



beyond materiality: histories re-thought and re-imagined.

The 2017 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award (SMFACA) showcases five ambitious, newly commissioned bodies of work in the ceramic medium by five shortlisted finalists. As a biennial prize, the SMFACA enables us to reflect on the state of ceramics in a contemporary context.

The artists in this exhibition employ a diverse array of methodologies, where the clay medium is harnessed to explore a variety of artistic and conceptual ideas. Yasmin Smith uses a cross-disciplinary approach - her investigations around clay and glaze reveal the social histories and biochemistries of place. By contrast, Glenn Barkley and Karen Black look to the lineages of the ceramic form and its museological traditions of display. While Barkley references botanical motifs, literature and the Internet, Black creates symbols of endurance and survival that speak about female experience and the global refugee crisis. Looking inwards, Jenny Orchard and Laith McGregor tap into their imaginations for source material. For Orchard, fantastical hybrid creatures explore environmental concerns around genetic modification gone awry, while McGregor draws on personal nostalgia as a means of excavating subconscious memory.

Yasmin Smith works primarily in ceramics. She is known for her large-scale site referential installations that often involve laborious production processes and locally sourced materials. Her research-based approach centres on scientific experiments with clay and glaze. Through these methodologies, she uncovers both physical and chemical compositions and examines the social histories of place.

Smith's major installation *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker* (2017) consists of over 150 slip cast ceramic tree branches that emulate the forms of three species sourced from Shepparton. Forming an apex that resembles a humpy or domestic lean-to, the branches fit within the oscillating grooves of the corrugated iron clad walls. In the centre of the room, an additional heap of gnarled branches rests on a crumpled canvas tarpaulin.

Using labor-intensive production processes, Smith gathered and transported over a tonne of tree branches from Shepparton to her studio in regional NSW. This haul included two species of commercial fruit trees - Sundowner apple and Beurré Bosc pear gifted from local orchards, plus the native River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) sourced from beside the Goulburn River, where the artist camped for a

time. The title of this work denotes pruning techniques used by local orchardists: the pear branches have been trimmed in *Open Vase* style to enable the maximum filtration of sunlight; *Central Leader* refers to the conical shape of apple tree pruning; and *Widow Maker* to the often unexpected natural shedding of branches by the native eucalypt. The project involved extensive research as well as community and indigenous consultation, an undertaking that significantly informed and enriched the resulting installation.

Smith's practice-led research pivots around the unveiling of social histories by revealing the chemical makeup of place. Through scientific experimentation using a triaxial blend, each of these branches are glazed with wood ash derived from the same trees. The resulting glazes reveal the unique chemical makeup of each tree, a product of its own environmental system. Smith observes that the 'Sundowner' apple reflected a light iron soil content giving it its yellow colour. The 100 year old Beurré Bosc pears revealed copper oxide through its green hue, evidence of the fungicidal copper spray in the wood. While the River Red Gum held a mix of manganese dioxide and iron oxide, giving it a much deeper brown...this was intensified by the inclusion of water from the Goulburn River'.¹ Chemical soil composition, irrigation or flooding, pruning techniques, exposure to sunlight and the age of the tree are all vital factors that result in different glazes.

Glaze in ceramic traditions is usually employed for functional or decorative purposes. In *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker* Smith subverts this approach, and glaze is harnessed for more investigative means that evidence the biochemical traces of the natural world and the residue of human cultivation of the land. Moreover, her purist approach of minimal intervention celebrates the natural attributes of her materials.

Smith's lightness of touch and formalist approach recalls the legacies of Minimalism, an American art movement (1960s-1970s) characterised by repetitive seriality, structural refinement and highly reductive methodology. This is evidenced by the restrained constituent parts of this work: its repetitive linear branches, geometric tarpaulin and corrugated iron panelling which follows the gallery architecture.

Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker is a site-referential installation that responds to the context of Shepparton and its identity as the 'fruit bowl' of Victoria. Known for its

plentiful orchards and rich, well-irrigated soil, Shepparton is a diverse multicultural community of First Nations people, early settlers, migrants and itinerant fruit pickers. Reasons for resettlement are varied: some came to escape persecution or oppressive conditions in their place of origin, and many travelled to seek employment, find shelter and create a new home. Stories of displacement and resettlement are central to the histories of the region, and inexorably bound up in a relationship with the land.

