

Robyn Phelan is a Melbourne based ceramicist who graduated from RMIT in 2010. She also writes, is an educator and general enthusiast about craft. Her talk reflects her professional past as a secondary visual arts teacher, her work with exhibitions and objects while working at Museum Victoria, the National Gallery of Victoria and Craft Victoria.

Is that all there is?

Should we expect more from an exhibition of ceramics than just the presentation of crafted objects?

For the next 15 minutes I will be expressing observations about recent exhibitions that have got me pondering about how ceramics might be displayed to add deeper meaning and context to the work. I'll move fairly quickly through range images, some my own some from blogs so my apologies for some image quality.

IMAGE: TABLE-SCAPING There is nothing like a bit of humour to make one be self-reflective. This Haefeli cartoon in the New Yorker made me consider all the hours I have spent arranging, grouping, making families, creating belongings and relationships with my ceramic vessels. Perhaps you have lost hours to this pleasure too.

But this compulsion to style, raises a big question for me. When presenting work to public and our peers is the relevance of our work only about what appears carefully placed on a plinth?

The balance of scale, colour, texture and all the other formal qualities of art are incredibly important for the impression of a balanced and harmonious exhibition.

It is true that the culmination of our craft, is the work that we make and that this must be at the epicenter of an exhibition, But what greater reverberations of meanings and connections can a visitor take away from our exhibition?

Can and should we ask of a plinth based exhibition: Is that all there is?

IMAGE: GWEN FREER MUSEUM Haefeli's cartoon reminded me of a particular project by our monarch of "table-scaping". I am happy to give a generous nod to Gwen for relieving pottery from the loneliness of the single white plinth. In 2004, Gwen Hanssen Pigott was given full access to the ceramic storage which houses the collections of Charles Freer, donated to the Smithsonian Institution in 1906.

IMAGE: GWEN TWO PARADES My fingers itch with desire if I imagine myself in Gwen's position. At the National Gallery of Victoria where I worked in collections management, the arranging of objects for permanent display is triumvirate collaboration of effort between curator, designer and installer. Gwen created seven "Parades" for a permanent museum display freed from connection to maker, country, dynasty or technique.

What inspiration might I apply to current installation practice from this project, where the maker

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only is responsible for its display?

One could apply this approach to a group exhibition where vessels are grouped by formal qualities; an idea, colour, texture or a proposition rather than by maker or making. The opportunity for collaborative curation is boundless.

IMAGE: SALLY VESSELS Gwen's groupings, released works from museum classification. Imagine an exhibition of new ceramic works alongside works that have inspired and influenced the maker. These muses might be the objects in your studio, gifts, childhood gismos, travel memento, fellow potters work.

Melbourne jeweler, Sally Marsland casts vessels and modifies found objects. In her exhibition *Why are you like this and not like that?* Sally brings together her crafted vessels, found objects and, delightfully, the coil pot that she had made in secondary school. It was enlightening to witness a continuum of vessel form and scale that informed her work and that was also a strong continuum across a body of work.

IMAGE: ANNE WORK Ann Ferguson is a Victorian ceramicist who regularly works on projects with young children and is passionate about interactive experiences.

IMAGE: ANNE EXHIBITION Her 2010 solo show was primarily a white plinth minimal exhibition installation. Along the side of the gallery was an table of pieces to play with. For play is the important action here making a direct connection between the artworks, how the pieces interact with each other and how this desire to touch and arrange effects the viewer.

ANNE THE HOUSING PROJECT Ann was also involved with community arts project called The Housing Project, which evolved out of community workshops, audio aural recordings from the very diverse neighbourhood of Collingwood. In this work, people are invited to create their own urban soundscape by building a city using miniature ceramic houses, trees, tall buildings and factories. These objects trigger stored sounds and voices to create a multi-layered soundscape that evolves as the pieces are moved around, on or off the platform.

I pondered how could this complex designed event might inform an exhibition that I might do? What I take away from this show is the possibility (if your work is sturdy and you are brave) is to make an exhibition that is totally hands on where the arrangement of work is ever-changing. Might this every-changing arrangements be recorded digitally?

If you are a maker of functional ware, might your exhibition only exist when it is in use and in context.

IMAGE: CLAIRE PORTRAIT & OPENING NIGHT Claire McArdle's is a Melbourne based jewellery and her exhibition just keeps on giving. Opening image: A professional photographer was employed to capture each poser. There was an incredible vibe because of it's hands-on nature.

