

Ceramics pilgrimage pays off

Fragility - porcelain by Sandra Black.
Beaver Galleries. Until September 1.
Craft by Kerry-Anne Cousins

Two warm honey coloured celadon glazed bowls in this exhibition are a tangible reminder of Sandra Black's residency at Jingdezhen in China in 2014. Jingdezhen is called the pottery capital of China and is famous for its kaolin clay that has been used to make porcelain for more than 1000 years. Jingdezhen is almost like a place of pilgrimage for international ceramic artists and the city provides great opportunities for artists to visit, lecture and participate in the many workshops that are a feature of the city. The list of Australian ceramicists such as Black who have had residencies in Jingdezhen is impressive and is a testament to its continuing relevance and importance in the ceramic world.

The celadon glazed bowls stand on elegant feet and reference the tea bowl in form. Their surface is carved with delicate tendrils of vine, then glazed so the whole effect is one of understated refinement.

Black's other works are in black or white porcelain and are not glazed but polished so their surfaces have a soft glow. The forms are simple variations of open bowls and flat



Sandra Black's Hardenbergia II (ebony).

cylindrical vessels. Some are more open and generous in shape, growing outwards from a small foot while other cylindrical vessels are long and tapering.

Black either slip casts her vessels from plaster moulds or they are wheel-thrown in the case of the small bowls. She restricts herself to a soft ebony coloured porcelain, a bright cool ice white porcelain and a beautiful porcelain that resembles the colour of old ivory. The body of the pot is integral to the decoration as Black sculpts, carves and cuts into its surface to create intricate, decorative patterns. This decoration could be overpowering but Black's restraint in choosing simple forms

and not glazing the pots but leaving the design to speak for itself, results in works that are attractive with a harmonious interweaving of pattern and form.

Although painstaking in their precision and intricacy, the patterns do not lose any sense of vitality. This may be because the artist uses plant motifs in a natural rather than a stylised way. The motifs are taken from vines, banksias and hardenbergia. The vines spread their tendrils around the pots while the leaves of the banksia are used as a repeating motif. It is interesting to note how the banksia, a popular motif for artists in the Australian arts and craft movement in the early years of last century, has undergone a revival and has become appreciated by contemporary artists for its identifiable leaves with their strong structural imprint.

Piercing the body of the pots to make patterns is well known in Asian ceramics. It has long been associated with China where it is called *Linglong* were although it is said to have come to China from Turkey in the 14th century. It was popular in China during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) Dynasties and was among the vast quantities of porcelain exported to Europe.

To sculpt her porcelain clay bodies,

Black uses a surgical blade to carve out her designs before using a Dremel power tool and other instruments to cut into the porcelain body. The process needs a steady hand. Black's technical skill is impressive, especially as there is no room for error. In some of the works, notably the small bowl series, the open or negative spaces balance the positive spaces. This is true particularly of the series of *Etched Bowls* with their open jigsaw-like shaped holes.

In other works the piercing is also bolder such as in the *Lattice series* bowls. These small bowls look like they are made of open weave textiles and their open patterns cast lively shadows. In the smaller cylindrical works the pierced decoration is in a band that encircles the form. In the long tapering vessels it becomes a longitudinal pattern.

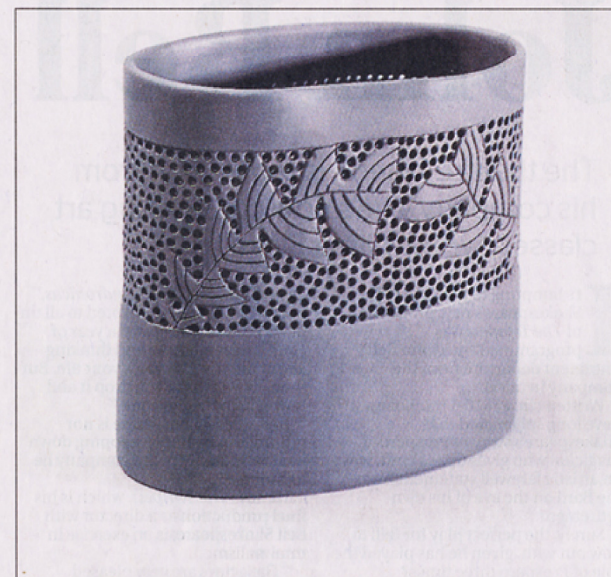
The piercing provides a lively surface and results in subtle plays of light and shadow. However, it is hard to see beyond the standout work of the exhibition which is the beautiful open shaped bowl (*Hardenbergia I*, no.11) in slip cast porcelain. Larger than some of the other bowls (15cm x 26cm x 26cm), it opens gracefully to reveal its pierced and carved pattern. This pattern is based on hardenbergia – a native creeping vine



Banksia: Stack series I (white).

with small purple flowers common around Canberra and found in many suburban gardens. In this work Black has carved the design into the body of the pot so that it looks like beautiful old *guipure* lace and this effect is reinforced by the warmth of the ivory-coloured porcelain.

Black is an artist who works in



Banksia III (ebony).

Fremantle in Western Australia. She has had a long career in ceramics and has also lectured in many institutions, including Curtin University in Western Australia. In 1986 she was visiting artist at the Canberra School of Art. In past years she has enjoyed several residencies including Red Deer College, Alberta,

and the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg. This year she has had residencies in Jingdezhen and Maihar in Madhya Pradesh in India.

Fragility at Beaver Galleries is an exhibition by an artist who not only knows what she wants to create but also has the professional skill to bring it to fruition.