



Precious Little (detail). 2006. Slipcast porcelain with decals 4 cm/h. Photography: Mel Robson.

Inspiration of the Archive

Recent Work of Mel Robson

Article by Susan Ostling



A Secret History (detail). 2005. Slipcast porcelain with decals. 10 cm/h. Photography: Mel Robson.

IN THE RECENTLY OPENED STATE LIBRARY OF QUEENSLAND'S splendid new building there is an exhibition, drawn from the library's collection of artists' books, titled *Unbound*. Mel Robson's *A Secret History 2005*, (a cluster of 12 small vessels), is in this exhibition. With artists such as Luke Roberts, Madonna Staunton, Ray Arnold, Barbara Heath, Ed Ruscha and, a duo no less, of Charles Baudelaire and Henri Matisse, Robson is in good company indeed. Most of the other works in this exhibition are far more book-like. Not Robson's. Robson's objects, consisting of black and white bowls, handleless cups and saucers, a thimble, a jug and a beaker are lined up on a glass shelf. You might ask why they are there in this exhibition.

Commissioned by The State Library of Queensland, Robson's *A Secret History* was part of an exhibition *Sufferance*, which commemorated 100 years of women's suffrage. The exhibition was curated by Jacqueline Armitstead and shown at Craft Queensland in 2005. The exhibition, *Unbound*, caused a mild kaffuffle over how many of the works in the exhibition (there was video, copper-plated children's shoes, sewn stockings etc), related in any way to the idea of 'books'. Robson's *A Secret History* stood up to that critique, for possibly the same reason it works so well in a larger display of (more recognisable) artists' books.

This is because the work has such an ability to link objects to narratives and to turn, literally, viewers into readers.

The flow of narratives in this work occurs in a number of ways. Firstly, the everyday nature of the objects – cup, saucer, jug, bowl, beaker and thimble, makes them strong carriers of memories of family life and, in particular, memories of mothers, grandmothers and aunts, at a time when these kinds of objects played a strong role in the rituals of domestic life. Secondly, the handwritten diary entry ('...let the book of your life be shut...'; '...hurry up to get the work done before the baby) was only a few placed around the interior of the small vessels is so decidedly haunting that one is compelled to attempt to unravel the rest of the text. Then there is the extreme translucency of the slipcast white objects that the texts (and a dress pattern diagram, a floral design, an historic map and crochet instructions), emanate through the vessels with such apparent ease, one is brought to ponder on the narrative of materiality itself. Still further, there is the dialogue of the objects as a collection, that play and jostle spatially: similar/dissimilar, black/white, empty/full, tall/short, wide/closed, inside/outside, text/no text, pattern/no pattern. Jean Baudrillard says that collections transform the collector as well as



Re:collect Series. 2005. Slipcast porcelain. Photography: Rod Buccholz.

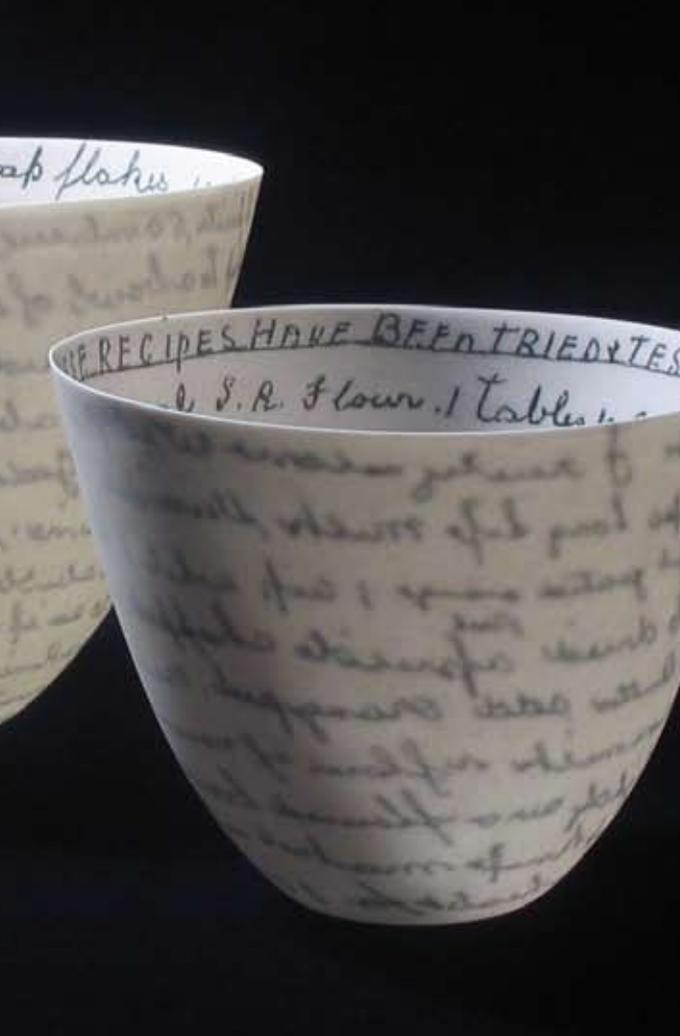
the objects collected. He says it is through creating a collection that 'the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse' (Baudrillard 1996, p.86).

However it is not only unravelling narratives or triggering memories of other places and times that hold us to *A Secret History*. There are other sensations at work here too. Susan Stewart says in *On Longing* that handwriting has a particular impact on the reader. It is felt, she says, 'because writing by hand assumes the speed of the body, it is linked to the personal... handwriting is to space what the voice is to time' (Stewart 1993, p.14). There is also a well-honed sense of nostalgia encircling this work. Nostalgia is 'a sadness... a sadness which creates a longing...' (Stewart 1993, p. 23). Linda Hutcheon notes in her essay 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', that nostalgia may well depend for its effect 'on the irrecoverable nature of the past' (Hutcheon 1998, p.3). It is the 'pastness of the past, its inaccessibility' that gives nostalgia such power. It probably goes without saying that nostalgia is rarely for the past as actually lived, it is for a selectively imagined past, 'idealised through memory and desire' (ibid.).

