

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Potter Kirsten Coelh discovers domestic bliss in colonial paintings

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BRONWYN WATSON THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 02, 2013 12:00AM



Kirsten Coelho, *Nine Ceramic Vessels* (2008). Samstag Collection, University of South Australia. On display, Hawke Building, public foyer, Level 5, University of South Australia, Adelaide. Source: Supplied

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### PUBLIC WORKS

**WHEN** Kirsten Coelho gazes at notable 19th-century colonial paintings, such as Frederick McCubbin's *Kitchen at the Old King Street Bakery* or John Longstaff's *Breaking the News*, it isn't the painting technique or use of colour that draws her eye but the depiction of the kitchenware.

In the homely, unoccupied kitchen of McCubbin's painting, for instance, she would notice the kettle on the fire, the teacup and saucer on the wooden table next to the chair, the pots and pans above the fireplace.

Coelho, a contemporary potter, is inspired by colonial paintings and illustrations that feature domestic scenes with migrants and settlers.

Of her attraction to kitchenware, she explains: "My ceramics practice has been focused on the exploration and reinterpretation of 19th and early 20th-century enamelware and ceramics produced for a domestic market. To reconstruct some of these objects in clay is to create a cycle whereby the ceramic object now attempts to emulate the metal object."

Coelho, who was born in 1966 in Denmark, completed a bachelor of design in ceramics at Adelaide's University of South Australia.

But when she graduated, she says, she didn't have a clue what she wanted to do. She dabbled in pottery but then, as a 25-year-old, she left for London, where she spent several years making decorative earthenware and selling it at local markets.

However, there's nothing like trying to sell pottery in the snow of an English winter to focus the mind, and so she decided to shift her interest to the English studio tradition, influenced by the renowned British potter Bernard Leach and by Chinese, Japanese and Korean ceramics.

After eight years of English winters, she decided to come home to Adelaide. Encouraged by ideas she had picked up overseas, she found inspiration in the colonial artists and the work of Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864-1916). Since then she has won several prestigious awards, including the Sidney Myer Ceramic Award last year. She is also represented in numerous collections, including that of her alma mater, the University of South Australia.

When I visit Adelaide, I'm shown Coelho's work *Nine Ceramic Vessels*, by Erica Green, the director of the university's Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, and by Susan Jenkins, the museum's senior curator.

*Nine Ceramic Vessels* is a suite of 12 vessels commissioned for a cabinet designed by architects John Wardle and Hassell for the university's Hawke Building. And while the bowls, cups, flask and ginger jar are of extremely fine porcelain with milky glazes, they look exactly like those 19th-century enamelware pieces you find in the McCubbin or Longstaff paintings. Coelho has even managed to replicate the look of a rusting enamel surface.

"These seemingly familiar objects evoke a sense of nostalgia for Australian mythology, for pioneering times or simpler times, for the ordinary utilitarian objects of everyday life, yet they are exquisitely contemporary," Jenkins says.

Green says she loves the way Coelho is able to use the traditions of porcelain, which are European, but give her work a distinctive Australian flavour.

"You can identify the rust with the idea of the Australian bush, and I find that really engaging," she says. "Aesthetically, it is quite beautiful because you are able to stop and ponder the way she has actually created this idea of the representation of rust. It is so realistic and lifelike you could almost believe it is enamelware with its finish of that beautiful, pure white. I think it is an extremely successful, superb work."

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