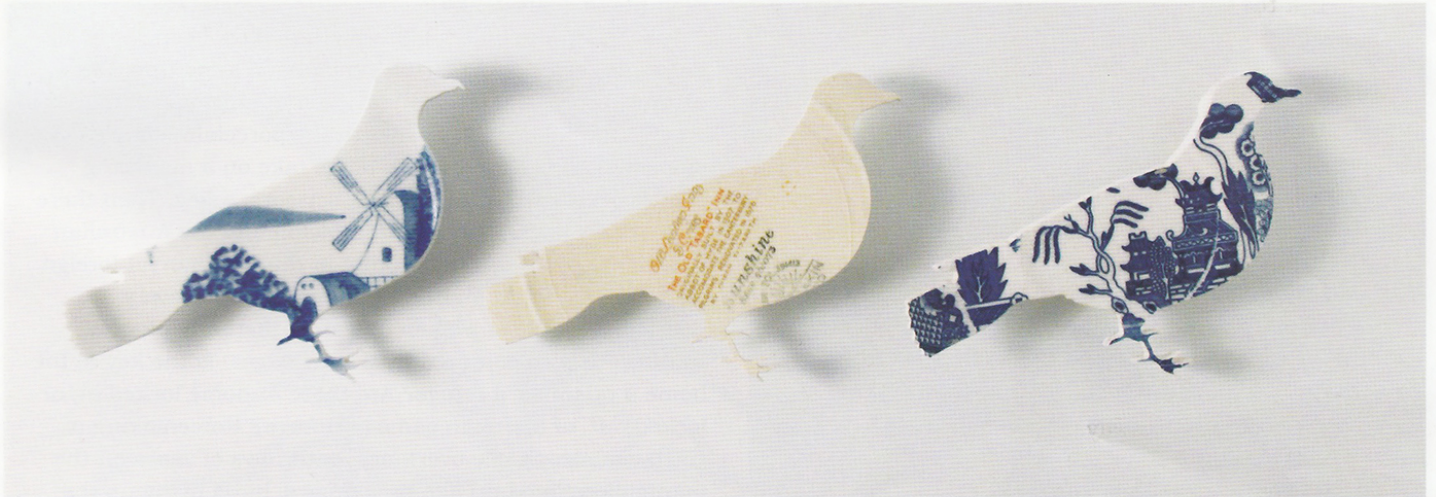


# Keep Calm and Carry On: new work by Mel Robson

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Mel Robson, *Home-ing pigeons*, found plates (ceramic), 2008. Courtesy the artist. Photograph by Mel Robson.

Love a good yarn I do! And Australians really do have such a distinctive and unique way of storytelling. (Mel Robson, 2008<sup>1</sup>)

I think what I'm trying to do is create moments of recognition. To try to detonate some kind of feeling or understanding of lived experience. (Barbara Kruger, 1997<sup>2</sup>)

Meeting Mel Robson earlier this year was to be all too aware of Robson's embedding of personal history. The postwar house in which she lives wears old Brisbane like a trophy, complete with VJ boards, granny grass and a 1950s-style garden with now unfashionable trees and hydrangea bushes. And the sense of a personal legacy handed from generation to generation could not have been more emphasised by her pregnant belly in the last trimester before the birth of her first child.

Mel Robson's excavations of family histories – the pulling at and unravelling of secret threads, fragments recorded from the lives of her ancestors – have catalysed a rapid artistic renaissance which prevails in her most recent work. Robson's ceramic explorations have been cast variously as books, sculpture, wall pieces and vases. This year, on the verge of bringing a new human piece into this family puzzle, Mel Robson finds herself, once again, mired in family business, secret and otherwise, exploring, and making art of the unresolvable puzzle. This time, she has been drawn, against her will in many ways, into the sombre territory of war.

It's not such a big stretch for Robson whose work conveying domestic iconography has always had an undercurrent of darkness, mining 'the conceptual view of the household as a quietly menacing terrain of hidden obstacles navigated by ineffectual protagonists, a view that

is ultimately a metaphor for a larger dysfunctional environment of contemporary society'.<sup>3</sup>

The depth of experience that goes with wartime deprivation and sacrifice, the enormity of its impact on survivors and families, has been visited on the national psyche earlier this year with the discovery of the resting place of the warship HMAS Sydney, which sunk off the coast of Western Australia in 1941, losing all hands. Descendants of those who died have expressed their emotion, still raw and deeply felt, at the discovery of the site of their relatives' graves, making death at sea, even sixty-six years later, part of a painful journey for which they still seek closure. The collective imagination is entranced by the stories which have emerged with this latest chapter in the sad history of the HMAS Sydney. Equally, it is this personal narrative, as Susan Ostling suggested, Robson's ability to 'capture the fleeting in the vessels themselves',<sup>4</sup> that resonates with the viewer of Robson's ceramic essays.