Smith's provisional arrangement seems to imply some future utilitarian function as wood, ceramics, corrugated iron and canvas are materials that might be employed to construct a home or temporary shelter. Their use spans cultures, continents and eras. The history of European ceramic production in Australia dates back to the First Fleet, who landed at Botany Bay in 1788 with brick moulds to build houses for colonial settlers. Corrugated iron is a quintessentially Australian material, and Smith's use of it also recalls the residences that Yorta Yorta people constructed on local riverbanks after the Cummeragunja walkoff in 1939². The Flats between Shepparton and Mooroopna are still a place where campers, itinerant fruit pickers and homeless people find shelter and reside.

Glenn Barkley has also produced a work that is site-referential, pointing back in part to Shepparton's Australian Botanic Gardens and SAM's Ceramics Collection. Barkley is a gardener, curator and artist with a research interest in the histories of ceramics and their traditions of making. It follows then that his reference points would be an amalgam of horticulture, popular culture, literary sources and art history.

In *Garden Garniture* (2017), Barkley mines the histories of the ceramic form and its traditions of museological display. Two formal arrangements of pots and vases rest on plinths in a linear fashion. Barkley co-opts 17th to 19th century display conventions of the garniture: an assembly of similar decorative objects intended to be displayed together, that might be found in either a museum vitrine or on a domestic mantelpiece. A monumental circular wall work comprised of a dense matrix of ceramic text and small circular tokens is installed on a neon yellow wall. Opposite, a series of framed collages read as preliminary sketches that have informed his ideas.

Barkley is an artistic bowerbird who entangles ceramic histories with personal narratives. Conflating time and place, this body of work displays a distinctive mash-up of influences. The collages reveal scrawled lyrics from 90s grunge band Pearl Jam, juxtaposed with vessels and busts from classical antiquity. By contrast, the pots and tokens include stamped heart-shaped indentations from a ceremonial wedding pot made by the artist's mother-in-law; chrysanthemum patterns borrowed from Korean slipware; and rope designs from Jōmon Pottery, an ancient Japanese tradition characterised by the rope-patterned impressions on the vessel's surface. Reoccurring seashell motifs recall wood-firing techniques where shells are used as a barrier to stop the pot from adhering to the kiln. Shells are also evocative of mid-century modern Lustreware by commercial potteries such as Darbyshire in Perth, examples of which are held in SAM's Ceramics Collection. Barkley cannibalises these traditions, harnessing them for their conceptual and expressive potential. His self-consciously naive art style embraces irregularity, imperfection and the emotive qualities this can infer.

Barkley has a maximalist aesthetic with a healthy dose of *horror vacui*. These effervescent pots and wall works reveal intensely patterned surfaces through applied text and jewel-like tokens rendered using coloured glazes. As messages on bottles, his encoded pots explore the possibilities and limitations of language and semiotics, sometimes citing pop song lyrics or literary quotations. Spelt out in hand rolled clay letters on the wall, Barkley has reworked a protest slogan from the Situationist International, a revolutionary movement that reached its pinnacle in May 1968 in Paris, France; '*Under the cobble stones – the beach*,'³ becomes '*Under the dump a garden*'. This phrase can be read as a rethinking of the historic statement that points back to Shepparton's Australian Botanic Gardens, a recently developed site established on previous land-fill. Another quotation from a pot in the centre of the garniture has been borrowed from 20th century poet T.S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton* (1935) which is set in a rose garden. '*Words strain, crack and sometimes break*,'⁴ speaks about humanity's relationship with time, the universe and the divine. Barkley's use of these texts hints at utopian ideas as well as the ephemerality of the natural world— *Garden Garniture* suggests fertile possibilities for renewal, nurtured from urban wastelands and social disorder.

