

Weekend arts review

In the realm of the imagination

Dining with Cannibals.

Ceramics by Jenny Orchard. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until March 2.

Reviewer: Kerry-Anne Cousins

Jenny Orchard's highly glazed totemic sculptures stand like sentinels of a lost tribe. Yet in conception they are very much the reflection of how Orchard perceives the contemporary world with its technological advancements that interfere with the inherent nature of living organisms.

She is also interested in exploring the consuming "cannibalism" of destructive complex relationships and our greed and obsession with food. The title of the exhibition is inspired by Nick Cave's song, *Cannibal's Hymn*, which has the apt and no doubt true observation "but, if you're gonna dine with them cannibals, sooner or later darling, you're gonna get eaten!"

Orchard cultivates the grotesque. In this she draws on a rich heritage of artists employing the realm of the fantastic and their imagination to create works that are derived from objects in the real world.

I am reminded of the Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-93), who painted grotesque human heads made up of plants, flowers and animals. In the same manner, the paintings of the early Netherlands artist Hieronymus Bosch (c1450-1516) were visions of hell also peopled with grotesque animals and creatures. Bosch employed, as does Orchard, the grotesque to illustrate his view of contemporary morality.

In Orchard's exhibition, each sculptural entity is an uneasy sum of its parts. The artist constructs individual ceramic sections and joins them together in a way that does not make rational sense. Lips, eyes, legs, feet and hands appear in strange and fanciful forms. Lips sprout from foreheads, bodies grow from one-legged hybrids, sinister-looking teeth gleam from cruel red pouting lips and hands stretch out in mute supplication.

In play with the obviously human features are animal parts such as heads, curling horns, tentacles and tails. Small outgrowths of coral sprout among leaves of plants,



RICH HERITAGE: Orchard's *Bt* and *CaMv* ceramic totems. Elements of beauty startle amid the grotesque.

cucumbers, melons and other vegetable forms. These works can repel with their exaggerated depiction of body parts and fantastic appearance. There is something vaguely disturbing in the one-footed creatures, and why does each foot have red toenails just like mine?

However, each work has sections of visual beauty that startle because of the context in which they are found. Orchard achieves these beautiful visual effects by fine modelling, an assured sense of colour and mastery of glazing as well as intriguing areas of texture. In *Redeye, the Fire Tamer* there are some finely modelled green leaves that cover one form and this is partnered by another richly glazed red "trunk" obviously based on coral. In the work *Plantperson Bluey*, there is a sensitively modelled outcrop of coral polyps. *Blue beehive* is of particular note because of the remarkable scale-like texture.

It is hard not to see these works as a collection of sections or bits. They might fit physically together like a jigsaw puzzle but in effect the image remains distorted and dysfunctional. I am not totally convinced they are really viable creatures capable of cannibalism. In this belief, however, I may be mistaken.