

THE PORTAGE CERAMIC AWARDS NEW ZEALAND

Patsy Hely – Judge for 2004

Objects of utility saturate our daily lives yet we continue to pursue titillation by purchasing or making more. Perhaps one cannot underestimate the everyday object's significance, which is often deflected due to the familiarity of use. An object's functional value may exist alongside other discourses and Patsy Hely's work faces the challenge of making objects, with the idea of utility, as a catalyst for personal and universal narratives.

The focus of such narratives is enriched by Hely's intimate connection with the substance and processes of clay. The sensual tactility and infinite malleability of porcelain is interwoven with concerns such as sustainability within a commodity-driven environment or the revaluing of the old within the context of the new.

Redrawing utility, in a series of earlier works for an exhibition entitled *Being with Objects*, Hely gives new definition to found objects from the past, such as a wooden lid or rusted metal stand. Through their alignment with newly fashioned vessels of white lightness, these assemblages generate a connection between the past and present, creating meaning and vitality for both. Hely's objects refer to a different way of thinking about time, not past as distinct from the present, but as coexistence, generating a new trajectory for the functional, everyday object.

These early assemblages also give expression to concerns about the global issue of sustainability. The reinvigoration of objects, destined for the dusty shelves of museums or pantries, satisfies Hely's desire '.... to keep objects already in circulation still useful, to capitalise on the amount of energy expended in their initial production'.

In a recent exhibition at Object Galleries in Sydney called *Nature Writing*, Hely once again assembles seemingly disparate components from the past and present but with the desire to create a new material language for the representation of nature. In this series, ceramic objects from different times, each carrying representations of nature, are interconnected. A vessel representing 19th century Australiana shares the same space as an 18th century porcelain vase.

In addition, Hely incorporates representations of nature from her local environment of Canberra by utilising clay's capacity to sample elements from life. She moulds and casts fragmented and twisted dry twigs, transforming them into fine, white porcelain. The translation of the raw natural environment, its textures and course surfaces, into the fineness of porcelain shifts its familiarity into a precious place belonging more to the tradition of 18th century European porcelain, yet at the same time, disrupting that tradition. By making new connections between distinct objects, Hely rewrites representations of nature from disparate times, styles and cultures.

There is a pleasurable act of defiance evident when everyday objects of utility interpose in the visual arts world. Hely actively inhabits the visual arts realm in Australia through her exhibitions and teaching, currently as Honours Coordinator at the Australian National University School of Art in Canberra. Not unlike her recent object assemblages, that cross the barriers of time, culture and style, Hely forges links across the boundaries of craft, design and the visual arts, confirming an understanding of herself and her work as a path of connectivity. The fact that her work gives equal status to the materiality of clay and conceptual concerns, within the contextualising framework of the everyday object of utility, expresses her uniqueness, particularly within an art world driven more by idea than materiality and process.

Julie Bartholomew
Judge for 2003

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