

# Essence of.....porcelain by Maria Chatzinikolaki at Beaver Galleries is arresting

*Essence of... porcelain by Maria Chatzinikolaki. Beaver Galleries. Until July 3.*

**Reviewer:** Kerry-Anne Cousins.



Identity by Maria Chatzinikolaki is a strong piece which could be read as her questioning her own sense of identity.

*Photo: supplied*

Maria Chatzinikolaki's ceramics with their heightened decoration are very distinctive. They make an arresting display for the artist's first solo exhibition at Beaver Galleries.

The artist previously had a work in the *CHOICE* exhibition at Beaver Galleries in July last year. The *CHOICE* exhibition involved a group of artists from overseas who have chosen to make a new life in Australia. These artists, while accepting the new cultural mores of their adopted country, continue to make work influenced by their countries of origin and experiences of migration. Chatzinikolaki was part of this group exhibition. Born in Greece she migrated as a young woman to Australia in 2007. She continues to travel between the two countries and her present work was made in Greece and sent back to Australia.



The senses series are painted with a different animal to represent each of the senses.

*Photo: supplied*

Chatzinikolaki's art education began in Greece where she graduated with a BA in Graphic Design from the Vakalo School of Art in Athens. She originally worked in interior design and graphics, but developed an interest in ceramics while working in a ceramics shop in Greece. After migrating to Australia she continued her visual arts education with a BA in Visual Arts from Adelaide TAFE. Her subsequent years (2010-2015) as a JamFactory Associate in Adelaide have obviously played an influential part in her career as a ceramicist.

Simple vessels, beakers and flasks are made from white slip cast porcelain or from hand-thrown stoneware decorated before firing with coloured slips, glazes and gold, silver and copper metallic leaf. The decoration of the ceramics takes visual precedence over the forms of the pots and because this decoration is so strong and assured it is hard not to see it as the result of the artist's training as a graphic designer. The ceramic decorations are in a plethora of different styles and imagery that come from many sources – European historical art movements and Asian cultures, as well as the natural world. The decoration, whether stylised repeat patterns or drawn on the pots by freehand, demonstrates Chatzinikolaki's assured and skilled draughtsmanship and finely tuned sense of design.

Among the works there are several outstanding pots. One of the most successful works is called *identity*. It is a classic wide-mouth stoneware vessel (17 centimetres in height) tapering to a small foot. The form has been flattened almost like a representa-

tion of a two-dimensional canvas. Its ceramic form, decoration and execution are in perfect alignment. Free-drawn brushstrokes in black slips on each side of the pot are brought together by the silhouette of two hands almost clasping the pot. Included with the pot is a key (a found object) tied to the pot by red raffia and visually tied to it by a tiny fleck of red colour on the pot. This is a very strong and arresting work that could be read as questioning the migrant's sense of identity when caught between two cultures.

Another series of notable works are *the senses* series (no. 20 a-f). These are six small geometric style flasks in porcelain (about 10 centimetres in height) with "found" assorted decorative glass stoppers. I am reminded of a memorable series of painted "found" glass scent bottles called *Syntax of Flowers* made by Fiona Hall in 1992 and shown at the *Temple of Flora* exhibition at the Nolan Gallery at Lanyon in November 1992. Both the artists have used found objects as part of their art which associates scent bottles with femininity. Hall painted her bottles with images of female sexuality, while Chatzinikolaki uses imagery associated with the five senses. On each of the bottles, Chatzinikolaki has painted with charm and great skill a different animal to represent each of the senses of hearing, instinct, touch, smell, taste and sight. The five senses as a concept have been represented in Western art since the early Middle Ages, although they usually take human form. However, animals have long appeared in art as symbolic of certain attributes such as the dog for fidelity. In what seems to be an idiosyncratic choice, Chatzinikolaki ascribes the individual "sense" to each animal. While it is logical that the eagle represents sight, one might ask why does the monkey represent smell or the snake taste? However, this is largely irrelevant because it may just represent the artist's personal iconography. It also prompts us to revisit these old traditions and perhaps question them way in a new way.

Asian art is the inspiration for other patterns and imagery in Chatzinikolaki's work. In particular many forms are decorated in black and white variations of the traditional Japanese pattern (called *seigaiha*) of stylised waves and sea. Other patterns are made up from geometric shapes of dots and stripes, while fine, black linear patterns decorate the white body surfaces of flasks and beakers. In contrast there are several stoneware works with softly painted images of bamboo in the Asian style. One work has knotted bamboo root included with the ceramic vessel – a partnership that works well. Emu feathers are included with another stoneware vessel (*libertyno.19*) the decoration of which mirrors their delicate, linear feathering.