Botanical motifs such as seedpods and cacti, Victorian topiary and hedging are also suggested through the textures of

Barkley's forms. Using an array of pottery techniques such as coiling, slab building and pinch pot methods, indentations from fingers and tools produce ridges and recessions, puncturing the surface of the clay ground. These rhythmical gestures cajole the medium into resembling the pores of human skin, or surfaces that might be found in earth's vibrant microcosm.

Karen Black is known for her gestural approach to surface across painting and ceramics. Her works explore politically charged themes around war, and female driven narratives across time and place. Her installation *Temporary Arrangements* (2017) has been conceived as an exploration of materiality and form, while functioning as a symbol of resilience and endurance.⁵

Black's ceramic vessels have been mathematically up-scaled from third and fourth century glassware seen by the artist in an archaeological museum in Istanbul. Roman in origin, these receptacles were used to store an array of precious oils and perfumes used by all members of society. Their reproduction reflects the ongoing reiteration and reinterpretation of glass and ceramic vessels across the continuum of history. Some of these forms are just as likely to be found in a department store like Myer as they are in a museum context. Black considers them enduring forms that are inherently political, having survived centuries of conflict.

At first glance, Black's surfaces could be read in a formal way, as beautiful self-referential abstractions about colour and form. Here the surface of the clay body is equivalent to the canvas ground in her paintings. Hand coloured slip is applied in gestural brushstrokes, and daubs of paint are allowed to weep and cascade downwards. Closer inspection reveals the suggestion of faces, or the silhouettes of figures clothed in hijabs - some stooped in grief, some gathered in groups, and some lying motionless. Black's artistic lineage is not, in fact, mid twentieth century abstraction, but the subject matter of German Social Realist painter Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and Francisco Goya (1746-1828), both of whom depicted sombre and sometimes harrowing scenes of human suffering in times of war.⁶

These sculptures function as memorials of survival, reflecting the endurance of Syrian refugees with whom Black worked with in Reyhanlı, the border town for the Aleppo crossing into Turkey. The layered surfaces convey trans-historical narratives about female experience, as well as feminist critique around

the control and exchange of woman's bodies as a chattel. A large-scale, predominantly yellow vessel with a fluted top conveys the graphic scene of a female refugee giving birth in a warzone. The ancient form of the Persian tear catcher (a device used to gauge a wife's commitment to her husband by measuring the volume of tears she had shed) is realised in monumental proportions. Forms and details also suggest adornments and womens' bodies more overtly - hips, busts and pregnant bellies feature prominently. A matt-black glaze on a pedestal resembles the texture of a black leather handbag; a viscous looking glaze infers bodily fluid or mother's milk; a length of grey-blonde human hair resembles a tassel that might attach to a perfume atomizer. Resting severed on a plinth it could alternatively be read as some kind of trophy, a sinister souvenir from a sexual conquest or a relic from a battle zone.

These large-scale vessels are stacked in provisional groupings atop bulbous supports and geometric plinths. Tentatively placed, they are spatially responsive and could be configured in myriad other ways. This sense of impermanence is captured in the work's title - *Temporary Arrangements*, reflecting the precarious placement of the ceramic forms, as well as the social displacement experienced by millions of women within the ongoing global refugee crisis.

In this installation, the gallery architecture combined with the sculptural qualities of the ceramic forms and their plinths, produces an immersive quality that spatializes Black's painterly concerns into a three dimensional context. A grey-blue curvilinear plinth suggests the gesture of a brushstroke, while another flat cylindrical form resembles a daub of paint that might be found on a canvas. These geometrical shapes have been applied as they would in a painting, to inform and unify the composition of the room and as directional devices to navigate the viewer's experience.

A subtle olfactory intervention also permeates the space, as Black has detonated an array of scented oils from Egypt, chosen for their symbolic associations. Using a balance of musk, oud, rose and frankincense combined with Australian sandalwood, a harmonious choral structure has been composed between base, mid and high notes that changes dependent on the viewer's location in the space. According to Black, the aroma of rose oil has signified secrecy since Roman times. Suspended above a meeting table, it symbolises the freedom to speak plainly and without repercussion.⁷ Art has forever been utilised as a platform to elicit debate and

discussion about the state of the world. At a time when displaced refugees and migration are polarising subjects in Australia and indeed the world, these works enable a crucial dialogue by addressing pertinent themes.

