ASHES TO ASHES

Yasmin Smith’s site-specific ceramic installations reveal the history, ecology and culture of place.

WORDS: RACHEL TOLORA PAZ
PHOTOGRAPHY: JACQUE MANNING
When it comes to the work of Sydney-born artist Yasmin Smith, process is paramount. The artist has developed a highly rigorous and hermetic approach to her ceramic practice, which she uses to investigate the world around her. Her major exhibitions over the past four years — including her most recent large-scale and public-participatory installation Downriver Valley (2018) at Cockatoo Island as part of the 21st Biennale of Sydney — are complex, site-specific explorations of the Australian landscape that reveal history, ecology, geology and culture of place.

After graduating from Sydney College of the Arts in 2010 with a Master of Fine Arts and participating in the excavation of an archaeological site in Spain, Smith feels that the turning point in her practice came in 2014 when working with the Hermansburg Potters in Naria in the Northern Territory. "I was living in a house in Naria that was surrounded by a fence that had all of those branches stuck in it," she tells me. "Formally, I saw that fence in the landscape and I wanted to appreciate the object for what it was. And I started thinking about how I could use the materials themselves, rather than just try and reproduce it."

The outcome, Naria Fences (2015), was a sculptural installation shown as part of a solo exhibition of the same name at The Commercial in Chippendale, Sydney, where Smith has been represented since 2012. Smith's individually cast branches were attached to a makotn bird fence, reflecting the original object in a new way. The branches were glazed with ash collected from local Naria fireplaces and cooking spaces using a wood-ash glazing technique the artist continues to refine today.

This wood-ash glazing provides Smith with a way to investigate the history of place: the ash determines the colour of the glaze, revealing a given environment's past narratives. In Smith's installation, Open Your Central Leader (2017) — her Sydney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award finalist work exhibited at Shepparton Art Museum — Smith cast 109-year-old pear branches from a local redwood. "The glaze turned out to be very green, and that came from the copper fungicidal sprays and copper oxide sprays that were used up until the 1970s to make the pears turn brown," says Smith.

In her Downriver installation Downriver Valley — an iteration of which will exhibit at The Commercial in June/July — Smith again utilized wood-ash glazing techniques to expose the contorted history of locally gathered timber on Cockatoo Island. The work also had a participatory element: as Cockatoo Island marks the tidal exchange between the salt waters of Sydney Harbour and the fresh waters of the Parramatta River, Smith wanted to explore the performative nature of salt harvesting collective in early colonial history. She built a salt kiln on site to fire pinch pots made by the herminal visitors. "Having the public as the labour is beneficial for me as an artist," Smith explains. "People get to engage with the work, and it allows me to provide them with a direct explanation of the glazing techniques and the materials involved. This in turn gives them an insight into their environment."

The finished salt-glazed vessels and the stake-like, ash-glazed cubes of manuka and wattle were laid individually alongside one another in a sparse, sparsely-grasped wood-drying bed on the floor. "I wanted to give the pieces a lot of space," says Smith. "There is so much inside the material that to add any more subjectivity would just overload the work."

Exhibiting within the limits of the gallery space late this month, Smith will arrange the pinch pots within a towering metal stack. The cast sculptures and manuka will be wall-mounted, providing audiences with an intimate, vertical view of the deep connections and interior spaces that Smith contains in her ceramic processes and collectors with an opportunity to acquire their own piece of this incredibly complex, multi-layed undertaking that epitomises Smith's practice.

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MAMI KATAOKA


This page: Installation view of Yasmin Smith's Downriver Valley, 2018, 21st Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE COMMERCIAL, SYDNEY.
PHOTO BY FRANK BARRETT.
MAMI KATAOKA
Curator and Artistic Director, 21st Biennale of Sydney

In her role as artistic director of the 21st Biennale of Sydney, SUPERPOSITION: Equilibrium & Engagement, Mami Kataoka commissioned Yasmine Smith to create the site-specific ceramic installation, Downed River Valley, exhibited at Sydney’s Cockatoo Island.

During the process of selecting artists for the Biennale, Kataoka was particularly concerned with working out those who were working within a holistic, Wu Xing view of the world: a Chinese philosophy that explores the relationship and interaction between the five elements of wood, fire, earth, water and metal. In regard to Smith’s art practice, Kataoka says: “I was interested in her ceramic works due to their nature of using fire, water, wood and earth to represent the Wu Xing concept and the ecology of the universe.”

As part of her research into Smith’s practice, Kataoka had viewed her work Converse of our heart (2016) at Barangaroo and was impressed by her ability to work with the public. “As the idea of engagement was one of the crucial perspectives for the Biennale, I was looking for local artists who could make a longer commitment with the visitors and communities after the opening,” says Kataoka.

A culturally relevant artist working to reflect both the local climate and natural condition, “Yasmine was one of the best artists to be able to achieve both of the above”, says Kataoka. “This was in addition to her scientific approach of making glazes and use of local materials such as sea salt and mangrove, which is highly valued.”

AMANDA ROWELL
Director, The Commercial, Sydney

Amanda Rowell has represented Yasmine Smith since 2012, though they first worked together on a curatorial project in 2009. “I was hugely impressed by the originality and beauty of her work,” says the Sydney gallerist. “She was completely doing her own thing – very ambitious, large-scale ceramic installations. She had single-minded focus, great energy and confidence.”

In recent years, Smith’s considered blend of science, archaeology and art has been attracting more and more attention. In 2017, her work for the NAB Myer Fund/Australian Ceramic Award was acquired in full by Victoria’s Shepparton Art Museum. “It would be one of the largest ceramic installations in an Australian public collection today,” says Rowell.

To awareness of and high level of interest in her work from influential international curators is rapidly increasing – especially since the Biennale. Smith’s forthcoming exhibition at The Commercial will see Smith’s Birds installation re-configured together with some new works of a more intimate nature. “They will indicate a departure and future development in work and will most likely be less than $10,000,” says Rowell.

“Yasmine’s works are both highly intelligent in their consideration of site and immensely labour-intensive.”

AMANDA ROWELL