

Cross-cultural narrative

Crossed Paths, porcelain by Mel Robson, Vipoo Srivilasa and Kenji Uranishi.

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Hours: Tuesday-Friday 10am-5pm, Saturday-Sunday 9am-5pm. On until June 12.

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At the heart of the work of these three artists is the paraphrase of an old question – how do we sing our own songs in a new land? Indeed, the challenge can be twofold for artists who are transplanted from one country to another – to understand the new culture and to make sense of the culture in which they have lived previously.

Kenji Uranishi, for example, felt that, in order to understand his own Japanese traditions, he had to come and live in Australia, where he can take a more objective and reflective viewpoint. Vipoo Srivilasa seeks to bring together aspects of his own Thai culture with the culture of Australia, where he now lives and works.

Mel Robson is conscious of not only her own Australian experience of relocating from Brisbane to Alice Springs, but also the experience of other cultures.

Robson has lived and studied in Japan and this experience has resulted in her friendship and collaborative work with Kenji Uranishi.

Kenji Uranishi was born and studied in Nara, Japan and came to Australia in 2004. His work evolves from his interest in his own country's past history, allied to his interest in architecture and the natural environment.

In his series called *Forgotten Flowers*, the works are made from small multiple tubular units that are brought together in a larger form – although, in theory, they could multiply indefinitely. These delicate white tubular clusters are glazed inside with fine celadon glazes in pale blues, greens and creamy whites.

Some of the forms echo the spiral structure of the chrysanthemum – a flower significant in Japanese culture as not only a symbol of the sun but also of royal authority. Their scalloped edges make up a repeating decorative pattern that appears constantly in all forms of Japanese decorative arts.

These flower forms are perhaps representative of aspects of Japanese culture that have been overlooked in the contemporary world.

Another work, *Kagerou*, is more



Mel Robson's *Alice Springs* series, top; Kenji Uranishi's *Forgotten flower I*, above left, and Vipoo Srivilasa's *Still life of birth and death*.

architectural in concept. Each straight-sided porcelain slab wall intersects to form an irregular and complicated maze so that it is rather like looking down on an excavated mud village. Uranishi likes to work in multiples and this work is a miniature and more complex version of his larger slab-sided forms.

Vipoo Srivilasa works in the crossover space between two cultures. He was born in Thailand and came to Australia in 1997. The mermaid, a recurring motif in his work, is his alter ego – a symbol of his being positioned between two worlds. In this exhibition, the mermaid appears on the lids of the two ginger jars instead of the traditional knob or crouching lion. Indeed, these two jars, called *Sleeping Beauty* and *Invader*, are both examples of Vipoo's ability to combine two cultural narratives.

The jars are a ubiquitous form that in Western eyes have come to

represent the exotic East. Vipoo, however, subverts this expectation by decorating his forms with a narrative that in this case derives from his interest in the environment. Vipoo also uses glazes that are traditionally associated with Eastern ceramic practice. The populist blue and white glaze, as well as celadon glazes, enhances a cross-cultural narrative that includes political, environmental and social issues.

Sometimes his ceramic work can be quite confronting in its unexpected pairings. In a work called *Gender bent teapot*, a traditional kneeling Thai temple figure is provided with a tea spout and handle. And, like the work of Kenji Uranishi, the meaning of a lot of Vipoo Srivilasa's imagery is not immediately readable.

It supposes a knowledge of two cultures – an understanding that is only available to those viewers who, like the artists, have entree

into both worlds. This elusive quality is also present to some extent in Mel Robson's work, although she is dealing with more familiar everyday objects.

Text is usually associated with communication, but Robson uses it as a symbolic and decorative device. She has long been fascinated by maps and knitting patterns which organise text in certain prescribed ways on a page. Her most fragile and complex works are the series called *Sticks I-IV*.

The fragile white and mysterious porcelain twigs are rather evocative of water divining rods or the ritual objects of a shaman. And, although they are sometimes paired with other small objects like beakers or bowls and are decorated with text or delicate leaf imagery (one of the beakers has, I think, a recipe for Anzac biscuits), this only deepens their enigma.

Robson's other series of wall

plaques of kangaroos (*Alice Springs I-X*) are cut out from old china, baking dishes and laminated wood. They recall, in an ironic way, the so-called Flying Ducks – a decorative wall arrangement of ceramic ducks popular in the 1950s that have apparently "flown" across country borders to invade many areas of the world. (Indeed, I saw an example of these flying ducks on a houseboat wall on the Mekong in Cambodia).

It is a version of cultural exchange similar to the way blue and white china invaded the West.

There is indeed a rich store of cultural treasure to provide the kind of interchange of ideas that these three artists have so successfully incorporated in their work. It is surely a welcome sign of a vibrant culture when such cross-cultural exchange is both accepted and celebrated.