



Portrait of the artist as a collector

While Australian potter Kirsten Coelho was making a new body of ceramics in response to an artist residency, *Colin Martin* met her to discover more about the exhibition in which the work was to be shown


‘An interior will result in a portrait of the person who lives there ...’ wrote the Australian artist Margaret Olley (1923–2011), who was famous for her still-life paintings of flowers and objects from her extensive personal collection. After her death, 21,000 items were catalogued in her Sydney home studio and transferred to Murwillumbah, a town in rural New South Wales, where she’d spent part of her childhood. Several rooms were accurately recreated and furnished there, at the Margaret Olley Art Centre, where an artist residency programme was established in 2014. Last September, the Australian potter Kirsten Coelho immersed herself in this subjective and deeply personal environment. She also studied the form, colour and other characteristics of selected items within the more objective setting of the reserve collection. Her residency was a particularly apposite artistic pairing, as Coelho consistently explores the cultural resonance of everyday objects in her own ceramic practice. Visiting her Adelaide studio last November, I saw and discussed work in progress, made in response to her residency. Time and distance precluded my seeing her resulting *Portrait* exhibition first-hand; however an email dialogue with Coelho and MOAC curator Ingrid Hedgcock revealed how their well-considered arrangement of the potter’s intimate works, within the gallery, led to an installation which resonated powerfully and universally.

In Adelaide, Coelho had developed seven groups of varying numbers of new works. Some were inspired by the shapes of objects collected by Olley, or the colours of her favourite flowers, which she also included in her still-life compositions. Coelho acknowledged Olley’s passion for flowers when titling her ceramic groups: *Agapanthus*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Delphinium*, *Flannel Flowers*, *Hyacinth*, *Lilium* and *Pomegranate*. During the process of arranging works in the gallery space, six groups of works were distilled into three installations. ‘Every space presents a new opportunity for varying placement in response to the context,’ says Coelho, who is not dictatorial in how individual works are positioned within groups of her differently shaped or glazed works. Only the *Chrysanthemum* group, which responded directly to stacked bowls stored in Olley’s ‘green kitchen’, weren’t used.

The first installation visitors encountered was *Pomegranate*: the only one of Coelho’s Adelaide groups shown in its entirety. It was displayed on a shelf positioned at the height at which still-life paintings are usually hung. ‘[Olley] followed the light, throughout the day, from room to room in her home

studio ... capturing arrangements lit by the afternoon sun (for example) streaming in through a window onto the objects’, says Hedgcock. In homage to the painter’s interest in lighting, and her composed arrangements, Coelho suggested, and the curator agreed, that each *Portrait* installation should be lit from the same direction by a single source, so as to cast shadows. Silhouetted against the gallery’s dark grey-blue walls, *Pomegranate* resembled a dramatically lit 17th-century Dutch still-life painting. The form of the pedestal bowl on the left was inspired by a similarly shaped bowl in Olley’s collection; and the two-handled Greek Skyphus Cup on the right was made in response to one that Coelho found, tucked away at the back of a shelf.

The corner shelf supporting the second installation, *Hyacinth and Delphinium* (pictured), was positioned at the same height as an identical original above Olley’s ‘green kitchen’ fridge. Coelho’s arrangement, also including some *Ilium* works, transcended such prosaic domesticity. ‘The height of this shelf raises the viewer’s gaze ... not every item is fully visible – some peek out behind other objects or just above the shelf,’ says Hedgcock. That’s quite fitting, as partial concealment of individual works is a recurring characteristic in Coelho’s groups.

For the third gallery installation, *Cornflowers*, Coelho arranged pieces from five groups (*Agapanthus*, *Delphinium*, *Flannel Flowers*, *Hyacinth and Lilium*), with other works not previously photographed, on and below a simple timber table. Originally this table was positioned beside Olley’s ‘blue kitchen’ window, where she often sat and painted still-life compositions, as evidenced by brushstrokes of oil pigment on its front and sides. Unlike the other gallery installations, *Cornflowers* can be viewed in the round. ‘Coelho’s creations, her choreography of objects, form, light and the visitors’ physical navigation of the work, is imbued with a resonance of Olley’s practice’, says Hedgcock. In her *Portrait* installations at Tweed Regional Gallery, Coelho utilised her ceramic practice and sensibility to cut through what could be perceived as a lifetime’s accumulation of bohemian clutter. Coelho celebrated a fellow artist’s shared interest in everyday forms, demonstrating how their spatial and emotional resonance can enrich our lives, if we only look. 

Portrait: Kirsten Coelho was at the Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah, NSW, Australia; artgallery.tweed.nsw.gov.au