

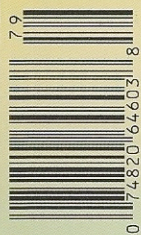
Ceramics

Art + Perception

2019

#113

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| USD | \$20 |
| EUR | €18 |
| CAD | \$27 |
| AUD | \$27 |
| GBP | £15 |



In an Ideal World: the 2019 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award at Shepparton Art Museum

Written by Damon Moon

Intro: road trip

I almost missed the opening of the **2019 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award**. I'd been at the Melbourne Convention Centre for *Denfair*, Australia's biggest design trade-fair and also to attend the *Friends and Associates/Local Design exhibition Expo 2019*, a tightly curated, three day design pop-up, held at what used to be the Meat Market Craft Centre in North Melbourne, now 'reimagined' as a venue for hire.

Caught the train back to Bendigo, jumped in the car and called in to work at Bendigo Pottery, Australia's oldest and largest ceramics manufacturer, before continuing down the highway to Shepparton, arriving just in time for the speeches.

That little journey covered a lot of ground – design, craft, industry and finally art. For what it's worth, that's the context for this review.

In an Ideal World

If clay is a wonky mirror made of mud, forever fixed by an attentive fire, then the **2019 Sidney Myer Fund Ceramic Award** is a hall of mirrors; at once reflecting the makers, the selectors and the judges; the institution, current fashions and trends; and the experiences that all those who view this exhibition bring to the table, which I guess includes me.

So, in the interests of *full disclosure* I should state that I've never entered this award but I did, in late 2018, exhibit an installation piece at SAM which occupied the same extensive vitrine used by Steven Bird for his work in this exhibition.

The first time I peered into that lobby-sized art aquarium, SAM's Director, Dr. Rebecca Coates, had filled the space with a riotous and colourful collection of early to mid-twentieth century *art pottery* – it really was a delight and also something quite close to my heart, as it was exactly the type of pottery made by my current employer, Bendigo Pottery, back in the day. (I'm sure I've seen the case-mold for the swan-vase they had displayed somewhere around here...)



Continent of Exiles (detail), Stephen Bird, 2019, artist and installation view. Image credit: Amina Barolli. Courtesy of Shepparton Art Museum.

The second occasion saw me inside the vitrine, placing my own works and trying not to walk into the glass doors (almost got away with it). The third was at this year's Sidney Myer award, where I had time to take in the full panoply of *Continent of Exiles*, thirty ceramics made by Stephen Bird – the Bad-Wallace, Bad-Grommit, Sean the Wolf in Sheep's Clothing of Australian ceramics.

As SAM's curator Lara Merrington points out, there is "... no particular narrative to Bird's story-telling", a statement embodying an almost *koan*-like paradox but nonetheless one with which I fundamentally agree. Pithy and comical by turns, Bird presents "a diorama reminiscent of folk story-telling", though just which folk we are referring to here is another question. There is certainly no naivety nor the folk artist's unquestioning continuation of tradition, rather a studied exercise in style. The vitrine both helps and hinders, as it always does, framing and isolating the work with such force that I wonder if it wouldn't be better, within the context of an award, to do away with this option entirely. Still, Bird trained as a painter and in this instance the setting seems apposite.

This prize has been around for a while. It began in 1991 as the *Sidney Myer Fund Australia Day Ceramic Award* (OMG that would so not happen now #myceramicsarenotcomplicit) and by the late nineties had morphed into the *Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramic Art Award* with the stated aim of "providing an unprecedented opportunity for a major international ceramic award and exhibition in Australia."

In 2010 the award changed its name yet again, becoming the *Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramics Award*. That year the winner was Stephen Benwell, who, along with Dr. Lisa Slade, Assistant Director of Artistic Programs at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and SAM's Director Dr. Rebecca Coates, was one of the judges for this year's prize. The 2010 award maintained an emerging and an international category alongside the main prize, as it did in 2012 when it was won by Kirsten Coehlo. In 2015 the prize was awarded to Ramesh Mario Nithyendron at which time it settled into its present form of a single winner from a field of finalists, with the 2017 prize being awarded to Jenny Orchard from a field of five finalists.

The Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award is unusual in that while it has an open call for entries (which means it's not really an invitational prize) it is then heavily edited; out of maybe a couple of hundred entries only a handful remain. This year, six artists – Julie Bartholomew, Stephen Bird, Greg Daly, Lynda Draper, Juz Kitson and Isadora Vaughan – were offered the opportunity, supported by a small stipend, to develop a body of work to be exhibited at SAM, from which one of the finalists was selected as the winner of the not inconsiderable sum of \$50,000 AUD. The award is acquisitive, although not all of the winning artist's works necessarily enter the collection.

And herein lies the rub, because ipso facto this award is beginning to be read as being one for ceramic 'installation', that poorly-defined but ubiquitous arm of contemporary art practice which is so museum-specific it essentially is mendicant on that sector for its survival.



(It's also worth mentioning that the Shepparton Art Museum hosts a significant *Indigenous Ceramics Award (ICA)* with prize money of \$20,000, which in 2018 was won by the artist Yhonnie Scarce.)

By the time the next prize is scheduled the Shepparton Art Museum will be moving into a new, purpose built and greatly expanded building and this puts even more emphasis on this (these) important award(s); what it has been, what it is now and what it might become.

In terms of the exhibition display, a significant change occurred in 2015 when the award was shifted from the larger gallery spaces downstairs to the smaller upstairs rooms.

Below:
Line of Sight: Captured Moments (detail), Greg Daly, 2019, artist and installation view.

Opposite:
Anthropogenic Scrolls (detail), Julie Bartholomew, 2019, artist and installation view.
Image credits: Amina Barolli. Courtesy of Shepparton Art Museum.



While entirely logical from the museum's point of view, that seemingly unimportant change to where the prize was situated, together with the small number of finalists selected, had the effect of giving each artist a room to themselves, which they then proceeded to fill. And herein lies the rub, because ipso facto this award is beginning to be read as being one for ceramic *installation*, that poorly-defined but ubiquitous arm of contemporary art practice which is so museum-specific it essentially is mendicant on that sector for its survival.

Not that I have an issue with the form, but a group of works in a room does not necessarily amount to an installation and in a prize of this importance, with such a high level of curatorial input, I think it is extremely important that everyone involved is on the same page regarding just what constitutes an appropriate *body of work* for the purposes of the award.

Greg Daly's *Line of Sight: Captured Moments 2019* is undoubtedly an installation. A group of rounded, lustrous ceramic objects, raised on metal supports, echo the video footage of rolling hills projected on an adjacent wall. Every piece is part of a whole, a *narrative* if you will. It makes total sense as a grouping, even if to me – as it did to my exhibition-viewing companion who had

grown up on the land – it brought to mind a herd of psychedelic sheep all gazing at the sunset. (What was that grass they were chewing?) There was nothing extraneous in this work, it was a significant extension of Daly's practice and as such this work would seem to me to fulfil the award's brief quite admirably.

Both Julie Bartholomew and Juz Kitson's work straddles the territory between presenting collected works and installation. They also share a similar approach to manufacture, often utilising the full potential of contractors, artisans and interns and it seems appropriate to consider these two artists' works side by side.

Julie Bartholomew is a born designer, a term which I mean as a compliment and one which probably makes her wince. Despite the important subject matter with which she deals (the science of climate change) as part of her ongoing conceptual engagement with environmental issues, I can't help seeing the birth of a *collection*. Her objects would be as much at home on Via Santa Marta during Milan Design Week as in a contemporary art gallery; the carefully-chosen colours and clean designs would become her signature for fabrics, home-wares, and a range of ceramic furniture, all of which are well within the manufacturing



Opposite:
Temporal Fluidity
(detail), Juz Kitson,
2019, artist and
installation view.

Below:
**Brickworks (Touch,
Cut, Embed)** (detail),
Isadora Vaughan,
2019, artist and
installation view.
Image credits:
Amina Barolli.
Courtesy of Shepparton
Art Museum.

capabilities of her extended networks. The climate-change narrative (there's that word again) would play well into the luxe and verve of high-end consumerism, which likes nothing better than to have its cake and eat it too – a bit like the art world really, but much better dressed.

For what it's worth, I took the totem-like porcelain and cast-glass *Anthropogenic Scrolls* together with the digital prints on paper of *Unravelling Climate History* to be one powerful, standout work (I deliberately put off reading the explanatory texts until I've had a chance to make up my own mind about things) with the collection of porcelain objects *Mapping Carbon*, as beautiful as they were, being surplus to requirements. Again, I think this relates to the type of rigorous curatorial intervention from which the entire award would have benefited. Less often really is more, and I couldn't help feeling that this dictum might have been usefully applied to many of the exhibits.

