

Material Deceptions

A review by Julie Bartholomew

Material Deceptions is a recent exhibition of Nicole Lister's work at the Object galleries, Customs House, Circular Quay in Sydney. This is Lister's second solo show and maintains a technically ambitious level of achievement and continues her interest in contemporary 'throwaway' culture.

The initial experience of *Material Deceptions* is distant and primarily visual, which seems to be reinforced by the modernist, grid-like arrangement of porcelain objects. On closer inspection, Lister's refined forms begin to activate the senses, particularly taste and touch, drawing the viewer into a sensory alliance with transformed 'throwaways'. This is the beginning of a path of deception, as the viewer gradually experiences the exhibition's capacity to hold contradictions in tension, such as identification/objectification old/new and precious/banal.

The sensory affects initiated by these objects have a number of sources. Corporeal responses are triggered by reference to the vessel form. The unshakeable tradition of the crafted vessel in ceramic practice continues to evoke the everyday rituals of drinking and eating. Lister places the continuity of vessel making in the realm of contemporary habits, of bodily consumption and the fast, immediately satisfying 'takeaway' culture of urban life by using its 'throwaway' containers and wrappings. This opens further possibility for sensory response, evoking memories of 'take away' delights, cakes and cookies. Taste, touch and smell are activated and held in suspension while exploring the fragmented remnants of food labels, packaging folds and corrugated twists.

Crushing Desire has an irresistible tactility. This work began its existence as an upright waste paper bag. Used like a plaster mould, Lister builds up layers of porcelain slip inside. Fired together, the 'castaway' paper disintegrates leaving crushed traces of its former existence, taking full advantage of clay's capacity for mimicry. As a consequence, there is a strong desire to touch the ceramic creases and folds originally created by the 'throwaway' action of the hand.

Yet at the same time there is a collision taking place between the delights of sensory experience and the knowledge that these were once waste objects, discarded in the gutter along with the detritus of urban decay. These objects oscillate between sensory delight, reinforced by the beauty of their translucent surfaces, punctuated by the occasional rose decal, and the less appealing abject associations of disavowal as the carriers of bodily sustenance are cast aside. Of course this ambivalence enhances the fascination of the object.

The processes of quilt making were chosen as a means of assembling the porcelain wall piece titled *Frugal Comfort*. Lister recycles the unwanted fragments of tests and off-cuts into a collage-like arrangement. The torn,

frayed edges and disparate combinations appear to be stitched and layered, reinvented within a grid structure and creating a work with uncanny material density. I am reminded of the compression techniques used for recycling aluminum cans and other 'castaways'. The association of compressed material density plays against the delicacy and lightness of the white and coloured porcelain combinations. This is particularly evident if one's former experience of porcelain revolves around sipping tea from a 'feather weight' cup. Again Lister creates a sense of tension by conjoining disparate components.

The most obvious fusion of apparent opposites is the juxtaposition of the precious and the banal. This has been a strong theme for Lister, starting with an earlier work titled *Stack Up*, exhibited at Artspace in Sydney for the Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship in 1999. It consists of six 'takeaway' porcelain coffee cups carefully stacked to three levels. The tension between the elegant hierarchic assemblage of these exquisite vessel forms and their mundane origin plays 'tug a war' with our expectations.

There is a pleasurable act of defiance evident when the ordinary, everyday object intervenes in the art world. Lister continues to play with our expectations and she does this to great effect with *Material Deceptions*. The centre piece of the show, *Wrapping Cloth* investigates the power of texture, repetition and light within a balanced format, taking us on a smooth aesthetic ride only to be jolted by another deception. To create these delicate, corrugated receptacles, Lister has transformed the abandoned cardboard used for wrapping and protecting precious forms.

The implied fusion of apparent opposites situates Lister's work within the contentious zone of boundaries. These tensions agitate the oppositions of modernism, such as art and the everyday, aesthetics and function, contesting both categories and questioning boundary making. The web of discordant connections formed through the assemblage of *Material Deceptions*, evokes new spaces of innovation for ceramic practice.

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