

Kirstin Coelho: Passages

Born from revolutions of the potter's wheel, Kirsten Coelho's pots speak of the passages of pottery forms through time, across continents. Yet while Coelho is a devoted student of ceramics, it is humble everyday objects — tobacco jars, ginger beer bottles, ordinary square ink-bottles — that attract her, rather than forms celebrated in the history of ceramics. She looks to 'the layers of history, looking at form but also thinking about lived experience...'

Coelho's experiences, in this case with vessels, are Australian. Based in Adelaide, a city established on the continent's southern coast in the early nineteenth century, she frames her work within an Australian understanding of cultural hybridization, considering the way objects, as well as people, travel to take up new lives; in her studio near Adelaide's old port, she is engaged in making work to be shown in other places, other contexts. In all these passages, including the current exhibition, things become something other than their first embodiment, come to 'have their own interpretation', as Coelho puts it. Making migrates. So from the nineteenth century, Australian potteries made vessels adapting European and Asian examples — the much-loved Chinese ginger jar, English cheese pots — to local uses, and Coelho has studied these at the National Museum of Australian Pottery at Holbrook, especially its great collection of tobacco jars. Thus *Arrival*, with its motley trail of shapes, speaks of a broad idea of migration: though one sees family resemblances here, no pots in this slightly awkward line-up are identical, and all face whatever uses, whatever adaptations, the future may hold.

Return reiterates Coelho's thinking about these movements of objects and peoples: placement, and displacement, is an urgent subject in these difficult times. A mute group of vessels, simple domestic items as well as an elegant lobed dish owing to Chinese ancestors, await their fate: what will be taken on the journey? What might return home? Similarly, in *The Apothecary*, Coelho asks

‘in a broader sense, what do people take with them and bring when they arrive – objects brought into a new environment, where they acquire new meanings.’ The work began with the little curving beaker on the right: Coelho searches for vessels in historical images, and found a seventeenth century Delft cup that evoked healing and medicine in a photograph. Her beaker interprets the original, which looks back to blue and white Delft pottery, and to Dutch still life paintings, and even further back to Chinese potters, but also, closer to home, to images of Australian apothecaries, some from the wine-growing Barossa Valley just north of Adelaide. Taken together, these vessels speak of the practical business of healing, transposed in time and place, but efficacious despite the challenges of disruption.

The Lambeth Jar, a reinterpreted tobacco jar, is one such transposition, a subtle re-imagining of the past for a new kind of life. In the 1990s, Coelho lived in Lambeth in London’s south, close to the beautiful old Royal Doulton factory with its frieze of potters above the entrance. Nineteenth and twentieth century migrations brought English pottery as well as people to Australia, transposing histories as well as lives, and this jar speaks to these transitions. In other works the urgent practical logic embodied in Coelho’s modest sources is evident. With Necessity, the funnel is the key: without it, the vessels would remain unfilled, unfulfilled. Together, they suggest domestic, and by implication social, cooperation. But the singularity of the iron oxide-glazed beaker is a sign — Coelho uses glaze as an interruption: here vibrant colour dramatizes the beginning of the sequence, when water, which brings rust in its wake, first enters these vessels: actions have consequences.

And then there is blue. The title of Viola, and its compote, were inspired by the late Australian painter Margaret Olley (1923-2011). Her treasured collections of art and pottery are now gathered together at Tweed Regional Gallery in sub-tropical northern New South Wales, where Coelho undertook a residency in 2015. These include many beautiful blue and white ceramics, which appear in Olley’s still lifes, paintings that often featured deep blue flowers — cornflowers,

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agapanthus, violas. Since this encounter, Coelho has started using cobalt glazes, naming works including these pots for flowers. Moreover, Olley owned many compotes like the one here, which elevate humble pieces of fruit, like an apple or pear, make an offering. (Perhaps as a potter's tribute, Coelho throws these compotes in one piece, a technically challenging task.)

Pottery is an exceptionally complex set of conversations, through centuries, across continents. The longevity of its practice is inextricably associated with Chinese culture, and with the millennia-long passages in, and out, of the country of ideas, influences and techniques. Kirsten Coelho has studied Chinese ceramics, especially porcelain, for decades, but this is her first exhibition in Hong Kong. I can see, in my mind's eye, the city's pale misty light passing across the restrained emotion of her pots, registering, in their long transits, a kind of homecoming.

– Julie Ewington, 2017