Another artist with strong connections to the world of Chinese ceramics manufacturing and the myriad possibilities it presents is Juz Kitson. She also has the best titles, mixing scraps of Byron (Lord, not the Bay...although come to think of it...) – '*She walks in beauty,*

like the night, and all that's best of dark and bright and there still lurks an elusive something' – and gnomic allusions to Newton's Second Law – *A subtle power to overcome friction* – to aphorisms more generally found (and perhaps better left) in the self-help section of your local bookstore, as in – *You are what you think about most* – or was that Barbara Kruger?

In the award, a number of Kitson's instantly recognisable, pendulous mixed-media assemblages, made of porcelain, pelts, fur, teeth, horn and glass (those materials originating from exotic locales, such as 'Dehua porcelain, Scandinavian reindeer pelt, Tibetan gazelle hide' being identified like unguents in a day-spa) rub shoulders – or at least bits of what might have once been shoulders – with work of a different character. *Accumulated associations; they form potentialities or possibilities*, a long, elevated structure covered with an exquisitely detailed coral-like work in porcelain, is a piece with which I feel curiously familiar.

In part it is childhood memories of gliding over shallow reefs while a world passes inches below your face although here, alas, all the colour has gone; coral-bleaching, I suppose. The obsessive detail also reminded me of the work of Anne-Sophie Guerinaud (Anthemis ceramics)

who has interned with several leading Australian makers including Juz Kitson (she previously spent time at the JamFactory when I was Creative Director of the Ceramics Studio) and again it is here that Kitson and Bartholomew's approach echoes that of a designer or creative director; often sourcing the best skills, products and services available to assist in making their work.

The only problem I see in this approach lies in attribution, or rather the lack of attribution and the assumptions that stem from this contextual absence. Some artists and curators emphasise these creative connections, just as many ethical designers now support and encourage local artisans and manufacturing by acknowledging the collective contribution that enables complex or specialist tasks to be realised.

But in the forest of words – the wall texts, catalogue essays, articles and reviews – that surround an important exhibition such as this, the wood frequently gets lost in the trees. If it is instructive to elaborate at l - e - n - g - t - h on the conceptual underpinnings of an artwork then surely it is equally as interesting to examine its origins in terms of manufacture – if only (and there are many other reasons besides) to raise issues which may contribute to the greater good.

For example, asking why it is that artists like Julie Bartholomew and Juz Kitson work so much in China may lead to the discovery of new possibilities in Australia. Since the award has deliberately set an agenda of fostering excellence in Australian ceramics this surely would be an outcome to be welcomed.

It's just that with ceramics, having been carried, giggling and giddy in love, over the threshold a level of unwelcome conformity sets in and the very things that make ceramics unique are subsumed by the rhetoric and puffery of the art world. Like living with a narcissist, it all becomes about them.



Isadora Vaughan's association with manufacturing is both more local than Bartholomew's or Kitson's and yet less interested in deploying the skills of others than in a process akin to gleaned the collection and use of unwanted material to a good end.

Isadora has a connection to Krause Bricks, a third-generation brickworks based in the Victorian town of Stawell about three hours drive west of Melbourne.

Using 'wasters' from the factory she has constructed small, partition-like structures in the gallery, thus removing the product from its intended or expected use. Those with a knowledge of art history may look to Carl Andre's 1966 *Equivalent VIII* or even the Australian artist Alex Danko's fascination with the brick, from his early 1970's *Just a Pile of Tricks* to his windowless red brick simulacrum of a house in the Lion Art Centre forecourt in Adelaide, but I also see a small, regionally-based Victorian factory that has been willing to engage with leading architects and designers and parlay the attendant collateral into a thriving business where Krause bricks are used on some of the coolest buildings around. Now that really is clever.

Vaughan's *Touch, Cut & Embedded* that together comprise *Brickworks* is perhaps the most self-consciously *arty* piece in the award, and it is no surprise that her background is less involved with ceramic traditions and processes than the other participants. The engagement with craft, so evident in all the other artists' works, is almost entirely absent from Vaughan's sculptures. Both the extruded clay components and the metal armatures which serve as their support, complete with contrasting dollops of builder's bog are, like Carl Andre's work made more than fifty years before, completely reliant on the context of the gallery to define their object-status; returned to the back of the brickyard they would be unrecognisable artifacts of industrial detritus.

