

Craft Kerry-Anne Cousins

Native life becomes an exuberant motif

Coast - ceramics by Fiona Hiscock. Beaver Galleries. Until July 8.

To walk into the Beaver Galleries on a cold and grey winter's day and see Fiona Hiscock's exhibition of ceramics is to experience a welcome reminder of another season and another place.

Her generously sized and vividly coloured ceramics seem to suggest alfresco lunches in a bucolic countryside, with trees providing deep pools of shade as a respite from the blinding sun.

Hiscock's ceramics are in the tradition of the everyday domestic vessels made from white glazed earthenware pottery found in many regions of Europe. I have acquired on my travels such a collection of open platters, bowls, shallow casserole dishes and covered jars hand-painted in traditional designs from Portugal, Austria, Spain and Italy.

These ceramics are made in local potteries and their designs in coloured slips and oxides on a white glazed background are both regional and distinctive.

Hiscock draws on this tradition, but has firmly positioned her work within an Australian context. There were convict potters and simple potteries in early colonial Australia (Bendigo Potteries, for example, was established in the 1850s), but the majority of domestic ware was imported from abroad. Hiscock has based the forms



Natural match: (Clockwise from above) banksia serrata jars, by Fiona Hiscock; correa water pitcher; blue wren cassoulet.

of her ceramic vessels on a range of early colonial domestic ware used in the Australian colonies and rescaled them to suit her needs. Her vocabulary of forms is quite restricted - beakers, casserole dishes and jugs, as these vessels seem to serve the needs of the artist for suitable surfaces and shapes for adornment.

Her large pitchers recall the enamel water jugs used when water had to be fetched and carried to kitchens and bedrooms. The shallow casserole dishes and the beakers, although still being used today, have a long history going back beyond Roman times.

In her previous work, Hiscock has decorated all these vessels with images of figs, lemons and pears with delicate clusters of pear and almond blossom. These were all introduced species brought to Australia by the early settlers.

The inspiration for the choice of these plants and flowers came from the gardens still surviving around old miners' cottages in the goldmining town of Hill End in NSW. These plants tell a story of early settlers striving for self-sufficiency, but still making cottage gardens that reminded them of home.

In the current exhibition, however, the artist has moved away from these introduced species to look at the native plants found along the Victorian coastline. Plants that come to life in the artist's designs include the banksia tree (*Banksia serrata* and *Banksia integrifolia* or coastal banksia) - its flowers, cones and leaves, as well as the correa bush with its flame-red flowers.

The banksia tree has naturally curving branches and folded serrated leaves that lend themselves sympathetically to the decoration of three-dimensional objects. The correa, with its bright-red, bell-shaped flowers is very decorative and provides a striking motif on several of the beakers, and the moulded form of its red-flower motif is used as a knob on two covered jars.

In many of the works, Hiscock has included the small birds and insect life she has observed in the habitat of the banksia



trees. Small birds, such as honeyeaters, blue wrens and scarlet robins, are found depicted among her decorative foliage.

To create her designs, Hiscock draws the image onto the surface of the dried clay of the ceramic vessel before it is fired. The design is then painted in the manner of a watercolour with coloured stains and oxides.

In the tradition of botanical painting, she shows several aspects of the plant, from the seed to the flower. Her drawings, however, have a decorative design and exuberance far removed from the painstaking rendition of botanical specimens. Even her birds are overscaled and appear quickly executed in rapid brush strokes.

It is the directness of Hiscock's vision that provides the very real appeal of these works. One can feel as well as see the connection between the hand of the artist and her assured and painterly brushstrokes that build up the design so confidently.

Even her large and sometimes ungainly ceramic forms seem to be at one with the decoration.

It is indeed encouraging to see that Hiscock is now exploring the use of native plants for her designs. This latest body of work has shown that she can use them very successfully on her forms, bringing together tradition, history and innovation in a very successful ceramic series.

