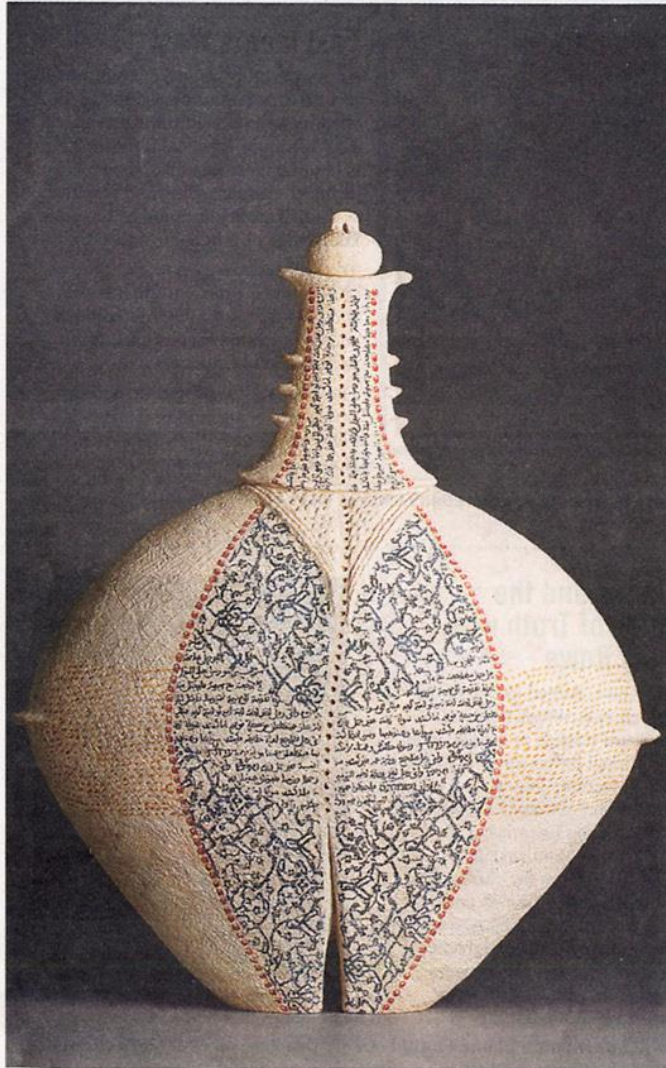


Fusing form and decoration



Mother tongues - ceramics by Avital Sheffer.

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.
Hours: Tuesday-Friday 10am-5pm,
Saturday-Sunday 9am-5pm. Until March 1.

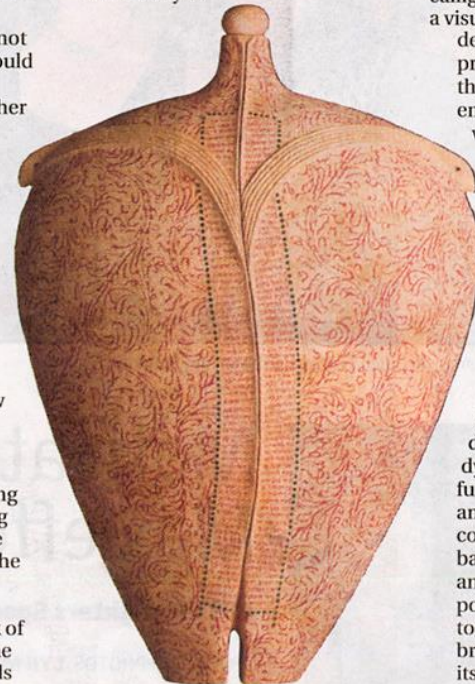
Reviewer: **Kerry-Anne Cousins**

Avital Sheffer's pots stand monumental and calm like guardians of another realm. Hand built and moulded from earthenware clay they have the initial appearance of just being recovered from the earth like artefacts from an archaeological dig. They speak eloquently of desert landscapes and Middle Eastern domed architecture. Yet the pots are not replicas of ancient pots nor could they be mistaken for ancient artefacts. Sheffer brings together elements of her Jewish and Middle Eastern heritage to develop new forms and new ways of using text, ornamentation and decoration so that the pots have a contemporary sensibility. Sheffer was born in Jaffa in Israel. Her educational background is in town planning, fashion and textile design. In 1990 she migrated to Australia and now lives on the North Coast of NSW.

Sheffer's initial interest in ceramics was sparked by seeing the cylindrical pots containing the Dead Sea Scrolls that were found in cliffs on the edge of the Dead Sea in Israel. She was intrigued by these pots that contained the texts that speak of a forgotten people. In the same way the Dead Sea Scroll vessels

carry such a weight of cultural information, Sheffer has fashioned her own pots to act as carriers for her iconography.

In this collection of pots called *Mother tongues* Sheffer has based their actual forms on the female body. The prototypes go back many thousand of years to small cult figures found in graveyards or kept as fertility talismans. In Sheffer's pots the roundness of the forms suggests the wide fecund hips of these goddesses and cult figures. In each pot a ridge or line sways from the lip down the centre of the body of



the pot to the cleft at its foot. This dynamic line like the sway of feminine hips reinforces the image of a fertility goddess while serving to bring an energy and vitality to the form of the pot.

The pots themselves are divided into areas of decoration by incised or printed dots or raised clay mouldings in the same way areas of decoration are allocated in an architectural context by architectural detailing. The various designated cartouches contain Hebrew and Aramaic texts where the beauty of the calligraphic line becomes not only a visual language but a decorative device. Outside these prescribed areas the bodies of the pots are covered with entwining floral motifs and vines like the patterning of decorated tiles on the walls of mosques and temples. These printed patterns are rendered in soft reds and pale indigo blues that are applied unevenly so that they appear to be rubbed off in places by the effect of weather and time.

Sheffer's pots have developed from simply being surfaces for carrying decoration to organic dynamic forms that can function outside the historical and cultural context Sheffer has constructed. She has judged the balance between decoration and form acutely so that each pot and its decoration are fused together to become one almost breathing entity, complete in its timeless elegance.