And the winner is ...

In his interview speaking about the decision to award Lynda Draper the award, Stephen Benwell described her collected works, exhibited under the title *Sonambulism*, as being unlike anything he had ever seen. That's a big call, given there is very little new in the world, but it's certainly true that most ceramics either enclose volumes and/or present continuous surfaces, whereas Draper's work could be said to describe space; it's as much about what's absent as is present but what is there seems... enough.

Apparently *Sonambulism* relates to the artist's residency at the Chateau of Versailles on the outskirts of Paris, that seventeenth century edifice of baroque power established during the reign of the 'Sun King', Louis XIV, later to be forever associated with the terminal fail of the French court, the downfall of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Her work is said to "conjure a psychological space with echoes of the wintry parklands, gardens and decorative excesses..." (a matter of opinion, that) "... of the Palace of Versailles" motivating her to "consider her own European heritage, and our often complex relationship to the history of Australia's first European settlement and its impact on the Australian landscape and people."

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Draper's work is strange and inner and I'd prefer it was left unexplained because I suspect that it comes from a place deep within her where there are no coherent words and from which art often springs. Amidst the fashion for the *faux naïve* (yes Sydney, I'm looking at you) Draper's ceramics come close to being outsider art, even if they are made by someone who is very much an insider.

And that *insider* thing is where I have a problem with this prize and it's one of the reasons it left me somewhat underwhelmed.

I think the *Sidney Myer Award* has become borderline institutionalised.

Is it a coincidence that of the six artists who were finalists, four are either employed or have recently been employed in senior teaching positions at art schools (two from the one major Sydney art school), thus making them part of a vanishingly small coterie of ceramic artists to have such a privilege? Or is it that both institutions, the art school and the gallery, speak the same language, an officially sanctioned dialect but one spoken by fewer and fewer adherents as time goes on?



Sonambulism (detail), Lynda Draper, 2019, artist and installation view. Image credit: Amina Barolli. Courtesy of Shepparton Art Museum.

Garth Clark, an astute observer of all things ceramic, coined the phrase *Fortress Ceramica*, but in this exhibition the ramparts in question are those surrounding the contemporary art museum. It's not that these are erected to keep ceramics out; on the contrary, the drawbridge is down, the oil's off the boil and the crocodiles in the moat have all been turned into handbags. It's just that with ceramics, having been carried, giggling and giddy in love, over the threshold, a level of unwelcome conformity sets in and the very things that make ceramics unique are subsumed by the rhetoric and puffery of the art world. Like living with a narcissist, it all becomes about them.

Lara Merington, the curator at Shepparton Art Museum during the development of the 2019 award, begins her catalogue essay *The Storytellers: landscapes of the real and imagined*, with the sentence "How about a material-based prize where we don't talk about the material...", before going on to explain that many of the exhibitors "... don't describe themselves as ceramists; rather they are artists", and you can almost feel the caps lock ARTISTS kick in.

The Australian ceramics world, like any good eco-system, is defined by its diversity. A young maker with a few years practice under her belt might have twenty thousand followers on social media, be working with stylists and designers, making work on commission for a new restaurant, selling online, exhibiting internationally and being included in curated shows, all at the one time. This is the new normal, but I just don't see that person in the room and she really needs to be present. Not for her sake – she'll be fine. It's the award I'm worried about. ■

About the author

Dr. Damon Moon is a second-generation maker. Currently Creative Director of CLAD, the Centre for Learning and Design at Bendigo Pottery in regional Victoria, from 2014 to 2018 he was Creative Director of the JamFactory ceramics studios in Adelaide, South Australia. In forty years of practice he has worked in art, industry and design, as a studio head, a designer/maker, a researcher and exhibiting artist with work held in several major public collections. One of Australia's most prolific commentators on ceramics he has published over fifty articles and book chapters and in 2013 he co-authored the Wakefield Press monograph Stephen Bowers: Beyond Bravura as part of a series initiated by the SALA Festival and supported by the South Australian government. Damon Moon holds a PhD in Art History from the University of South Australia for research into the development of Australian ceramics.