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In the Falling Light: ANU exhibit showcases ceramics by Kirsten Coelho

<http://www.smh.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/in-the-falling-light-anu-exhibit-showcases-ceramics-by-kirsten-coelho-20150710-gi6lph.html?skin=dumb-phone>

Walking into the small side gallery at the Drill Hall is like walking into a very calm and serene space. It is a space that attracted ceramic artist Kirsten Coelho when she visited last year.

In particular she was drawn to the three tall windows that are the main source of natural light. It is interesting to make connections between these three tall windows as a source of light in the gallery and the paintings by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864-1916) that Coelho cites as being one of the artists with whom she has an empathetic connection.

In Hammershoi's quiet and atmospheric paintings of 19th-century domestic interiors, a tall window often becomes the main source of light that illuminates the cool and muted tonal austerity of the painting. In turn Coelho's small groupings of ceramic vessels in white glazed porcelain are animated by the natural light that streams through the windows of the gallery.

Light is the extra dimension that illuminates their surfaces, casts shadows and relates them to the space they inhabit. The curator of the exhibition, Karen O'Clery has sensitively emphasised the painterly quality of these works by framing small groupings of the vessels in dark grey shadow boxes to define the space around them so that the works exist as objects in a deep space.

We tend to think of the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) when we see tonal compositions of pots, but while Coelho's compositions do not have the extra dimension of warm colour that is the emotive motif that animates Morandi's compositions, the difference is really one of spatial design. Morandi's objects tend to huddle together as if jostling for position on the canvas. Coelho's pots are considered each in its own space.

Each work is related to its neighbour by light and shadows. The slight variations in the surfaces of these works – a shiny reflective glaze, a white matt glaze as well as a subtle crackle glaze – mean that tiny variations cause the light and shadow to change the surface of the porcelain forms as they move and outline shapes or reproduce the forms on the walls behind them.

In contrast to the light in a Hammershoi painting that is frozen as in a moment in time, the light on these works is constantly changing bringing about subtle tonal differences in the seemingly white surfaces. In that sense they are in a state of flux responding to the intensity of the natural light and time of the day which creates a repertoire of atmospheric moods.

While I was in the gallery an open vessel in the path of the direct glow of the midday light changed over the hour from a saturated pale blue surface to a light grey. Coelho's actual forms are deceptively unassuming with subtle variations on a long-necked vase, lidded jar, bowl and open dish. However they are the result of a multi-layering of influences that have informed the artist's work both directly and indirectly.

Asian ceramics provide inspiration for the long-necked vessels and lidded jars but other influences such as domestic enamelware from the 19th and 20th centuries have come into play in the funnels, the drip can and the wide-mouthed vessel with the concentric rings around its circumference like hammered tin bands. However these influences come together harmoniously in the serene and distinct forms that only hint at other times and cultures.

Many of Coelho's vessels feature the addition of iron oxide that provides a dark brown accent to define their rims. This is a reference to the metal rims found on Ding pots from the Chinese Song dynasty during the late 11th to 12th century. Ding pottery from the Ding kilns in Hebei province in Northern China was fired upside down. This resulted in a rough or unglazed rim which was disguised by a metal or silver band that became a characteristic of Ding ceramics.

However the use of iron oxide can also reference Coelho's interest in enamel ware with its characteristic chips that occur with use allowing the rust of the base metal to come through. Coelho's use of iron oxide on the white glazed forms gives linear definition to the edges of the rims and lids so that it appears as if the artist has highlighted them with a little flick of the brush to bring aspects of them into focus. The same accent is provided by the addition in some groupings of simple bowls and a lidded canister in a rich red brown saturated iron glaze.

Coelho studied ceramics in Adelaide before leaving for England in the early 1990s. Before this time her early work was highly decorated and colourful. In England she came under the influence of the British studio pottery movement and became more interested in the materiality of clay and glazes. One important influence was the English studio potter Joanna Constantinidis (1927-2000) whose work using matt glazes emphasised the surface qualities of the pot as well as the material qualities of the clay. On her return to Australia in 1998 Coelho became a tenant at Adelaide JamFactory. She now has her own studio in Adelaide.

There are many exhibitions being held in connection with the Australian Ceramics Triennial in Canberra but I think that this exhibition could be among the most memorable.

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