

ARTS

Craft review Kerry-Anne Cousins

Disparate traditions speak



Kevin White vessel, porcelain with gold, platinum, enamels and decals, 20 x 19 x 19cm.

Porcelain. Kevin White and Marianne Huhn. Beaver Galleries. Until March 24.

Kevin White and Marianne Huhn are both accomplished artists who work in porcelain.

White covers his porcelain forms with a rich mantle of coloured glazes, enamels and gold leaf.

In contrast, Huhn works with a restricted palette of black and brown oxides on a porcelain body.

White has had a long professional career. His first interest in ceramics dates from his studies at the Royal College of Art, London, in the 1970s.

However, it was his early travels to Japan that ignited his interest in East Asian ceramic traditions.

In 1978, he was awarded a prestigious Japanese government scholarship to study ceramics in Kyoto. During this time, he worked at the studio of Satashi Sato and became interested in the avant-garde ceramic group Sojichisha.

This group looked at ceramics not as traditional functional objects but as potential sculptural forms in a modernist context.

White came to Australia in 1985 and has continued to pursue a career not only as a ceramicist, but as a teacher and academic. He has written several learned papers on Japanese ceramics and has continued to travel to Asia to follow his studies.

He is currently associate professor and deputy head of international development at RMIT in Melbourne. White's work in this exhibition will be familiar to anyone who has followed his career.

He is content to work within a narrow perimeter of form and decoration. This, too, is in the Japanese tradition, where perfection in craftsmanship sometimes means becoming known for producing one

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special object or craft form. This can be as rarefied as making a special kind of ceramic or lacquerware or as fundamental as cooking a special noodle dish.

In White's present body of work, there are only three kinds of objects – small cups, pouring vessels and the larger vessels.

One has the impression that he is not seduced by the idea of experimentation, but rather has decided that these three forms will provide the necessary canvas on which to experiment with decoration.

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On the large vessels, the calligraphic swirls become prominent, matched against the geometric grids, breaking up the sense

of the roundness of the form, but nevertheless providing a sense of drama and movement to these otherwise monumental objects. By way of contrast, the series of cups and pouring vessels are quite small and delicate.

The gold and coloured enamel decoration reduced to miniature scale on these small objects makes them jewel-like and visually seductive.

Huhn's work comes from another tradition. The artist initially was interested in the way plates from the Russian Imperial Porcelain Factory in St Petersburg originally intended as decorative items were taken over between 1905 and 1930 and painted with political images to promote communism. This is the focus of her current PhD studies at RMIT in Melbourne.

In her own work, she has developed the idea of political narratives in functional ceramics. Her works are in Limoges porcelain, traditionally used for delicate and decorative domestic ware.

Her work is wheel-made, and altered by hand as the artist is motivated by the idea of the potter's mark or thumbprint.

Generally, she makes bowls, plates, cups and lidded jars. The porcelain is dried and then the artist carves into it with a sharp instrument, creating her text and images. Brown and black oxides are rubbed into the scored lines, so that the effect is not unlike an engraving.

In this present work, Huhn's themes are based on immigration, climate change and democratic ideals. The words climatic and immigration are spelt out in ceramic Scrabble letters arranged on a wooden board, as if to underline the artist's message.

Some of the small shallow bowls have images of barbed wire drawn across them, creating a net of entrapment. In other works, the beautifully designed text spells out democratic ideals in words such as hope, justice, vision and courage.

In *Ever watching eyes*, tiny eye motifs pepper a bowl. *Machinations* features cogs of machinery.

However, Huhn's major work of the exhibition would have to be the plate, *Unity is strength*, with its ambiguous reading.

The plate refers to Julia Gillard's brief reign as prime minister. It is decorated around

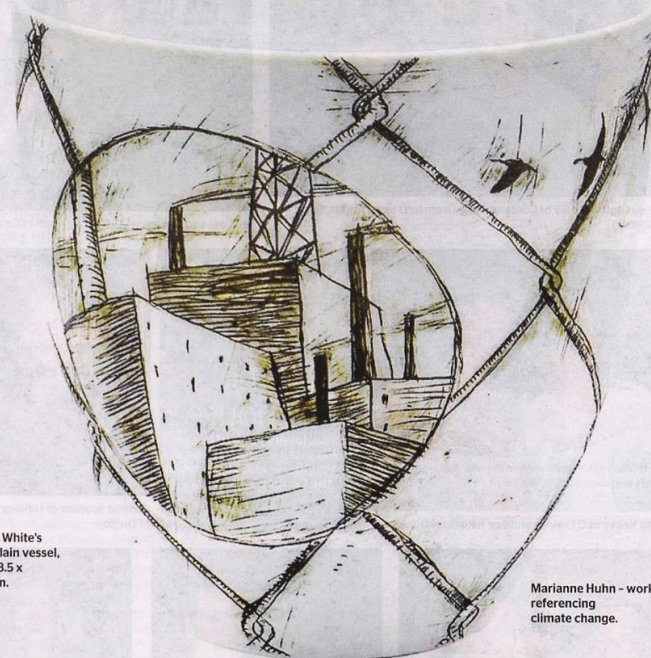
volumes

the rim with the catchery of the Australian union movement with its ironic overtones when juxtaposed with Gillard's time as prime minister and a sharp but not unkind little image of the prime ministerial profile.

This is a clever and highly successful work that succeeds on many levels: as a decorative design, as a political comment, and as a commemorative historical record in an age-old ceramic tradition, all of which would make it an ideal work to be part of the national collection.



Kevin White's porcelain vessel, 22 x 18.5 x 18.5cm.



Marianne Huhn - work referencing climate change.