

## ARTS

# An intriguing set of sculptures with a hidden dimension

## Craft review

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**DAI Li: *Little Things in life*. Beaver Galleries. Until March 1, 2020.**

Dai Li's series of hand built and glazed stoneware ceramics of female sculptures at the Beaver Galleries are intriguing.

They are small in height - the largest is 33 centimetres.

The figures bend their heads toward the viewer with an invitation to connect with them in an intimate and personal way.

A tilt of the head, a slight twist or change in the shape of the mouth, a directional look in the eyes can be enough to bring about a change of expression and mood.

Yet there remains something not quite knowable about these works that gives them an added dimension, placing them beyond the simply decorative.

Indeed, to see these figures as being only whimsical or quirky is to fail to engage with them on a meaningful level.

Dai Li was born in 1987 in Sichuan province, China.

She attended the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute in China from 2005 to 2009.

Shortly after graduating, she came to Australia and settled in Queensland.

Her first professional exhibition was in 2010.

She has continued to exhibit successfully including being a finalist in the 2016 Biennial North Queensland Ceramic Award.

This is her first solo exhibition at the Beaver Galleries although she was part of the group show *A Point of Difference* in 2019.

These small sculptural figures come from a tradition as old as human culture.

Greek Cycladic figures from the third century BC come to mind with their stylised bodies and exaggerated-sized heads.

The artist's Chinese heritage provides many other examples.

Among them are ancestral figures, statues of the gods and the terracotta funerary figures that accompanied burials.

As well as her interest in the imagery of contemporary life, Dai Li also cites the in-



Dai Li, *Scarf* in *Little Things in Life* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied

fluence of Greek and Roman sculptures and the work of two 20th-century men, Balthus (a Polish-French artist who lived from 1908 to 2001) and French sculptor Georges Jeanclous-Mossé (who was born in 1933 and died in 1997).

The intimate knowledge of human expression in her distinct works, however, surely

comes from her own feelings and experience.

Dai Li's sculptures are ceramic busts and figures.

In the majority of these figures, the body, enveloped in clothing, becomes a column-like form supporting the large head.

The subject's arms are thin and frail with hands that seem listless and ineffectual

unless they are engaged in a task such as carrying a cat or holding an apple.

Clothing is generic, decorated in muted colours and patterns and is not tied to any specific fashion style, although in *Deep Breath* there is a delightful rendering of a knitted jumper.

There is subtle modelling of the faces of the female

subjects particularly in two busts, *Scarf* and *Queensland winter II*, framed by the delicate detailing of strands of hair.

One of the more intriguing aspects of Li's modelled faces is that, although each face is different, they are not portraits.

Perhaps this is because the artist's emphasis is on the universality of the facial expressions that we instinctively recognise and to which we respond.

Dai Li's work however is not without its flights of fancy - a tilting towards the dreamlike possibilities of surrealism perhaps?

In works such as *Flower Eyes* and *Lady bird*, objects such as insects, fruit and flowers are placed in connection with the subject in an enigmatic way.

And whimsy is not excluded completely, with works such as the girl holding a cat in *Slightly tired*, the cat on top of the toilet bowl in *Cover up* and the *Blue Heeler study*.

Fun as these works are, they can be a distraction from the artist's more thoughtful and insightful sculptural studies.