



Roderick Bamford. *Tincture of Laudanum*. Glazed, slipcast ceramic with pigment & onglaze enamel. 4 x 16 x 30 cm. Photographer: Cara Howell.

Alice at the Allport

Curious Arts and Magical Practices

Article by Penny Smith

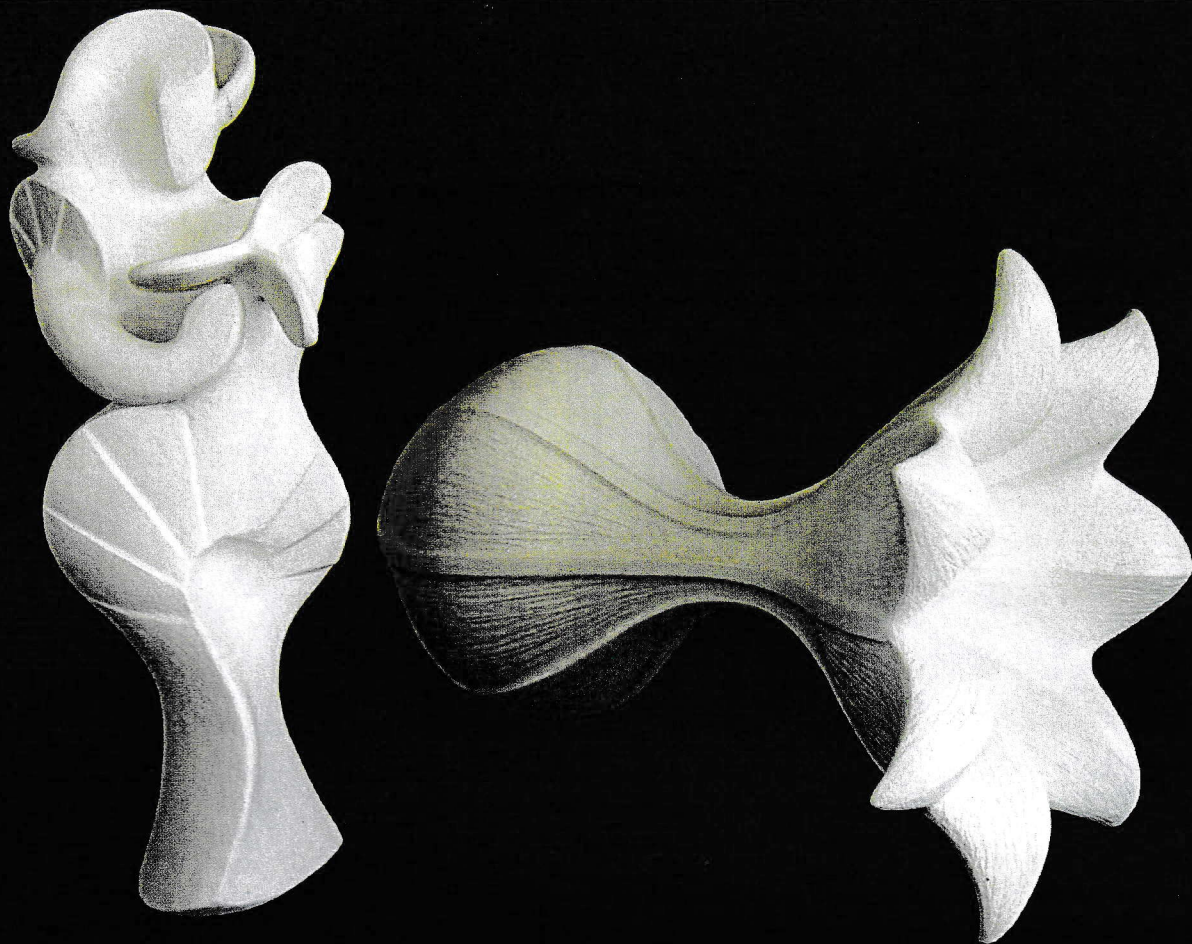
ALICE AT THE ALLPORT WAS A SERIES OF EXHIBITIONS and events inspired by Lewis Carroll's story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, that explored the alchemy of ceramics, the social rituals of taking high tea and the art of storytelling. This series of events was part of Tasmania's 4th *10 Days on the Island* international arts festival that took place in March 2007 at the State Library of Tasmania in Hobart.

Alice's adventures in time and place were used in this instance as a metaphor for a number of invited artists to explore the State Library's collection of fine and decorative arts at the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, to the Alice theme. The Allport collection boasts a unique collection of rare books, maps, photographs and decorative arts, (furniture, china, silver and glass) all set within designated room bays that provided the artists with a series of theatrical backdrops in which to place their artistic interpretations.

