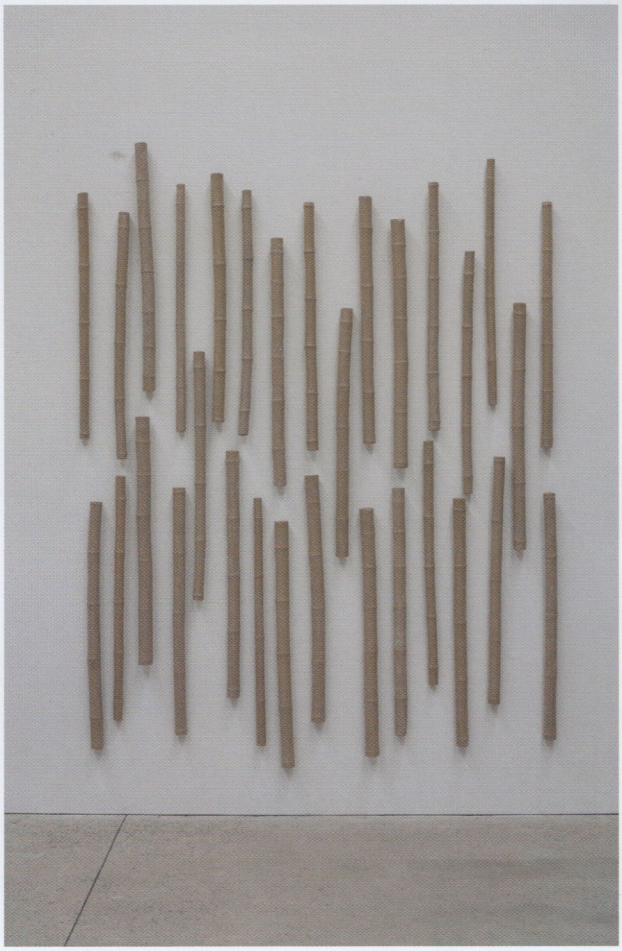
Yasmin Smith

Born 1984, Sydney, Australia
Lives and works in Sydney



(above and opposite)
Flooded Rose Red Basin (details) 2018
Yong Chuan slip industrial stoneware with wood (*Eucalyptus grandis*) ash glaze and Jiajiang bamboo ash glaze / 68 pieces: installed dimensions variable / Purchased 2021 with funds from the Future Collective through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / Images courtesy: The artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Yasmin Smith is known for her research-based ceramic installations that formally and chromatically evoke the landscape from which they are produced. As part of her investigative method, Smith gathers natural materials and, through analysis, determines how she can harness their chemical properties. Key to the artist's process is burning plant material as a basis for glazes. The minerals, nutrients and toxins absorbed from soil and water remain in the ash, resulting in fascinating colour and textural variations in the glazes that cover Smith's earthenware and ceramic casts of the original plants.

Flooded Rose Red Basin 2018 draws upon ancient ceramic traditions in China while also referencing the rapid development that is changing that country's rural landscape. The ceramic sculpture was made while Smith was in residence at the Jinhui Ceramic Sanitary Ware Factory near Wuchangzhen, in Sichuan Province. Ci zhu bamboo was collected from the nearby Shiyan village, in Jiajiang County, known for its tradition of bamboo paper-making. Segments of the stems were cast at the factory in collaboration with the workers who usually produce toilets and sinks. The plant material was burnt, and the remaining ash used to glaze the stoneware objects.

Smith's initial interest in bamboo was spurred on by recent scientific investigations into the material as a possible source of biosilica for future electric, solar, satellite and phone technologies. During her time in Sichuan, however, the artist noticed established plantings of *Eucalyptus grandis* — a species endemic to Australia, commonly known as flooded gum or rose gum. Eucalyptus was first introduced in China in 1890 as an ornamental planting, but it was not until the 1950s that large eucalyptus timber plantations were established. Eucalypts' high yield and adaptability in diverse conditions makes them economically attractive.[1] Gums are also planted along roadsides and farmland to stabilise soil erosion; however, as they are adept at absorbing water and nutrients, the trees leave reduced supplies for the surrounding agricultural vegetation.

Encountering this Australian tree far from its original habitat, yet deeply embedded in the Chinese landscape, prompted Smith to create a set of stoneware eucalypt branches with a syrupy, gum-ash glaze that are presented alongside the sections of cast bamboo. Bringing together these two iconic plants, *Flooded Rose Red Basin* highlights the tension between local and introduced species, and the ecological challenges intensive industrialisation of the countryside and the climate emergency pose to both China and Australia.

In creating subtly textured sculptural forms, Smith asks the viewer to look past the clichéd imagery associated with these respective national symbols to the physical, material and chemical properties of the plants. This is an artwork with contradictions at its core, seen in the way that the natural forms are replicated using an industrial process. Repeated cast objects within the large display reinforce the idea of mass production. In contrast, the glazes are unrefined and freely stream and pool across the body of the branches and stems. Although it might be assumed that the high amount of silica in the glaze would produce a glassy finish, the bamboo glaze is matt with speckles of sand-like deposits. This is because the melting point of pure silica is higher than the 1200–20 degrees Celsius glaze firing used in the factory; moreover, there were very few other fluxes or materials in the ash with lower melting points that would normally help melt the glaze. Meanwhile, the high amount of iron and manganese give the eucalyptus glaze its amber-olive colour. Hairline cracks appear on the surface as a result of the object expanding and compressing at a different rate to the glaze during firing. While the bamboo stems and gum branches are repeated forms made from industrial stoneware, their idiosyncratic glazes make them unique objects.

In *Flooded Rose Red Basin*, Smith utilises available organic matter to elegantly reveal the ecological, cultural and economic history of the emblematic bamboo and gum, and in turn the distinct connections between Australia and China.

Ellie Buttrose

Endnotes

This essay draws on conversations with the artist in January and April 2020 and May 2021.

1 Forest Department, Guangxi, China, 'Research achievements of the Dongmen Eucalyptus Demonstration Project, Guangxi State Forest Farm Company Guangxi, China – Wei Ju', *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, <http://www.fao.org/3/AC772E/ac772e05.htm#:~:text=Eucalypt%20was%20introduced%20into%20China,four%20sides%E2%80%9D%20of%20agricultural%20fields>, viewed April 2021.