Jenny Orchard's ceramic totems and creatures are characterised by eccentric forms and complex surfaces. This is apparent in her high frequency colours and patterns, experimental glazes and hybrid assemblages. Drawing from the natural world, mythology and imagined narratives, her repertoire is underpinned by ecological and ethical concerns

The Imagined Possibility of Unity, (2017) furthers the thematic investigations that have driven her practice for four decades. A strange cast of zoological and animal forms populate the gallery space. Some are striking in scale, reaching skywards at up to two metres high, while others skulk at ground level, like amoeba awaiting their next evolution. Orchard's figurative creatures resemble genetic amalgams or medieval bestiaries that might have escaped from Dr Moreau's laboratory. With beaks, tusks and grinning teeth, some have lips on lumpy thighs, while others are scaled and claw-footed, with tentacles and cyclopean eyes. These chimeras are a fantastical mash-up of all the creatures from Noah's Ark, and possibly some that never made it on board.

A cacophony of colour, Orchard's surfaces are highly ornamental with painterly gestures and stylised mark marking. Textured patterns are incised or stamped onto the clay ground as impressions while in other areas, leaf-like forms have been sculpted in three-dimensional relief. While the work appears to relate to decorative pottery traditions, it is underpinned by a more serious intent.

The artist's deep concerns around the environmental impact of genetic modification and industrial farming techniques are central to the work's narrative. It is through these cheerful looking mutations that Orchard explores the idea of biological experimentation gone awry.⁸ Much like plants that self-pollinate, her *Zookiniis* or *Interbeings* are conceived as hybrid sexual entities. While some have pregnant bellies, others sprout uncanny botanical forms or protuberances from displaced orifices. Orchard's intention is to generate an empathetic response to their joyous otherly forms.

Reminiscent of the fluid and composite nature of her creatures' identities, Orchard's clay forms are often constructed as modular units. Built in sections and stacked

around an internal spoke or armature, they allow flexibility and transformation where ceramic components from previous decades of sculptural practise can be re-employed and resurrected to build entirely new forms. For this major installation, Orchard has reintroduced found materials that include crystal chandeliers, plastic raffia tassels and a red duster that has been reincarnated as a feathered plume for the head of a bird. These inclusions allow her to expand on the possibilities offered by the ceramic medium, entering into a dialogue with other materials and their inherited associations.

Orchard's work employs a variety of technical processes belonging to both sculptural and ceramics traditions. Fine details from fruit and vegetables such as durians and chokos have been captured through plaster mould making and slip-casting methods. Using earthenware and midrange clay, her hand-built forms have undergone multiple glazings and firings. Embracing chance and happy accidents, she experiments constantly with combinations of iron, copper, manganese and cobalt.

This cobalt pigment has been subsequently translated into the backdrop of the installation and paired with a black and white checked linoleum floor chosen for its optical quality. This is a unique effect that borrows from one of Orchard's enduring influences: The Memphis Group (1981-87), an Italian design movement known for their fusion of unconventional forms with the wild geometry of Art Deco, popular culture and the candy-coloured palette of the 1980s. As an artist who commenced her practice in this decade, these influences continue to inform her work.

Laith McGregor garners from his subconscious for artistic source material. His body of work for the 2017 SMFACA coalesces around childhood fantasy and nostalgia, while exploring the intersection of magic and reality, fiction and nonfiction.

Laith McGregor has a multidisciplinary practise spanning painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics and video. His figurative works often explore reoccurring themes of self-representation and portraiture, and their progression from ancient cultures through to the present. McGregor is particularly known for his biro pen illustrations, which fuse photo-realistic portraits with excerpts of text, pop cultural cues and mythology. This visual and conceptual layering of material results in an oscillating depiction of the self or

personality, one that is comprised of multiple fragments and possibly inhabits manifold worlds.