When Alice fell down the rabbit-hole, she pondered about emerging on the other side of the world – "I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth. How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downward. The Antipathies, I think."

This sense of 'other-worldliness' – of stepping into another time – parallels the experience of entering the room-bays of the Allport Collection, each of which is permanently displayed to re-create the activities and atmosphere of a gentleman's house of more than 100 years ago.

Each of the seven ceramic artists was invited to create a work that highlighted or celebrated the function of his or her selected room, and just as Alice's trip through Wonderland – enhanced by various mind and body-altering stimulants – led to a series of surreal experiences, so too the rooms became enhanced by the fantastic lunacy of ceramics.

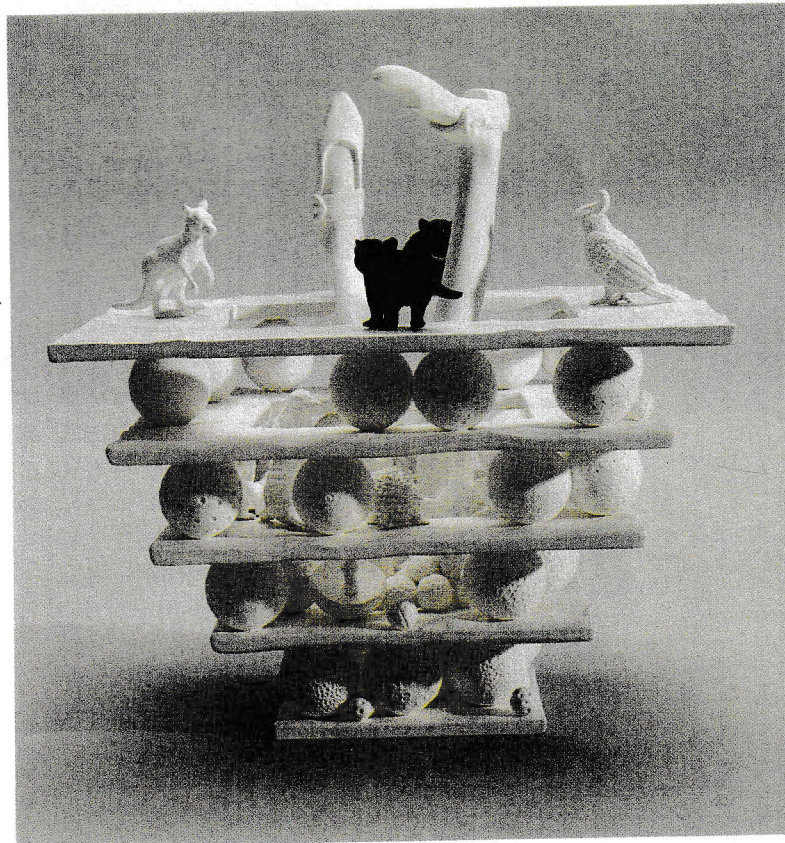


Fiona Murphy. *Flux*. Handbuilt stoneware. Flower: 29 x 29 x 46 cm. Figure: 37 x 13 x 12 cm. Photographer: Fiona Murphy.

Rod Bamford was given the first of the Allport rooms that was set out as 'The Study'. In this room, Bamford chose to create a series of porcelain pieces that appeared to ooze through the fabric of the study's walls – that dripped on to the table beneath and ended up as a series of 'splats' on the floor to finally morph into the grin of the Cheshire Cat. These distorted objects were intended to physically interact with the space itself, and thus to suggest a connection of past and present – a kind of time-warped intervention. Bamford's title *Laudanum* alludes to the drug induced transformations of mind and matter often associated with Carroll, his characters and our own experience as readers of Alice – and laudanum was also a tincture of opium supposedly used by Carroll to ease his painful arthritis.

Next door, in the location of 'The Games Room', Fiona Murphy's *Flux* comprised of two handbuilt stoneware pieces that dealt with the continuously changing nature of both Alice herself (she was forever growing and shrinking) and the changing world she found herself in. "A wonderland" states Murphy in her artist's statement "is so important because it is not what you create, but what you do not destroy that is at issue".

Changing environmental issues was also at the heart of Andrea Hyland's *Descending Alice*. Hyland's explored Alice's rapid descent into a bewildering world in 'The Library', where her Alice finds herself



Andrea Hyland's. *Descending Alice*. Slipcast porcelain, ceramic crayon, found objects. 28 x 28 x 28 cm. Photographer: Andrew Barcham.



