

# Solids of Time

## The ceramic works of William Lungas

*Article by Jan Guy*



**H**ORUS AND DELORIS CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE IN Pyrmont, Sydney is a new space and its enthusiastic director Caroline Wales is bent on supporting emerging artists as well as those already established. Though small the space is ideal for the artist wishing to exhibit new or experimental works, and William Lungas chose well in making it the site of his 2006 solo exhibition, *Palimpsest*.

In this latest work Lungas is concerned with the palimpsests of history, the heavy and often burdensome layers of cultural histories, the personal history of the ceramics artist's process and the immediacy of the sedimentation of clays and light in the final works. There appears to be a strong link between the spatial ghosts of architecture and the archeological surfaces of ceramics. This is manifested in work that covers a spectrum from controlled, elegant vase shapes that suggest the density of celestial black holes to the fragmented delicate leaves of illuminated porcelain that shape the work of *Archi-type 1*. The palimpsest was originally spoken of when referring to art, as the erased shadowy outlines of previous sketches that could be seen behind the delicate lines of drawings.

This phenomenon is frequently observed in the drawings and paintings (though not so obviously, except in conservationists' x-rays) of the Renaissance Masters. During the times of Albrecht Durer and Leonardo Da Vinci, the palimpsest was a necessity, paper was scarce and expensive and in order to keep working it was not unusual to reuse sheets of paper on several occasions. These 'ghosts' are considered invaluable to our understanding of the process and histories of these works.

While these were of necessity, in the 1920s Francis Picabia produced a series of paintings known collectively as the *Transparencies*. These were an extension of Cubist ideas of perception, a deliberate layering of images that attempted to focus our experiential knowledge of the world as something unfolding and mobile. Standing at the beginning of the 21st century Lungas benefits from, and uses to effect, the technical and conceptual history of the palimpsest.

He engages the notion that we have modelled the face of long, otherwise silent, histories on shards of ceramics and the bones of architecture. These disciplines have been our mirrors, through them we have, and still construct, discover and fabricate ourselves.



*Archi-type 1. Ceramic panels. Porcelain.*

In the presence of Lungas's work I am reminded of an earlier unforgettable encounter. Many years ago I received a pottery jug handle from Egypt acquired by a rather cavalier and soft-witted friend who had removed it from one of the pyramids as consolation for his thwarted attempt to obtain a larger intact specimen. (It's a pity the Egyptians didn't use superior firepower when representatives of the British Museum came to visit a century earlier.)

The handle is a dull greyish-brown coil of clay, coarsely shaped, insignificant in appearance, but on its top underside where the potter attached handle to pot is the distinct fingerprint of a potter from 5000 years ago slightly blurred by the trace of moistness of the once wet clay. It is not an unexpected mark on a shard of pottery, but when I place my own fingers over it history simultaneously expands and collapses. I am caught in a reverie that connects me to the moment handle was pushed on to pot, to inhabit momentarily the potter's position – time and space transcended.

Similarly, Lungas's deliberate layering of surfaces to construct form and his revelation of surfaces rather than concealment transports one across time. While his forms echo the past they also suggest an apocalyptic future – an arid scaffolding of forgotten monuments. For example, though the gallery is an intimate space with low ceilings, the work titled *Archi-type 1* creates an illusionary elongation of the space. The slimline shelf supporting the clay parchments acts as a horizon line, evoking a wide-open scape and a sense

of urban grandeur. The fragile leaves of porcelain speckled and textured by the addition of paper and fibreglass are dry and brittle to the eye, producing a luminous but barren city.

A serendipitous moment (commented on by many) occurred on opening night when one turned one's back on *Archi-types 1*'s horizon line only to be met with its reflection on the gallery's window – there it appeared as virtual city against the night sky. The gathering's attendees appeared as a silhouetted crowd passing across this city like the space of architectural memory. For an instant, the experience was intensified by a play of light and a dark intangible void. And this moment seemed to fold back into the work through the forms of his *Density* series.

*Density*'s vessel-shaped forms are made of thin irregular strips of clay packed tightly together; their density compacted by a heavy metallic glaze. The individual strips are captured in a movement of fleeing from the base vessel shape yet this is also what binds them to it. They are both Medusa's writhing hair turned to stone and ancient outcrop of kelp thrown about by a violent sea. They form a melancholic polarity with the matter and concept of *Archi-type 1*. Each work sits at the far reaches of form. One is barely there, fractured and made of light; the other so dense and solid that no space or light escapes it.

Lungas has much in common with the architect Aldo Rossi who believed it is the forms of architecture that carry our collective memory.<sup>1</sup> This is borne out in the series *Archi-type 2* that is made of a similar base

*Pyra.*

unit to the first work of the same name, but is ordered and mathematically regimented to create repetitive pyramidal towers. While the form is repeated no two are the same, playing out Carl Jung's notion of the archetype. And though they are small, delicate objects they evoke a sense of fossilised monument, and, like the city of *Archi-type 1*, echo a form of architecture ingrained in our collective psyche.

While both works of *Archi-type* suggest a diagrammatic evacuated experience of lived space; the fragmented works of *Layers* are the segments anti-forms of a circular shape (perhaps the earliest form of architecture outside happenstance). These are objects that fill the empty space, that reveal that these spaces are never vacant, but burdened with layers of memory.

Lungas succeeds in this exhibition to merge past and present spaces and times with a restrained dynamism – he creates the palimpsest without resorting to the use of specific ancient or contemporary iconography and so potentially ignites for the viewer the sense of time unravelling at differing speeds and loci. One of art's functions is to let one dream and the works of the exhibition *Palimpsest* give one the opportunity to do so.

REFERENCE:

1. See Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (1966), MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1982

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*Dense.**Dense (detail).*