



FIVE WAYS WITH CLAY

The 2017 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award
in review by Sophia Cai

The Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award (SMFACA) at the Shepparton Art Museum (SAM) is one of the most significant ceramics exhibitions in Australia. Not only does it come with a significant cash prize, the award also provides a current snapshot of contemporary ceramics practice. This year's offering is an unashamed celebration of clay through the works of Glenn Barkley, Karen Black, Laith McGregor, Yasmin Smith and well-deserving winner Jenny Orchard. All five artists harness ceramics to ambitious effect, and the resulting group exhibition is a visually exceptional show that opens up conversations beyond medium-specificity to consider broader material and conceptual underpinnings.

Since 2015 the SMFACA has focused exclusively on Australian contemporary artists. Its staging at SAM is significant as the museum holds one of the largest collections of ceramics in Australia, which has been strengthened through the ceramic award and the acquisition of past recipients. This year, the finalists were shortlisted from more than 100 entries with curator Anna Briers describing the selection process as based not on technical proficiency or how established the artist was, but rather how they used the medium within a contemporary art context. This focus on concept rather than practice, while notable, has not been without controversy within the broader ceramics community.

Jenny Orchard, *The Imagined Possibility of Unity*, 2017
ceramic, metal stand, rubber, plastic polymer pipe, raffia, synthetic fibre, bubble wrap, plastic chandelier parts tin necklace, car tyre inner tube; various dimensions
Photo: Christian Capurro, courtesy the artist and Despard Gallery, Hobart

My initial impression of the exhibition is its ambitious scale, with a particular focus on spatial practice and installation-based work. All five artists have been allocated a single room in the upstairs gallery and the presentation feels like five solo exhibitions rather than a group show. The format allows audiences to appreciate each artist's practice as a whole by giving them the space and resources to create significant new bodies of work. In instances where the artists also work with non-ceramic mediums, their potential relationship to ceramics is evoked through this immersive mode of display.

View 2

Undoubtedly the most visually striking work is Jenny Orchard's prize-winning *The Imagined Possibility of Unity*. Orchard has been working with ceramics for more than four decades and is known for her highly distinctive and original ceramic creatures. In her new work, Orchard has brought together a whole cast of eccentric creature totems whose shapes and forms are derived from nature and the artist's imagination. Along with found materials such as bubble wrap and a chandelier, these clay forms are assembled and stacked on top of each other in a strange amalgamation. Orchard's skill with the ceramic medium is clearly evident, but it is the inventive ways in which she uses decorative finishes and glaze techniques that set her apart. The final result is a body of work that transports viewers to another realm; an imaginative wonderland that at once evokes Hieronymus Bosch, medieval manuscripts and the Memphis Group of the 1980s, as well as the spirit poles of Indigenous cultures. As the winner of this year's award, Orchard's practice makes a clear link to historical practices while also charting a distinctive approach of her own.

Although each artist is exhibited on their own, there are some clear links and common themes that can be traced between the five rooms. From narratives of the self to global concerns and questions about place, the works in the exhibition explore numerous contemporary issues. Orchard's installation stems from the artist's interest in ecology and biology, and this connection to the natural world is also explored in the works of Yasmin Smith and Glenn Barkley, albeit with very different results.

Yasmin Smith, *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker*, 2017

169 slipcast ceramic objects, woodash glaze, corrugated iron, canvas tarpaulin, various dimensions
Photo: Christian Capurro, courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney



Glenn Barkley, *Garden Garniture*, (detail), 2017, earthenware, glaze and collage, various dimensions
Photo: Christian Capurro, courtesy the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Where Orchard's work is visually loud, Smith's is perhaps the most restrained. *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker* is simple in its execution, but its minimalist appearance belies a highly rigorous approach to technique. Smith has cast 169 branches from trees around Shepparton in clay, and used the ashes from the burnt branches to create three distinct types of wood-ash glaze – from pear, apple and red-gum branches. The resulting ceramic works are a subtle nod to the local landscape and flora. By using corrugated steel and a canvas tarpaulin to exhibit the ceramic pieces, Smith's works also consider ideas about human settlement through evoking the sense of a 'home'.

Glenn Barkley's works also make a similar connection to the Shepparton landscape, focusing in particular on its botanical gardens and history. As an avid gardener himself, Barkley's *Garden Garniture* celebrates the artist's love of horticulture through evocative motifs and colours. His large circular wall piece is a stunning display of circular ceramic tokens and text against a neon yellow wall. Described as an 'artistic bowerbird' by curator Briers, Barkley's work is rich in intertextual references and personal connections to a wealth of influences including literature, poetry, pop-music, ceramic history and archaeology. At the heart of his practice is a deep fondness for ceramic pots, and the formal arrangement of his own distinctive pots in front of a series of framed collages clearly highlights this connection.

View 2

Pots are also a central component in Karen Black's dramatic installation *Temporary Arrangements*. An accomplished painter, Black's ceramic works similarly demonstrate a painterly approach. For Black, the clay body is equivalent to canvas, and she applies hand-coloured slips in a gestural and expressive manner. The forms of Black's pots are taken from historical perfume bottles, which are scaled up to multiple times their original size. Beyond a connection to history, Black's pots are also linked to the artist's interests in charting the female experience, including in recent conflicts and displacement in war-torn territories. Whether through a formal connection to women's bodies as vessels, or in her painterly depiction of their anguished faces on the surface, Black's works depict an enduring narrative of female strength and solidarity.

Arguably the most introspective and personally driven of all the works in the show is Laith McGregor's *Pipe Dream*, which is based on his childhood memories and family. The work is viewable as a sort of portrait of the artist through the form of his imaginary childhood friend, Waterface, as well as his memorable grandfathers – one a magician, the other a pipe smoker. This conflation of personal mythology with a more subconscious expression of dreams and symbols makes for a playful and introspective body of work. Like Black, McGregor has a multi-disciplinary practice spanning painting, drawing and sculpture, and his approach to ceramics reveals these influences. Most notably, McGregor has painted directly on the wall with left-over clay slip; the impression of this large-scale wall painting in clay is arresting.

Karen Black, *Temporary Arrangements*, (detail), 2017, earthenware, glaze, human hair, cotton embroidery thread, copper rod and velvet ribbon, various dimensions; photo: Christian Capurro, courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



Laith McGregor, *Pipe Dream*, (detail), 2017, ceramic, clay, enamel, chalk board paint, found pipe, wood, brass, wire, found ceramic sculpture, wool, peacock feather, cue ball, fibre-glass, clothing, accessories and glass, various dimensions
Photo: Christian Capurro, courtesy the artist and STATION Gallery, Melbourne

While there was only one cash prizewinner, all the artists in the 2017 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award should be applauded for their invigorating and ambitious new bodies of work. Their works are all united by a conceptual consideration of ceramics practice, and expanding the possibilities of the medium through experimentation with materials and techniques. It is a show that at its core celebrates the wonders of clay and its ability to be handled and shaped in so many different ways. Through surface, glaze, form, and texture, the artists in the award demonstrate the enduring legacy of ceramics practice in contemporary art.

The 2017 Sidney Myer Fund Ceramic Award runs from 17 June to 13 August 2017 at the Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC.
www.sheppartonartmuseum.com.au

Sophia Cai is a Melbourne-based emerging curator and arts writer with a particular interest in Asian art history and contemporary craft. She graduated from the Australian National University with First Class Honours in Art History and Curatorship in 2011, and completed her Masters in History of Art specialising in contemporary Chinese art post 1979 at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London in 2014. <http://sophiacai.info>. She is on Instagram and Twitter @sophiatron.