Jenny Orchard. *CuCuCu-umber*. Slipcast earthenware clay and glazes. 51 x 23 x 12 cm. Photographer: Cara Howell.

contemplating the demise of so much that is topsy turvey, broken and on the point of extinction as she falls down the rabbit hole. Hylands refers here to the sorry state of Tasmania's iconic mascot, the Tasmanian devil, whose current cancerous plight has caused national consternation and a scientific scramble to seek both cause and cure.

Around the corner, and into 'The Sitting Room', Jenny Orchard's two works sit in grotesque comfort among the dainty lounge suite, delicate silver tea ware and cabinets full of fine china shepherds and shepherdesses from the English factories of Derby, Bow and Chelsea. Love them or loathe them – *DoDo-egg*



Julie Bartholomew. *Old Tunes in New Time/Space*. Slipcast porcelain and wax. 90 x 38 x 37 cm. Photographer: Julie Bartholomew.

and *CuCuCu-umber* are a comic comment on the author himself. Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym used by the Reverend Lutwidge Dodgson, who suffered an embarrassing stutter and often referred to himself as the Right Reverend DoDoDodgson. Orchard goes on to spin make believe in the best Alice tradition – *CuCuCu-umber*, for example, is intended to remind readers of gardener Bill's mishap with the hot house vegetable patch: 'when he fell into the cucumber frame (letting) loose all sorts of exceptional inquisitive and desirous creatures (that had been) fed by the cucumbers and the solar radiation inside that innocuous box'.

Hybridisation continues in 'The Music Room', where Julie Bartholomew re-created a 19th century Zoetrope using Sir John Tenniel's classic Alice drawings. In the tradition of those early animations, Alice's neck extends and retracts with every turn of the carousel to the tune of *Greensleeves*, and as an interactive piece, this caused great audience delight. In the same room *Old Tunes in New Time/Space* conflates the world of manners and correctness, so characteristic of the Victorian era' with the 'new spaces' created by Carroll's magical Wonderland. The phonograph's distorted mouth-like horn and surrealistically disembodied arm with its nail-like stylus, plays loony tunes in 'Alice's music room'.

Also reflecting the Victorian era, Ruth Hutchinson's line-up of ghostly gynaecological birthing aids creates a chilling reminder to all women of the dangers of childbirth in an age where the bedroom was the battle-ground for new life. The setting is both luscious, with the rich brocades of the four-poster, and bizarre – Hutchinson's fluffy white bunny sits both benignly and menacingly next to the breast pump, the white towels and the painkillers. 'Rabbit ear forceps wrap around her little head – slowly, slowly wrenched into the world – into wonderland – everything strange and peculiar and while dreaming of all that awaits her... nestling warm and rosy-pink she hears – Drink this and you will grow...'

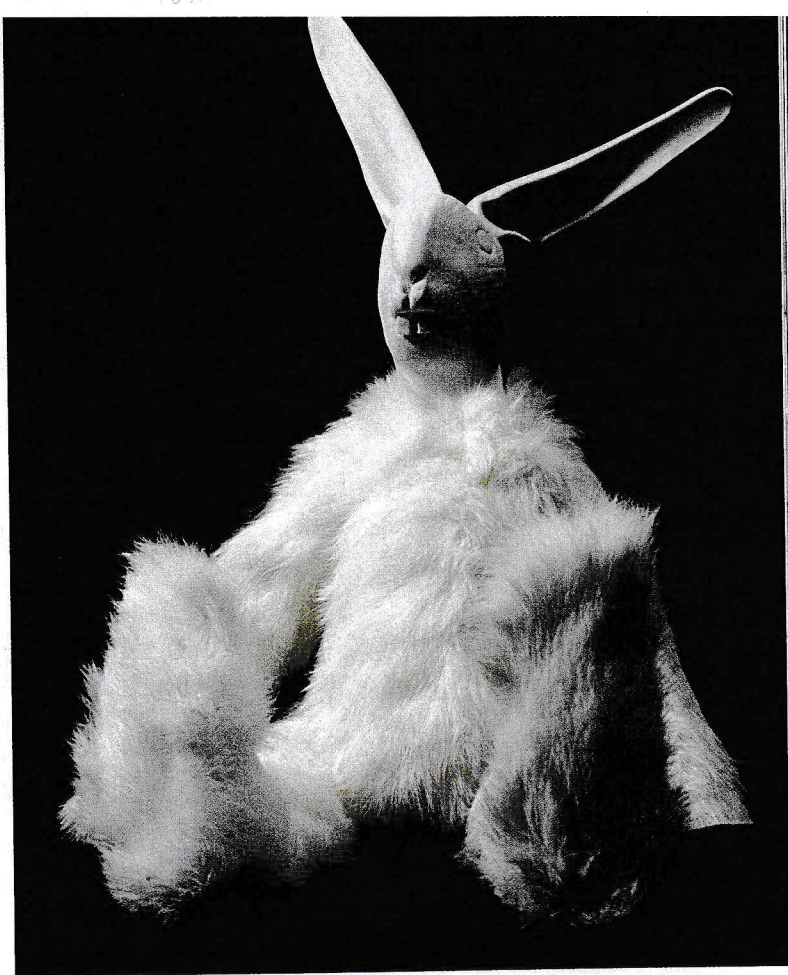
Nicole Lister, with her penchant for the domestic, was given 'The Dining Room' to explore – this she did with historical rigour, selecting a 'montieth' – a kind of 17th century punch bowl usually made of silver for cooling wine. Before serving the wine, glasses were apparently cooled by placing them with their feet hanging outwards from the notched rim of the montieth where the 'vessel or bason (was) notched at the brims to let drinking glasses hang there by the foot, so that the body or drinking parte might hang in the water to coole them. Such a bason was called a Montteigh from a fantastical Scot called Monsieur Montteigh, who at that time or a little before, wore the bottome of his cloake or coate so notched'.¹