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IMAGE: CLAIRE WEBSITE & POSTCARD This is the website publicly displaying those who signed permission to be "given attention". I visited independently of the opening and was photographed by Claire. A week later I received my image on a postcard inviting me to visit the website. Here Claire's primary concern with the body, the exhibition's title, the crafted silk pieces and the online presence combine in joyous perfection.

IMAGE: DEE In Dee Taylor Graham's fabulous work in Narrative Knot exhibition, Dee is very much central to, and mediates the nostalgic "taking tea with aunty experience". I was deeply engaged and torn between feelings comfort/discomfort, geniality/entrapment. However, not all of us have Dee's chameleon-like dexterity or willingness to be centre-front of the experience.

CLAIRE HAT PIECE How a piece of jewellery engages with the human body was crucial to the Public Displays of Attention experience for Claire and her curation of the exhibition is testament to this attention. Is the feel, weight and touch vital to the experience of your pottery or ceramics? How might we be able to record the experience of holding and caressing a work made of clay without ownership as part of the exhibition experience?

Yesterday, Clare Twomey outlined in detail her “Trophy” project. Her work casts a long and wonderfully challenging shadow of influence on our thinking about we can engage the visitor to our exhibitions.

IMAGE: FIGURE & GROUND Now for a look at some exhibitions which really pushed my buttons this year.

I have chosen them because both the work and how the work was placed in the gallery really made me consider the material qualities of clay. We are part of a community of artists who have conquered ceramics and the transformation of clay, so much so, that we rarely see the raw earthy stuff that is our beginnings within the exhibition space.

It seems that there is a flirtation with clay by emerging Melbourne artists. Perhaps this is a natural or logical continuum of the last decade where contemporary artists use labour intensive skills or adopt the techniques of hobbies or popular crafts. Such terms as “hipster craft”, DIY craft come to mind. [Ricky Swallow – mountboard architectural models, Louise Weaver- crochet.] We heard from Anton Reijnders about how people who are new to clay have a freedom of approach as they don’t know the problems of clay, are completely free and open to the material and don’t set limits to their work.

Challenging for me, is the basic level of craft skill. What is inspiring is the honest embrace of material, technique and the desire to create a curated exhibition experience. What can I learn from these recent exhibitions?

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IMAGE: SANNE MESTROM *Figure and Ground* hit this trend on its earthenware head. Quote from the catalogue essay: *The premise was to present artists who investigate the use of earthenware in contemporary art practices, particularly concerning intersections between ceramics and collage, the human figure and abstraction. The exhibition presents a*

curatorial interpretation of an archaeological dig by juxtaposing mounds of earth, lumps of clay and fossilised artefacts.

IMAGE: SARAH CROWEST, *Top Dog*, 2012 I accepted that fired clay and found ornament can act as idea expanders, value provokers, be banal, hint at history, and force nostalgia to bubble to the surface.

IMAGE: REBECCA DELANGE *from here to eternity*, 2011-2012 makes talisman-like sculptures. Here I meditated on unfired clay as prop, glue, plinth, stuff..

IMAGE: JACOB OGDEN SMITH INSTALLATION The next exhibition that rocked my socks was at Craft Victoria earlier this year by Perth based potter, Jacob Ogden Smith.

In *Figure and Ground* I relished being reminded that primary clay can be the superstar, Jacob presents the clay process and ceramic maker as star of the show. Like a reality tv show we are never quite sure what is true motivation or construct.

IMAGE: JACOB PROJECTION This is a digital projection of Jacob having a Bernard Leach kick wheel tattoo on his shoulder: the painful intersection of lifestyle and art practice.[Ben Richardson, Tasmanian]

IMAGE: JACOB INSTALLATION Further installation shots for your interest and mine.

IMAGE: KIRSTEN PERRY Kirsten Perry's exhibition opened yesterday. It is an ode to Fleetwood Mac's single Dreams.

IMAGE: LEAH JACKSON INSTALLATION And to return to whence I started; the grouping of ceramic objects. Sydney trained but Melbourne based ceramic artist Leah Jackson dreamily suspends or floats on fragile trestles, hand-pinched vessels alongside clay-made thing-ies and fragments. An *Epic Romance* consisted of four contained assemblages.

IMAGE: LEAH 2 Looking at each atmospheric vignette I became conscious of how my viewing of the work was being manipulated from every angle and aspect.

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IMAGE: LEAH 3 Each still life whispered, “take me home I am perfectly styled and framed in every way”. Is this too Vogue Living? Too controlled.

IMAGE: LEAH 4 Honestly, I enjoyed being romanced.

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