There are multiple levels on which any successful artwork operates. Robson's work appears fragile, the pieces often small and wafer thin. Yet there is a stoic toughness in their presence, a conceptual and physical rigour, from the remnants of personal stories that have inspired or informed their development. The black works, which give up secret or sensitive family stories, exposing them to the light of day but still keeping them hidden to any but the most determined eye, remind us of the dark places visible in any past.

It is an ancient tradition, reminiscent of the Greek amphora vessels, which also embedded personal stories on ceramics. And letting go of the functional aspect of ceramics has freed Robson to take flight. Robson began her interest in ceramics with a commitment to their functional ability. But in recent years she has been increasingly captured by the



TOP: Mel Robson, *Keep Calm and Carry On* (detail), slipcast porcelain, 2008. Courtesy the artist. ABOVE: Mel Robson, *Untitled*, 2008, slipcast porcelain, decals. Courtesy the artist. Photographs by Mel Robson.

conceptual journey. She has, if you like, found a high water mark here, with innovative treatment of ceramics and new technologies releasing her from functional ware entirely.

The feminine stock-in-trade – crochet patterns, recipes, letters, measuring devices – have been Robson's trademark, inspired to a large extent by the grandmother who she never met, a legendary woman within the family who failed to neatly fit within her own time's defined domestic role. In this exhibition Robson has moved into new territory, drawn out of her own family's interactions with various Australian war efforts, using innovative methods and media to express this new reach.

The universal impact of war was something that Robson could not attempt to take on. Instead, she has drawn on her history and its tentacles, and found a perspective on the sense of a new national pride visible in Australia – a sense of the present through trawling the past. And her own concomitant wit has been brought to bear on these topics to create a lively, more installation-based series of works. The exhibition title, *Keep calm and carry on*, drawn from a World War Two poster, is another version of Howard's 'alert but not alarmed' anti-terrorism message from 2003.

The stoic nostalgia inherent in that message was echoed in Robson's family – those who were most involved were rarely heard to discuss the war – but imagery emerging

from this includes pigeons, given the involvement of Robson's grandfather as a signaller in the Australian Pigeon Brigade in World War Two. He was stationed in Papua New Guinea where the rough terrain made birds a vital communication tool, with pigeons awarded medals for their role in conveying codes and secret messages.

Robson spent time with pigeons as a child, with her grandfather continuing to keep birds around him all his life. The double edge of these quiet, cooing birds as vital tools in war is sharpened with word play and their construction from domestic ware, making them 'home-ing' pigeons in the ubiquitous domestic blue.

Depression era glass platters have been recast in porcelain, extending Robson's technique away from the ceramic process. Utilizing new waterjet cutting techniques to create sharply-defined shapes in the porcelain, simple domestic objects used in the home take on a menacing overtone – a knife, a rolling pin, scissors, a key. Then there is the cross (laden with guilt), a pistol, and the Australian coat of arms, all seen differently in this familiar yet foreign medium. The flight/fight message is never far away.

The role of women in war – inherently passive, waiting – is also conjured by these images. Is the key to the home a prison or a refuge? Are those at home locked in, or locked out, of the main game of the era? Homemaking is given claustrophobic overtones, with rows of vases on the mantelpiece lined up like prison bars, birds flying up the wall in squadron formation and inscribed with texts exhorting values of the time. Black birds are printed with black wallpaper images like camouflage, or maps of Papua New Guinea. Gardening and singing, acceptable female pursuits of the time, are given passive/aggressive overtones. Digging in the garden may be ravage or nurture, and singing might express joy or be channelled as an acceptable outlet for frustration.

Robson's ceramics are anything but passive. In this exhibition they are released, onto the walls, as installation. While they interact with the viewer's own nostalgic experience, they merge personal history with innovative technique and stamp out new territory for Robson and her ceramic medium. It is a unique blend of old and new that continues to mark Robson's practice and to create a significant perspective on the present.

## Notes

1. Mel Robson, from her blog: [www.fefferkookan.blogspot.com/](http://www.fefferkookan.blogspot.com/), 10 March, 2008.
2. Barbara Kruger, in interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, *Art in America*, Nov 1997, pp.92-99.
3. John Brunetti, 'Nostalgia as Cultural Discourse', *New Art Examiner*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2000, pp. 18-25.
4. Susan Ostling, 'The Inspiration of the Archive: Recent Work of Mel Robson', *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No. 69, 2007, p.17.

*Keep Calm and Carry On* is showing at Jan Manton Art, Brisbane, 23 July to 23 August 2008. This article is a reprint of the catalogue essay for the exhibition.

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