

CERAMICS Exhibition about preservation of nature

Capturing the essence of a fragile world

Craft review

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PRECIOUS Nature, Ceramics by Julie Bartholomew, Shannon Garson, Fiona Hiscock. Beaver Galleries. Until November 3.

I am always drawn to depictions of birds and remember with fondness the plump little quails woven into ancient Coptic Egyptian textiles. I also remember the birds, plants and fountains painted on the courtyard walls of Villa Poppaea, an ancient Roman villa near Naples. These birds are not depicted with forensic detail nor are they just decorative images but seem to be alive - caught in flight, as if frozen in time. Did those Roman painters feel that they were preserving the birds and plants by painting them in such a lifelike way? We will never know.

Ceramic artists Julie Bartholomew, Shannon Garson and Fiona Hiscock have more reason today to share a sense of the fragility of the natural world and its ecosystems. Both Hiscock and Garson have an ability to go beyond outward appearances to capture the essence of a moment in which birds, plants and the landscape are vitally alive. Bartholomew is sensitive to the changing physical environment underlined by the drifting and melting ice floes of Antarctica.

Hiscock has for many years used the forms of old household utensils - pitchers, buckets and jugs - as models for her stoneware ceramics giving them an importance that as domestic objects they would never have originally had. For this series she has decorated her vessels with Australian native plants and birds to draw attention to her concern for their environ-

ment under threat from humans and natural disasters. The artist makes detailed drawings of the plants and birds before transposing the image on to her hand-built and coiled pots. The birds include wrens, lorikeets and robins. The work *Blue Wren plate* exemplifies Hiscock's ability to decorate a surface

with directness and fluidity that has its basis in a close observation of nature as well as in execution.

Garson's work also depicts birds in a natural habitat but the imagery on her porcelain vessels encompasses a cosmic vision of land, water and sky. Her inspiration is

found in a small region of wild marshland near where she lives. The artist's ceramic forms of open bowls and beakers include three moon pots whose forms have derived from Korea ceramics. Some of the open bowls are tilted to reveal their beautiful painterly surfaces that draw you into their detail

Above: Julie Bartholomew, Antarctic thaw (detail). Far left: Fiona Hiscock, Blue wren plate (detail). Left: Shannon Garson, Hirundo Neovema (detail). All in Precious Nature at Beaver Galleries. Pictures: Supplied

as the artist is drawn into the intricacies of the natural world. White areas of surface are balanced by beautifully painted imagery that eloquently evokes grasses, riverbanks and tumultuous skies.

In *Evening Falls*, beautifully little images of small birds are silhouetted against moody skies while in other pots such as *Hirundo Neovema* (*the Welcome Swallow*) they have been painted onto the pot's surface.

Julie Bartholomew focuses on climate change in a more analytical way. *Climate Scrolls* is a series of coloured stacked cylinders (like ancient scrolls depicting human history) based on ice core readings. They refer

to the data collected in ice core sampling by Australian scientists from the Australian Antarctic Territory that show significant changes in the climate. A series of open dishes, *Antarctic Thaws*, is glazed with intricate patterns suggesting the thawing of the Antarctic ice. To look into them is to almost feel the movement of the melting floes.

Each of these artists is concerned with preserving the natural environment. Their work - in all its initial attractiveness - also makes the point that we have forgone the right to take nature for granted. If we do, our fragile ecosystem will disappear and all that will be left is its ghostly footprint.

