

## KIRSTEN COELHO Prospect 2012 Catalogue essay by Wendy Walker

Inspired by colonial era enamel wares and ceramic domestic objects, such as bottles and storage jars, Kirsten Coelho's new body of work represents both a tribute to and elevation of these humble forms. Frequently inlaid or rimmed with a contrasting edging of iron oxide, Prospect's series of narrow-necked bottles/vases and bowls, cups and lidded jars eloquently demonstrates the ongoing refinement of Coelho's porcelain vessels. (Earlier works – such as undulating celadon cylinders, similarly punctuated with iron oxide serrations – were inspired by rusting and disintegrating, corrugated iron rainwater tanks and soaring industrial chimneys.)

A specific point of reference is provided by colonial paintings, such as Frederick McCubbin's *Kitchen at the old King St Bakery* (1884) – a precursor to the artist's larger, celebrated works, including the 1904 triptych *The Pioneer* – that depicts a homely interior in the dwelling attached to the McCubbin family's bakery. Evidence of domestic activity abounds in the unoccupied kitchen, in which cups, pitchers, a cloth and so on are arrayed on a simple wooden table; a kettle hovers above a glowing fire next to a drying rack; sewing paraphernalia is strewn around a vacated chair and a sewing machine glimpsed through an open doorway.

Throughout the 1990s, Coelho lived and worked in the United Kingdom and it is not surprising that her work bears the traces of an ongoing British studio pottery tradition – which encompasses the Anglo-orientalism of the Leach/Hamada legacy, as well as the urbanity of Vienna-born Lucie Rie, the late Joanna Constantinidis and contemporary ceramicists, such as Edmund de Waal. At a formal level, classical Chinese/Japanese/Korean ceramics remain a significant influence – a number of pieces in Prospect recall for example, the subtly differentiated forms of early Korean vases (Coelho has also been experimenting with the more bulbous form of Korean moon jars). Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) white ware – adopted as imperial ware in the fifteenth century – and which paralleled a similar phenomenon in China during the early Ming dynasty can be viewed as an additional frame of reference. Seeyoung Lee offers the insight that in the early Joseon dynasty at least, a predilection for white ware was partly a reflection of 'the minimalist and purist aesthetics associated with the new ruling ideology of Neo-Confucianism.'<sup>1</sup>

In Prospect's series of exquisite vessels, luscious matt white and celadon glazes have supplanted an earlier investigation of dramatic temmoku and copper red glazes – their richness invariably counterpointed with the coolness of celadon (it has been observed that the early history of Chinese ceramics might be regarded as a methodical exploration of all the colouring potentials of iron oxides).<sup>2</sup>

Coelho makes the point that her porcelain works are interpretations of historical Australian enamel ware (not unlike the rusted and chipped enamel kitchen objects favoured by Rosalie Gascoigne in her early assemblages), which are in turn simulations of their more costly ceramic incarnations. There are fascinating historical precedents for the transferral of forms across divergent media – the shape of Korean narrow-necked (mallet) stoneware vases, for example, has its genesis in ancient Chinese bronzes, which were based on the kind of mallets used in the beating of cloth.<sup>3</sup> For Coelho, porcelain possesses 'properties that are both enduring and austere and its use carries strong historical links between North Asia and Europe, the geographical origins of many immigrants to Australia.' Furthermore, she believes that porcelain and ceramic materials have the capacity to embody 'points of historical and contemporary cultural intersection.'

In an expansion of her practice, for a 2011 exhibition based on contemporary and historical Gothic literature,<sup>4</sup> Coelho collaborated on an installation, inspired by the dual references of Australian author Katharine Susannah Prichard's 1932 short story 'The Curse' and the unsettling tea scene in the Australian film *The Proposition* (2005). The resultant collaborative work – in which a selection of Coelho's pristine white (enamel-like) vessels on a nineteenth-century cedar table formed a subtle, yet potent tableau with Sera Waters' framed sampler and white embroidered cloth – also quoted from the austere and dreamlike paintings of interiors of Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916).

In the context of Coelho's ongoing research into material associated with the personal and social history of nineteenth-century migration to Australia, the exhibition title *Prospect* conveys both the optimism of those immigrants and the nature of the endeavour, which had lured them to Australia. A marker at Guichen Bay in south-eastern South Australia indicates the place of disembarkation for thousands of Chinese gold-seekers, who undertook on foot the arduous journey from the seaside town of Robe to the Victorian goldfields. (In 1859 one in every nine men in Australia was Chinese.)

Thus in her new and recent works and installations, Coelho – who considers the objects transported by immigrants from Asia and Europe as ‘metaphors for stories of personal dislocation and endurance that are part of settler and early mining history’ – infuses her elegantly austere porcelain vessels with a layer of Australian colonial narrative that is both distinctive and compelling.

Wendy Walker, 2012

## Endnotes

All unattributed quotes are from email correspondence between Kirsten Coelho and the author in January – February 2012.

1. Soyoung Lee, “In Pursuit of White: Porcelain in the Joseon Dynasty, 1392–1910 “. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chpo/hd\\_chpo.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chpo/hd_chpo.htm) (October 2004)
2. Nigel Wood, ‘In some ways the whole early history of Chinese ceramics can be regarded as a systematic exploration of all the colouring potentials of iron oxides - in bodies and glazes, in low-fired and high-fired wares and in both oxidising and reducing atmospheres.’ See, *Chinese Glazes*, London: G+B Arts International Ltd. 1999, p.159
3. See Edmund de Waal at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge: [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/inspiration/contributors/dewaal.html](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/inspiration/contributors/dewaal.html)
4. In the collaborative work, *The silence surging softly backwards* for the 2011 exhibition *Imagining Interiors*, Sera Waters’ sampler was embroidered with Paterson’s Curse (another kind of invader) and her linen cloth with blowflies. Katharine Susannah Prichard’s ‘The Curse’ is part of *The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction* (2007), edited by Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver.

**Helen Gory Galerie**  
25 St Edmonds Rd  
Prahran VIC 3181  
Tel +61 3 9525 2808  
[gallery@helengory.com](mailto:gallery@helengory.com)  
[www.helengory.com](http://www.helengory.com)

---