The shifting phantasmagorical quality of McGregor's biro drawings is evoked in this site-specific installation that is comprised of myriad elements. Entitled *Pipe Dream* (2017), a series of whimsical clay masks and stacked totems inhabit the walls, while a magician's hat dwells opposite. A life-sized figure rests on a Persian carpet that appears to be levitating above the gallery floor, while the suggestion of a portal to another realm has been applied in green chalkboard paint.

Along with the signs and symbols of magic, these masks and figurative forms reflect personal narratives and childhood nostalgia. Central to this work is the memory of an imaginary friend called Waterface, whose apparition has been the impetus for this recent branch of McGregor's practice. Whether this spectre is a ghost, protective guardian, or visitor from some distant past or future is uncertain. Other components of the work relate to McGregor's two grandfathers, one a pipe-smoker and the other a magician with a charismatic penchant for telling tall tales. These anecdotal details play out in the forms of pipes carved from corn, the inclusion of magician's wands and a large scale wall drawing painted in clay slip derived from the remnants of his production process. The life-sized figure on the carpet is clothed in McGregor's garments akin to a strange doppelganger, self-portrait or effigy. Adorned in Rudraksha prayer beads, his face is concealed with a silver clay mask.

Created in the ethereal tones of silver and white combined with black and green, the clay masks have been pinched, pummelled and formed through the gestural imprints of the artist's hand. Finger indentations produce facial features that have a shifting, morphing quality akin to moving water. Clay has been extracted to create holes for eyes - remaining as negative spaces or voids of possibility that might transport the wearer who looks through them.

While this naïve art style seems contrary to McGregor's scrupulous drawings, his approach and choice of clay has an inherent logic: the raw materiality lends itself - like no other medium - to the manifestation of three-dimensional matter. Channelled through the intent of the artist, 'thought forms' are willed into being, and use of the primordial medium becomes an invocation, a 'psychic medium' in another sense of the word. This production process reflects the role of the artist in many ancient cultures as shaman or conjuror, one

that is able to unlock doors to parallel worlds. A archetypal illusionist perhaps, who appears to wear many masks, and through a sleight of hand can discard them as effortlessly as a winter coat, or a magician who astral travels on a levitating Persian carpet.

Each of the finalists in the 2017 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award expand on the ceramic medium, pushing it beyond the bounds of its materiality and utility. These artists re-think historic approaches and imagine new possibilities, exploring the forms and methodologies of pottery traditions. The functional and decorative value of surface ornament and glaze is employed to reveal and examine global political narratives and broader artistic dialogues. Themes include concerns around genetic modification; the global refugee crisis; literary references; the unconscious; and representations of place and Country. The artists often take an installation-based or spatial approach that is at times site-referential, and always site responsive or immersive. They adopt sculptural techniques and integrate unconventional materials, extending the possibilities of clay and glaze into a contemporary context, in tempo with a post-medium art world.

Anna Briers
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1. Interview with the artist on the work *Open Vase Central Leader* (2017), May 2017.
2. The Cummeragunja walk off (1939) was the first major political protest by Aboriginal people post-colonisation, who left harsh labour and living conditions on the Cummeragunja Mission in NSW. Crossing the Murray River into Victoria, they established settlements in Barmah and in the bushland of 'The Flats' between Shepparton and Mooropna. See <https://waynera.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/cummeragunja-walk-off-doc.pdf> accessed June 2017.
3. The Situationist International (founded in 1957 by Guy Debord) played a central role in the student led revolution in Paris, 1968. The statement refers to sand that was found beneath cobble stones that were dug up to build barricades and throw at police. See Osborne, Peter. *Conceptual Art, Appropriation, Intervention, Everyday* - Guy Debord, Phaidon Press Inc, New York. (2002 and 2005) p.240.
4. Excerpt from *Burnt Norton*, the first poem in *Four Quartets* by 20th Century poet T.S. Eliot. Originally published in his *Collected Poems* (1909-1935) in 1936.
5. Excerpt from artist's statement on the work *Temporary Arrangements* (2017), May 2017.
6. Gibson, Prue. Karen Black, *Beautiful Tragedies*, in *Art Collector* Issue 73, July-September 2015.
7. Artist's statement, May 2017.