

Eyeline Cat Moore

Mirror

6-18th October 2000
Gallery 482

Susan Ostling Patsy Hely Toni Warburton

Over the years, Ostling, Hely and Warburton's ceramic table-talk between Brisbane, Lismore and Sydney has created a conference call so prodigious that Peter Reith's Ministerial Telecard comes to mind as much as any elegant mirror image. 'Mirror' is the latest conversation between these inter-disciplinary ceramicists.

Three antique oval dining-tables are set for spatial histories and geographies of the home, studio and the bush, speculations on the processes of art and memory, systems of translation from one set of knowledges or forms to another, and how ceramics might provide an analytic tool in a discussion about history, geography, feminism and aesthetics.

Patsy Hely's installation offers a suggestive start for ongoing research. Tableware has traditionally supported floral or bushland decorative motifs. Hely pointed asks, "Inside, do we need to keep the outside always before us?" The delicate cup and saucer, beaker and bowl grouped on a mantelpiece above her table wear a demure blue and yellow flower motif. Decorative floral transfers are fused on the unglazed pieces, accentuating their abrupt borders and arbitrary placement. These formal disruptions offer a quiet yet critical distance from the feminine gentility of the tradition. There is just enough hinted slippage in the floral motif to suggest all's not well in the garden party below.

Hely's table is no bush picnic. Aesthetically it is uncomfortably reminiscent of the colonial grotesque, as elaborated by art historian Bernard Smith from Marcus Clarke's oft-quoted thoughts on the "weird melancholy" of the Australian bush. The dining table is abstractly laid: it could be a theatre stage-design, or a home-made version of the children's detective board-game, 'Cluedo?', or set for an (unhealthy, Dickensian) meal of sorts. Geometric, crisp-thin ceramic 'bones' encase *pate de vere* marrow, accompanied by an expectant silver marrow-spoon set alongside. A plain white dinner-plate is cut-away on one side by the form of what looks like an architectural cross-section of a plaster cornice. Three upturned beer

glasses become magnifying glasses through which the visitor peers in vain at a small picture of a country cottage. The visitor literally looks through a glass darkly, squinting through paraffin filler to pick out telling details in the image. It is a detail from a painting by Conrad Martens, Brush Scene, Brisbane Waters, originally sketched in 1835 on a property belonging to F.A.Hely, near Gosford on the NSW central coast.

Hely's parlour-game detective wades in deep genealogical and psychological waters. Following architectural plans for a "cottage for F.A. Hely, esq." drawn up by the colonial architect John Verge, Hely inks-in a small, stepped image like a bloodstain on the tablecloth, representing the entry to windowless cellar attached to the Hely's cottage, which reputedly built as a space for the convicts ("but why at the house?", she wonders). A palpable feeling of frustration grows from knowing we will never get the full story of what went on in that 'other country' we call the past. There is a moody power in the work, in its careful placement of elements which don't quite sit together, and yet which collectively conjure feelings of deep ambivalence.

Toni Warburton's table of wonder equally demands the inspired observational powers of Holmes or Poirot. Her perspective on the home, studio and bush draws from natural history, ceramics and painting. She lays out small objects that draw their inspiration from the systematic processes of both art practice and wetland ecologies. On the one hand, Warburton muses, we have the tea tree water-table. On the other, topological painting. (I must admit I had to look that one up in the handy gallery dictionary: "topology: the study of those properties of geometric forms that are considered to be unchanged, even when bent, stretched, etc.")

Warburton extends earlier research in her ceramic beaker forms and related domestic objects, which are alternatively flat or woven to suggest tangled sedge. Solid forms translate into void, shadows and reflections become a cut and weave. Low-lying cloud over water translates into a ceramic 'sketch'. The form of a beaker is unwrapped and splayed flat as an open weave. The template lifts again from the table into a beaker, its spiral wrap furls clockwise and anti-clockwise, as if pulled in a slow eddy of water. Richly-glazed surfaces pick out the forms of dragon-flies, lilies, clouds, sedge-grass and the tea-tree stained water. Warburton's plein-air ceramics conjure dreamy

thoughts of an antipodean Giverny: Eric Rolls and Claude Monet together.

Susan Ostling's table grouping of neutrally-toned vases looks at first like a one-off idea, albeit a witty and intriguing one. Vases Owned by Other People is, in a way, precisely what the title says it is: reconstructions of vases owned by Ostlings' friends and colleagues, who have drawn a picture of their vases for Ostling, and then suggested another object that the drawn vase reminded them of. Body parts, Egg, leaf, root vegetable, body parts The glazes have been kept very neutral; the closest the artist could come to non-colour (although there is a subtle suggestion of the Australian domestic tradition of Martin Boyd: with such suggestive objects, all sorts of cultural and historical associations come to mind, willy-nilly). Surfaces are inscribed with textural markings applicable to each named and labeled vase: "spaceship", "shell", "spider".

Ostling's ensemble prompts further thought on the intriguing nature of attachment and association, gifting and translation. These vases have undergone a chain of transformations, from someone's real vase to their drawing, to a named associated object, to Ostling's own interpretive re-creation, to be purchased and possibly gifted to other people, thus generating further transactions.

These vessels also convey Ostling's fascination with the historical and cultural story of the vase: its complicated funerary, ecclesiastic and later domestic and industrial fabric. She is intrigued how simple objects such as vases may stand as metaphors for other things, taking up Jean Baudrillard's suggestion that objects may be like mirrors, "not only because of their ability to reflect something of ourselves, or, at least our desired selves, but also because the images reflected follow 'one another without ever contradicting one another.'" Each of the works on display toys with this idea in some form; however they also engage with each other. Each object proposes a new point or counter-point, and generates fruitful complications to this model of sweet surrogacy.

Catriona Moore