carlene Thompson’s ‘Kalaya and Mamu’ (Emu and Spirit) showcases a potter who is turning heads, if not wheels, by bringing to life the stories cherished by her Pitjantjatjara culture.

From Melbourne, we’re honoured to have senior maker Stephen Benwell back at The Vivian with a gorgeous example of his delicate, whimsical, but always joyful ceramic vessels – paired beside a slightly older (by only 5200 years or so) maker from the early bronze age. This delightful terracotta bowl, made somewhere north of where Syria is today, speaks to us through millennia to remind us that, well, while we’ll all turn to dust at some point, our creations can outlive us.

First time exhibitors in New Zealand, Stephen Bird and Lynda Draper are both Sydney based. And share even more in common with their passion for quirky, colourful, and deeply emotive works. The calm and reflective gentleness of Lynda’s work ‘Still Life’, 2014 contrasts with the strangely sexual appeal of Stephen’s ‘Woman with a Banana’ (is it the woman or the banana? Hmmm). Both works brilliant; each utterly unique.

And finally, to Dean Smith. Brisbane born, he grew up in New Zealand and typifies what this show is about – telling the stories of our part of the world. His mesmerisingly beautiful ‘Ta Tarata (The Tattooed Rock)’, 2017 is a meditation on Te Otukapuarangi, or the now famously destroyed pink and white terraces near Mount Tarawera.

All of these artists are reflecting the pathos, joy, invigoration – and perhaps even dread – of the culture of the times we live in. We are lucky to be able to share their story.

Scott Lawrie
Director
You don’t have National Living Treasures in New Zealand. But you do have something similar; The New Zealander of the Year Awards which, embarrassingly enough, were founded by an Australian.

In Australia, where I’m from, we definitely have National Living Treasures. 81 of them in fact. No artists though. There used to be two; those bastions of mid-century blandness Arthur Boyd and Margaret Olley. On Google they exist now on the Deceased list. Robert Hughes (also deceased) is there as art critic and author – he used to be a painter didn’t he? Does that count? I once heard he used to buy his pictures back at auction and burn them – a lesson that others haven’t learnt.

Rolf’s gone too, removed from the list and exiled to the digital naughty corner where he belongs.

It’s hard to believe this list is even real.

I can only speak for Australia – and I can’t even do that really it’s far to polymorphous and fractured like any nation. But it’s a confusing list. I acknowledge the collective endeavours of those who make it, but it’s a shame no potters made it – Gwyn Hanssen Pigott? Marea Gazzard? Peter Rushforth? Thancoupie? All gone now but in the digital graveyard where you might just live forever.

But enough of people, what of things? For Treasure is forever fugitive. Take the supposed riches that are buried on Oak Island the legendary money pit ‘discovered’ by three young men in the late 1700s off the coast of Nova Scotia. Is Oak Island even real? Let alone the treasure.

Supposedly the island itself is now like the coat of Akaky Akakievitch Bashmachkin in Gogol’s short story the Overcoat – more holes than island. The holes begat holes that begat holes the infill going into one and then the other. The obsessive idea of the treasure creating a monstrous piece of twisted land art.

The island has its own Wikipedia page, reality TV show and endless made-for-you-tube documentaries. And when the Knights of the Templar are mentioned you KNOW it must be real.

But what is the treasure for a ceramicist?

There is a moment in making where there has to be a letting go – and there is something to be treasured in this. At the end of working on something so obsessively and intimately and at the point of firing there is a feeling that when it goes into the kiln it is going out into the world like a rat leaving a sinking ship. The kiln’s ability to transform and change is always one where the process lays claim to some ownership. And after this process when you next meet the work it is transformed. You may not even recognise this warm thing. For me it’s why I obsess over my own work and like having it.
around for as long as I can. I don’t feel like I made it. It’s a foreign order here among us. Mine, but not mine too. A peculiar and addictive sensation. It is here when the form takes on some greater meaning. If you work with glaze you can get stuck in the detail. Crack and fissures, shiny or matt surface each trap the eye like a crazed pirate his hands full of golden, shiny bullion.

It could also be the undeniable sensation of the past the endless seeking and peeping from one pit to the next. Of something looking down and over you like the ghosts that appear at the site of the hole, marking the spot, encouraging you to try your luck.

I think ceramics are the greatest medium for embodying the art of the past. It’s a cliché but the artist’s hand in pottery is a present and undeniable force. As you make pots you become increasingly aware of the way things are, the ways they were, and the way they were made. The movements in making something are choreographed and understood in the mind.

The real treasure could be all this. The unquantifiable and unexplained thing; the making itself. The sensation of time passing or slowing down, folding in on itself. Of the studio and the clock. The most precious things of all.

Dean Smith