

A Secret History



Inga Walton is intrigued by the five different responses to blue and white in the exhibition *A Secret History of Blue and White: Contemporary Australian Ceramics*.

Speculation, intrigue, rivalry, obsessed collectors and sedition-through-crockery is typical of the captivating power that cobalt blue decoration on a white background has wielded over its partisans for centuries. The timeless and compelling allure of this genre continues to engage ceramists today. Five Australian-based artists – Stephen Benwell, Robin Best, Bronwyn Kemp, Vipoo Srivilasa and Gerry Wedd – interpret this age-old practice with works that range from those that are more identifiably ‘Australian’ in theme to ones that engage with disparate political, cultural and personal subjects.

It seems somehow appropriate for artists from a geographically isolated island nation, dependent on trade and interaction with other countries, to undertake such a venture within the Asia-Pacific region. As Stephen Bowers, who has curated the exhibition, observes, ‘These works show how contemporary artists can renovate and innovate in relation to what might be regarded as a classic form or tradition’.

The four tall vases by Stephen Benwell congregate like sun-bleached tree trunks, luminous and gleaming. Their surfaces are covered with freehand illustration, calligraphic in its spontaneous expression, like an unfolding scroll. This is repeated on his *Large Vase* (2006) where the cartoon-like imagery is contained within vivid blue, like a sky crowded with thoughts. His two hand-formed *Figure* (2006) works



are replete with classical references, yet carry none of the ponderous weight of homage. Spattered with blue, their pocked and rough finish seems expressive of vigour and animation.

Robin Best has a history of exhibiting and working in China, and a keen eye for the type of 'cultural fusion' that now typifies interactions with the still ostensibly communist nation. *Silk Route* (2006), a row of 'flattened' vases, looks at the designs and decorative patterns that were exchanged along the trade routes. Pictorial references from India, Turkey and the Middle East were absorbed into the repertoire of Chinese manufacturers and re-exported to foreign markets.

In China We Trust (2006) cleverly plots the history of industry and commerce between China and western nations through pictorial signifiers on seven snuff bottles. Britain and France are represented by Elizabeth I and Napoléon Bonaparte, supported by two vessels bearing the 'willow pattern' motif. The vital economic ties Australia and America have forged with China are acknowledged with a mock seventeenth century illustration of kangaroos, and a rendition of the dour farming couple from Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* (1930). China's increasing influence on global financial markets, repressive political stance and militaristic posturing is

suggestive of a new imperialism. Mass production, cheap labour, and relentless economic growth have for years resulted in virtually everything being 'Made In China'. As if to underline this, at the centre on a Wedgwood-blue background, is a white and gold relief profile of Chairman Mao.

Bronwyn Kemp sensitively employs distinctive Australian botanical designs and landscape references within the wider tradition of decorative porcelain tableware. She grew up in Broken Hill, in outback New South Wales, and was exposed to the varied shades of blue the mercurial landscape was bathed in, including the eroded mountains nearby known as the Pinnacles. Her *Banksia* and *Grevillea Dish* (both 1995) have an almost 'antique' quality, reminiscent of the colonial past. In direct contrast, *The Blue Ranges* (2006) startles with its cool modernity, graceful sloping contours, and incised line work like grids on a map.

The Thai traditions of china or porcelain with indigo designs called *Lai Krarm* are the context for the pieces by Vipoo Srivilasa. Known for his extravagantly glazed and decorated vessels, the restrictions imposed by this discipline have challenged Srivilasa to focus more on pattern and dialogue. *Contemporary Culture, II* (2006) presents multiple images in squares like a storyboard, derived from Thai

2 Bronwyn Kemp – *The Blue Ranges*, 2006, W32cm max 3 Stephen Benwell – *Figurine*, handbuilt earthenware, H21cm
4 Vipoo Srivilasa – *Five Open Doors, II*, porcelain, cobalt blue pigment on unglazed clay surface, 2006, H24cm 5 Gerry Wedd – *Thong Cycle*, handbuilt, cobalt underglaze, 2006, L25cm max



mural paintings and used in Sangkhalok pottery of the Sukhothai era. *Bowl Pagoda, II* (2006) simulates the structure of temple roofs; fish, a symbol of wealth, adorn the sides. The bowls must be unstacked to discern the illustrated message; a Buddhist metaphor, whereby you need to practise the teachings to discover the meaning. *Five Open Doors, II* (2006) is inspired by the Buddhist philosophy of *ayatana*, the six channels of perception. This teaches awareness through sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and mindfulness. Modestly, Srivilasa created only the first five, as perception is contingent on an individual's personal experiences.

Following his extensive study of the 'willow pattern', Gerry Wedd uses this as the basis to explore ideas of prejudice and cultural stereotypes by inserting subversive elements into an already 'constructed' scenario. The witty *Thong Cycle* (2006) takes

the quintessential 'dinky-di' Australian footwear, and reminds us that it was first popularised in Asia. *Arcadia* (2006) refers to the idyllic world of pastoral romance, with elements loosely drawn from the static 'willow' scenery presented as a three-dimensional landscape tableau. The tree, with its ice-cream scoop foliage, is joined by a defensive homeowner and his snarling dog. The famous kinked fence now keeps out a boatload of illegal Asian immigrants under the supervision of a people-smuggler. Wedd reconfigures the saccharine story of star-crossed lovers in a prettified Chinese theme park into a vehicle for barbed social commentary, and to attack government policy.

These five artists make clear that the ubiquity of blue and white in no way limits its variance or negates its appeal; indeed they have played their small part in its evolution. If public clamour resulted in a frenzy of mass production, and led certain patterns to become visual clichés, this exhibition is its antithesis. The genre is returned to its artist-driven/studio roots, enlivened by the type of interpretive skills, personal narratives and bold individualism which has characterised the most revered works within its long (secret) history. ☐

The exhibition was curated by Stephen Bowers of Jam Factory in partnership with the Asialink Centre at the University of Melbourne and had toured to Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand and China before its Australian premiere at Object Gallery. The

touring exhibition continues at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bathurst, New South Wales, 11 July-24 August 2008. Web www.bathurstregion.com.au
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