

Irregular shapes create a vibrant beauty

Delinquent Children ceramics by Jenny Orchard. Beaver Galleries, Deakin. Until March 19.

Reviewer: Kerry-Anne Cousins

I have a wonderful bedspread from southern Sudan – a gift to our family from some local Dinka people. Its embroidered design of exuberant plant life and exotic flowers with petals striped like the markings of a zebra seem in tune with the work of Jenny Orchard. I think her “delinquent children” would feel quite happy tucked up under it.

Jenny Orchard was born in Turkey to British parents. In 1956, the family went to live in Zimbabwe. In 1969, Orchard left Zimbabwe for London where she lived for six years before leaving to live in Australia. Zimbabwe, however, as the artist has noted elsewhere, has remained for her “the home of the mind”. Influences of African tribal art can be discerned in the form of the ceramic poles that Orchard creates as well as the influence of South African voodoo dolls in the full red lips and eyes of her figurative images. These early childhood influences are overlaid with many other ideas that come from the richness of the artist’s imagination.

In Australia, Orchard’s early work in the 1980s showed the influence of the so-called Memphis Group, initiated by Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007). It was a design style in furniture and objects influenced by art deco and pop art



UNDER THE AFRICAN INFLUENCE: Jenny Orchard’s *Tooshie*, left, and her plate *Spirit of the tree*, both earthenware with glazes and enamels.

characterised by strong bright colours, slick surfaces, unconventional geometric shapes and decoration based on linear patterning. Other artists were also influenced by this stylistic movement; among them fashion designer Jenny Kee and artist Reg Mombassa with whom Orchard found an affinity. In her later work however Orchard moved on to create her own universe of strange botanical and zoological hybrids of plant/animal, plant/ people forms in brightly coloured and patterned ceramics.

In this latest exhibition, as well as these creatures, are several vases and wall plaques. The inclusion of the vases and wall plaques (in contrast to

latest works small pottery koalas appear as tiny emblems hiding as it were among the luxuriant patterned vegetation. They are joined by transfer patterns of blue forget-me-not flowers that may be a reference to traditional forms of ceramics or encode a personal meaning for the artist. The surface of each work is covered with such an abundance of images from the animal and plant world that it appears as if the world of objects is reduced to microbes under a microscope. This randomness of design is more apparent in the large totem series called *Strange trees from a new forest*, no. 1 *Heart* and no. 2 *Blue Roses*. Among all this fecundity of imagery it is the smaller sculptural works *Corporate Man* no. 2, *New Sofie* no. 15 and *Me Me as a cow* no. 28 that are more satisfyingly cohesive in their sculptural conception.

The vases in the exhibition are in a variety of irregular forms that have the same exuberance as the patterns with which they are decorated. *Nature Vase* is knobby and irregular like a tree stump. The *Tassie Devil Vase* is open and flamboyant with its bright yellow interior. *Love Changes Everything* harks back to her 1980s shapes with its large central image of a face. In contrast, the *Sky Creatures Vase* – double rimmed and flounced – is a more restrained attractive design in a blue and white figurative style.

The use of the phrase “love changes everything” does seem to suggest a more mellow feeling evading this latest work.