

# Startling ceramic conversations with plants and nature

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**JENNY Orchard: *Conversations with Weeds*- ceramics and works on paper. Beaver Galleries. Until August 30, 2020.**

Jenny Orchard describes her highly glazed hand-built ceramic sculptures as "mash-ups" - part creature, part plant, part insect and part reptile. Their creation is underpinned by her belief in the intrinsic connectedness between all living things. The artist's rich and fecund imagination is nourished by her interest in contemporary culture, the environment and European and tribal mythologies.

From ancient times there has always been a fascination with the idea of creatures that are an amalgam of humans, animals and plants. Mermaids being half human and half fish are a good example. The legends

surrounding them go back through human history. Hybrid creatures once only inhabiting the realm of our collective imagination are seen by the artist as a warning of the physical consequences of our fascination with scientific technology that pushes the boundaries of the natural world.

Orchard's sculptures are complex and highly decorated and stand like totem poles or take the form of small fantastical creatures. In a sculpture called *Japanese Amabie*, she depicts a version of the legendary mermaid/man Amabie from Japanese folklore who emerges from the sea in times of danger. In Japan this figure has had a resurgence with the emergence of the COVID-19 virus. The tradition was that artists recreated its image from their own imagination to bring good luck at times

of crisis. Orchard's *Amabie* looks rather benign with its three legs and fishlike fins. In another not quite so benign work *Gene G with COVID-19 Hunting Tail*, the sting (perhaps a representation of the COVID-19 protein molecule) is present in the tail of this hybrid beast that stalks us all.

In Greek mythology, the nymph Daphne was turned into a laurel bush by her father, the river god Peneus, to escape the unwanted attentions of Apollo. There is a faint echo of this in Orchard's work *Spring Festival Totem* with its mask-like face. Its limbs "grow" from its central structure and its tendrils are tipped with leaf-like fingers. In *Remembering bush ghost*, a rather beautiful small creature has a large plant sprouting from its head and leaves form on its stalk-like limbs.

Startling and indeed



Jenny Orchard, *Remembering Bush Ghost* (detail). **Picture: Supplied**

quite confronting as some of the sculptures are in their compelling directness, there are also intimate little passages of beautiful colour and texture.

Orchard is a highly skilled ceramicist with a great mastery of glazing techniques. The works are constructed by bringing together myriad forms, colours, textures and

non-ceramic materials. In an inventive approach, glossy ceramic surfaces are contrasted not only with textured matt areas of glaze and enamel but also with fabric and mixed material such as feathers. All elements are orchestrated with a deft hand with a sense of theatricality. There are startling juxtapositions of

human attributes - red lips, staring bulbous eyes and sharp white pointed teeth; with the scales and spots of animals; along with the scaly red tipped claws of birds; and the curled and waving tendrils of plants.

*Totem from everywhere* has its source perhaps in the artist's early homeland of Zimbabwe but its mask-like face, feathered skirt and legs with their decorative bands of colour and tufts of feathers conjures up the unknowable mysteries of the tribal guardians of the spirit world. A conical hat with feathers is a feature of another sculpture, *Birdman*, that is a reminder of how tribal dancers enter into the spirit of animals through mime and dance.

Orchard has also included in the exhibition works on paper that are an insightful accompaniment to her art practice.