The construction techniques Lister employed to create Mad Queen Montieth resembled that of a metal worker rather than of a ceramic designer, and it is in her recognition of ceramic history's capacity to mimic silver ware that she selected silver leaf to finish off the inside of the piece. The folded outer creases of the montieth

Top right: Ruth Hutchinson. Alice Followed the White Rabbit down the Rabbit Hole into Wonderland.

Paperclay, metal, rubber, lapin, synthetic filling, sea-sponge, cotton, objects from the Allport collection. 42 x 12 x 24 cm. Photographer: Cara Howell.

Right: Nicole Lister. Mad Queen Montieth. Slip cast porcelain with silver leaf. 44 x 27 cm. Photographer: Michel Brouet.





Milan Milojevic. *Sea of Tears*. Commercial tableware blanks with artist designed and printed decals by Inkpot Studios.
Teapot: 20 x 15 cm.

form a cunning series of repeated heart and diamond shapes that reference the playing cards, and the top of the monteith, the crowns of the bickering Queens.

The curious art of ceramics is bound up with the alchemy of 'altered states'. The geological changes that make rock into clay and back into 'rock' again from the application of extreme heat, is a special kind of magical process. As too is the alchemy of cooking – Alice finds herself constantly eating and drinking in an effort to maintain a crazy equilibrium in a world where pebbles turn into little cakes and strange liquids exact extravagant bodily changes.

Altered states was also at the heart of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party that was held in the gallery adjacent to the Allport rooms and was created by eight invited Tasmanian artists, all of whom contributed to bringing the art of tea to the heights of performance. Each table was laid in monochromatic tones, from the artist-designed decals on the tea-ware to the napery and the madly animated hatted chairs.

Milan Milojevic, Lindsay Broughton, Barbie Kjar, Helen Wright and Fiona Tabart all well known two-dimensional artists, were each given a set of 'blank' (pre-glazed but undecorated) tableware to decorate that had been donated by a local home-ware store. Each artist was then given a set pattern to work within designed by the curator in which they had to work, and each was then printed up as single colour decals that were produced by a local artisan print studio, Inkpot Studios.

The black and white settings that ensued in the most part were a salute both to the drawings of Sir John Tenniel. Tenniel's black and white wood engravings for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland first appeared in 1865 and as an illustrator and satirical artist, Tenniel was renowned for his political works that appeared in the British magazine *Punch*. Lindsay Broughton's graphics however, hinted to the darker side of Alice's author, the Rev Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, whose interest in young girls and his consumption of laudanum, was perhaps not the paragon of the church suggested by his title. The black and white napery was designed and produced by Maryanne Scholes (textile artist) and the Mad Hatter's chairs by Penny Carey-Wells and Diane Perndt (paper artists).

This black and white world also reflected the importance of many charitable causes favoured by some of the sponsors who gave generous support to these exhibitions – namely, the plight of children with cancer. Ultimately, however, the Alice theme that pervaded the entire State Library during this time was about celebration – not just for children – but for the child in all of us.

REFERENCE:

1. Reproduced from the book: *Drinking Vessels of Bygone Days* by G. J. Monson-Fitzjohn, 1927.

Alice at the Allport was curated by Penny Smith, ceramic artist, writer and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Tasmania.