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## Kirsten Coelho

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REVIEW

# Iron in the Soul

Stephen Bowers finds much to enjoy in Kirsten Coelho's porcelain tableware.



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1 Vase and two bowls, porcelain, matt white glaze, banded iron oxide, 2007, H25cm max

The cool perfection of classical Chinese ceramics and industrial rust inspire the porcelain work of Kirsten Coelho. After training at the South Australian School of Art in the late 1980s, Coelho lived for a number of years in London during the 1990s, working in a local council studio in Clapham, on the top floor of a 1930s leisure centre. Along with other tenants, Coelho taught pottery classes for nine hours a week in exchange for studio space. Here she began to develop her style, initially under the influence of Bernard Leach and a broad notion of integrating the philosophy of Japanese ceramics with the aesthetics of classical Chinese (Song Dynasty) ceramics. In late 2006, Coelho returned to London for a three-month residency at the Australia Council's studio in Sugar House Lane, East London, which, she was pleased to discover, was near the old Bow Pottery.

As well as giving her an apprenticeship in the skills and traditions of English studio pottery, time in London introduced her to the work of respected author and potter Edmund de Waal, known for his languid and optimistically thrown porcelain vessels and to the fine tableware made by Joanna Constantanidis, best remembered for her white porcelain domestic objects and lusted porcelain bottle forms.

There is an echo of their distinctive approach in Coelho's classically inclined resolutions of form, as her thrown porcelain vessels move towards abstraction but retain evidence of their making and strong links to utility and functional form.

Useful tableware has always fascinated Coelho. Most of her pots make brilliant containers for serving food and her solo exhibitions can feel a bit like wandering into a discerning collector's pantry. Currently she works from a home studio, located in the backyard of her charming and slightly eccentric Victorian-era worker's cottage in Adelaide, South Australia, which she shares with her husband, jazz musician Derek Pascoe. Here she creates the distinctive porcelains, which are increasingly appreciated and collected by lovers of fine pots.

**MATERIALS** Porcelain, Coelho says, is a perfect match for the subtleties of the glazes she uses. She is attracted by the fine variation in hue and the shifting painterly abstraction possible from high temperature reduction glazes over the porcelain body – pointing to temmoku as her favourite because of the depths it reveals in different lights. Her current



output includes a series of dramatic 'rusted' works – opalescent matt white glaze banded with judiciously applied iron oxide. Another series of bowls and ginger jars (covered vessels) have celadon on rims and shoulders while the rest of the pot is glazed in temmoku. The interface between these glazes forms a delicate transitional zone, suggestive of landscapes and mist-shrouded skylines.

Other works, such as beakers, are covered in iron saturated temmoku, where the 'iron in the soul' of the glaze is so rich it forms a vivid matrix of red crystals. This 'rusted' surface alludes to the urban landscape, the decaying efflorescence of rust on iron sheeting with its almost organic stains and streaks. Coelho sees rust as areas of abstraction with painterly qualities and uses the surfaces of her pots as blank canvasses upon which she gestures and composes with touches of iron.

Porcelain is a notoriously difficult material to control. Since returning to Adelaide in 1998 to work at Jam Factory before setting up her own studio at home, Coelho steadily pursued her approach to this material. Like Braille, you really need to pick up and feel her works to appreciate just how successful her approach has been, as there are subtleties of weight and balance and undulation of form that can be registered best by the sense of touch.

Applied decoration is minimal in Coelho's works; glaze materials and heat-induced diffusion speak for themselves. I was interested to hear Coelho state that some of her forms can be seen as abstracted towers and other kinds of buildings, with decoration loosely inspired by windows and doorways. Constantly reflecting on her work, Coelho has moved a long way from her early days, when she produced brightly painted earthenware for local markets.

**GLAZE** Though there is a strong contemplative and Hesychastic streak in her work, Coelho's glaze resolutions are striking, commanding attention with dramatic juxtapositions of rich dark mahogany, polished toffee-black, the floating golden spangles of iron rich tea dust, copper reds, arctic blues and pale greens of celadons – 'as cold as a polar bear's kiss'.

These glazes are not strict historical reconstructions. Raw materials from the Australian landscape are used and combinations of glazes are informed by a contemporary sensibility and an awareness of the evolved culinary demands and cultural richness of Australian cuisine – the Antipodean conundrum of deciding whether to put a steaming red aniseed curry of duck or seared kangaroo fillet into a bowl depends on individual choice.

Despite Francis Bacon's dictum that there is 'nothing of beauty that hath not some irregularity in its form', unblemished forms do have mesmerising appeal and it is notions of perfection that are the yardstick by which classical forms of Chinese porcelains are measured. Though Coelho takes classicism a step further, when she applies

2 *Iron and the Air*, porcelain, pale celadon, banded iron oxide, 2007, H21.5cm max  
3 Two ginger jars, porcelain temmoku glaze with celadon shoulder, 2007, H23.5cm max  
4 Bowl, porcelain matt white glaze, 2007, Ø23.5cm  
5 Two bowls, porcelain, celadon glaze, 2007, Ø26cm max



**6** Cup and bowl, porcelain, satin glaze with banded iron oxide, 2007, H14cm max  
**7** Teacups and saucers, porcelain, satin glaze with iron oxide banding, 2006, Ø15cm max  
**8** Two cups, porcelain, saturated iron glaze with celadon interior, 2007, H14cm  
**9** Tea can and cups, matt white glaze with banded iron oxide, 2007, H22cm max

**Technical Information** See page 69

**Photography** Grant Hancock

**Stephen Bowers** is an Adelaide-based artist, who recently returned from a residency at the Museum of International Ceramic Art in Denmark

**Exhibitions** *Porcelain*, group exhibition at the Jam Factory, Adelaide, Australia, until 25 May; *The International Ceramics Fair*

*and Seminar*, The Park Lane Hotel, London, 12-15 June 2008; Solo exhibition at Helen Stephens Gallery, Sydney, Australia, September 2008

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needle-like brush strokes of iron oxide which, when fired, bleed into the glazes and bodies of her otherwise immaculate forms. Like a species of stigmata, these pointed and penetrating gestures in iron refer to change, mortality and decay.

Questions are raised by these evocative streaks of rusty corruption. Museums prize objects for completeness, for being in 'perfect' or 'mint' condition. So what might less-than-perfect mean? Does flawed mean more temporal? More worldly? Corrupted? If so, why, as Rose Macaulay knew so well, is there pleasure in such ruin? It is a Zen-like task to contemplate, but that is the beauty and challenge of life in the material world.

Coelho's restrained 'rust marks' remove her work from the realm of untainted classical perfection and place it firmly within the context of real world change and mortal decay. Some of Coelho's work has a specific Antipodean reference to change and the impact of history by imitating the forms and characteristics of frontier utensils from early settler culture in Australia; colonial 'enamel wares' complete with chips and rust spots. These touches of iron connect her pots to metal and also suggest an oblique reference to the pot healer's art – the mending of cracked or broken pots by insertion of metal staples.

In addition to being a consummate craftperson, Coelho is also an avid collector of ceramics; she lives with the pieces, constantly reflecting on their feel and proportions. This devoted study and understanding is part of why her own pottery rewards long-term familiarity and use. Gwyn Hanssen Pigott (in the *Objects of Ideas* catalogue, 1996) provides a suggestive insight when she says there are pots that 'become known and loved objects, my companions; and at each meal or smoko I make a choice, inviting the pot like a friend, and seeing, perhaps, something about it that I've forgotten or overlooked in the rush of things'. 