Robson says she has been interested in nostalgia for a long time. It was particularly fuelled while at

Southern Cross University where she decided to investigate her own family history at Murwillumbah in northern NSW. Her memories there are of idyllic times of cooking and sewing with her mother and siblings, so that household cookery books (complete with food stains), childhood sewing patterns and maps have become strong signifiers and from which Robson drew on for earlier work.

However the commission to make new work for the exhibition *Sufferance* gave Robson an opportunity to branch out from her immediate family history to look at the broad field of Queensland women's experiences and lives. Robson buried herself in the State Library's Heritage Collection looking through a number of women's diaries from the 1890s through to the 1960s, eventually selecting two diaries from which to work closely. In Robson's search for understanding the past, she recognised the limitations in accessing or fully connecting with the past. As Robson said in an artist's talk on *A Secret History* "things are never remembered or recorded in their entirety. They are also rarely recorded or remembered objectively. Things get forgotten, misconstrued, reinvented... and all we are left with are the remnants, traces, flashes of the past" but it is just these 'flashes of the past', the shadowy traces held for a moment, that



In Her Words. 2006. Slipcast porcelain with decals. 9 cm/h. Photography: Mel Robson.

Robson has so effectively captured in the frail and barely-there vessels.

One of the great benefits of commissions is that the research undertaken for a project can feed back into existing work, and allow that work to be pushed that much further. This has happened with Robson. *A Secret History* led to developing the work *Precious Little*, which is now touring Australia in an exhibition *Pattern Recognition*, curated by Rhana Devenport and Andrea Higgins. A series of *Precious Little* also selected for the 4th World Ceramic Biennale in South Korea in 2007. *Precious Little* is a collection of 16 small vessels no larger than 4 cm that were inspired by the thimble in *A Secret History*. The thimble represented the personal histories of women who managed to keep the wolf from the door by making a living from sewing and embroidery. In this new work Robson has also integrated letters and photographs she has uncovered from her family through investigating the life of her actress and socialite grandmother, whom she never met. In this collected material what has become most poignant to Robson has been the recog-

nition of the resonance of suffering and shame and tragedy that surrounded her grandmother's life, and many of the women she had researched for *A Secret History*.

A further opportunity to track the past has come with another commission. This is an *Art Built In* project (part of the two per cent of the cost of new Queensland government buildings used to commission art works) for a vast TAFE Learning Technology Centre under construction in Brisbane. For this project Robson is gathering archival material on obsolete forms of technology such as typewriters and abandoned knowledge bases like house-wifery and typewriter mechanics. She is also interested in working with building plans which, like maps, tell us much more about a time and place than just where something was situated. Interestingly, in working with this imagery Robson has found that she has had to enlist other vessel forms as carriers of memory. The domestic hold over cups and saucers she realised is so strong that they were not effective conduits for exploring a more public history. So it is to be cylinders that allude more to structures that will provide the vessel form for this project. They will be larger than other work she has made and hopefully, if the firing problems can be solved, they will be as translucent as the fragile forms in *A Secret History* and *Precious Little*.

Robson's interest in ceramics developed by chance. She graduated from Griffith University in Asian Studies and travelled throughout Asia for two years between 1991-93, living in Japan for one year and teaching English while she became proficient in Japanese. Robson says looking back on her time in Japan that it was extraordinary an interest in ceramics did not develop while she was there. It was later, back in Australia, that Robson began looking for creative classes to provide a counter balance to her day job of teaching English and organising cultural study tours for Japanese students. She says it was a toss up between woodwork and ceramics. She began classes in ceramics at a local high school night-class. The next week she hired a wheel.

Within two months she had applied to enrol in the South Bank Diploma of Ceramics. She quit her job and began to live ceramics day and night. With a Diploma of Ceramics, Robson moved to Lismore to study ceramics in the visual arts program at Southern Cross University. At SCU at the time, there was a strong interest in woodfiring and Robson, enthused by it, travelled to Utah (where SCU had an exchange program), to work with John Neely. It was there she learnt about the 24/7 work ethic of studio life and while she loved the communal involvement in woodfiring, she found the lack of control over the outcomes an increasing concern. Robson returned to Australia determined to head in a different direction and began to slipcast and fire in an electric kiln. After graduating



Fortitude. 2005. Slipcast porcelain with decals. 9 cm/h. Photography: Rod Bucholz.

from SCU Robson says the next major influence on her work was an opportunity to take up a mentorship program initiated by Craft Queensland. Patsy Hely was to be the mentor and Robson moved to Canberra to work in the studios at the Canberra School of Art to be able to be in closer contact with Hely. It was through Hely's advice that Robson started to solve the problems associated with producing paper-thin slipcast work. She began to fire her work in saggars packed with silica to overcome the problems of warping and splitting. Robson also began to widen her creative use of decals. Discussions with Hely around shared interests of working from archives and domestic artifacts were a valuable part of the mentorship, which culminated in a joint exhibition held at Craft Queensland in 2004.

Robson has developed a confidence and an increasingly refined sensibility in her work. Her interest in nostalgia has been heightened by opportunities to work from archival material for specific commissions. Historical research has provided an important source for ideas for new projects. Robson's work

gains its strength in part from its ability to capture the fleeting in the vessels themselves. It is work that draws from the poetics of the past but this is held increasingly in tension through a recognition that an awareness of the past is as important as a vision for the future.

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