

Cheryl Lucas Dip Paddock – A Ceramic Installation



Article by Grant Banbury

ON THE SHELF OPPOSITE SIT TWO DOMESTIC-SCALED jugs. A thin blood-red line pours vertically from the rim of one. Only centimetres away, rests its partner. They are similar, yet different. Equivalent in height, both sit on a narrow horizontal shelf facing each other. Purposefully, the second jug appears to lean away from the other but is held steadfast by a poured circular form at its base. A sense of 'knowing' is generated between the two – a dialogue of nourishment, entrapment and release.

The two vessels appear to be in discussion. Discussion about what? And why place a literal translation on this pairing? In part, this response reflects the ease with which all of us (especially children) intuitively bestow inanimate-objects with human traits and thoughts. Thoughts of nourishment and release are 'a way in' to reading Cheryl Lucas' *Dip Paddock* exhibition – a way of embracing the underlying themes, associations and possible narrative readings of the large, adjacent floor installation.

Amassed on the gallery floor is a gathering of ceramic



jugs – 43 in total. Scattered amongst the jugs are a handful of curious, funeral-shaped forms and beakers, some positioned vertically while others rest side-on. These pieces successfully punctuate the installation, offering visual relief from the mass-presentation of jugs. Striking in shape, yet utilitarian in every sense, they cause the viewer to pause and to contemplate. In contrast to the domestic nature of the jug, these additional forms hint at an industrial usage.

The glow from the polished wooden floor energizes the presentation and accentuates the individuality of each piece, be it thrown or hand-built. Although grouped in relative proximity to each other, surprisingly, the jugs spread forming a large sprawling-arc that measure over nine metres. The other limits of the arc are held in check by tall hand-built jugs, positioned as if talismans surveying their flock. Lucas acknowledges the ‘asymmetrical nature’ of the jug with its ‘own inherent movement’. Hinged at their waists, these standing ‘sentinels’ appear to sway and move, as if overseeing proceedings.

Acutely aware of the symbolic nature ascribed to the jug (or pitcher) over many centuries, Lucas tantalizingly plays with its shape, teasing out numerous variations of form: height to width, body to handle (all have them), neck to base, large to small. Many of the jugs appear to be aligned to ancient forms, acknowledging the jug’s historical and cultural positioning as ‘signifiers’ and ‘water carriers’. A touch of humour permeates as a number; topped with bulbous growths, appear to be on the verge of transformation. Some deliberately reference Art Deco forms. Intentionally, the ebb and flow of the scale enlivens the visual field; yet in this instance, Lucas wished to retain a ‘human scale’.

Elsewhere in the gallery, small elongated jugs – either upright or inverted – hang in groups or individually. All are attached to the shelf or wall, wired with single-loop handles. They speak of storage, both before and after use. A small group of ‘pelts’, tautly stretched on the gallery wall, directly reference dead animal skins, a facet of farm survival.

The exhibition title, *Dip Paddock*, is a direct reference to Lucas’ rural upbringing in Central Otago, a farming area in the South Island of New Zealand, noted for its hot, dry climate. Regarding the

exhibition title, Lucas states “I wanted to make sure the rural connection was immediately apparent. Dip paddocks are very common on farms... usually close to the house where all of the drenching, docking and draughting are done.” This background has proved a valuable and fertile feeding-ground for major themes in Lucas’ ceramic production.

By its very nature, the jug is complete within itself, although, in this presentation stand-alone vessels can be enjoyed separately. Lucas, however, reinforces the theme of continuum by multiple placement of jugs and, in this aspect, drives home an assertion that the floor installation could (should?) be read as ‘one’. A sense of uniformity also supports this notion as all the jugs face the same direction, as if it were a like-minded army intent on its task. Lucas comments “I wanted to make the most of having a jug as a metaphor.”

Initially, all of the pieces appeared similarly coated with a thick cream-coloured glaze. In commenting on her choice of glaze, Lucas states “the lighter colour made... [the jugs appear] bleached or weathered... and the cream [colour] had a lard like appearance.” Closer observation reveals a number of stained surfaces. A red (pinkish to the eye) or blue stain highlight the crazed surfaces. The colour blue may reference water, growth or perhaps the remnants of chemical substances. A few jugs have splattered surfaces, while others reveal bold glaze applications: free-flowing interior and exterior ‘pourings’ in a dense mid-blue glaze.

Unlike previous solo presentations – mostly one-off vessels often with highly decorated exterior surfaces – here Lucas replaces decoration with an emphasis on form. In her earlier sculptural vessels she played with perceptions of space – three-dimensional illusions cleverly played-out through surface markings. In this installation, however, the viewer is encouraged to assimilate variations in shape.

In *Dip Paddock*, Lucas takes her greatest risks to date. By moving the jug from plinth to floor, dramatically increasing the numbers and experimenting with multiple variations, she shifts her practice to new heights, opening up future possibilities. And, the viewer too, is invited to take-part, to navigate the work within the gallery space differently.

Off of the main gallery in a smaller room is a key



work entitled, *Skin Fence*. Prior to the viewer entering the space, a line of free-hanging ceramic pieces (skeletal in appearance) is visible through a narrow doorway. Once in the room, the full scale of the work (four-and-a-half metres wide) is revealed. Suspended at waist height on a taught wire, *Skin Fence* bisects the room like an actual fence. The work comprises 53 loosely thrown cups, squashed and re-shaped before firing, then draped over the wire.

Although initially *Skin Fence* appears to be delicate, it generates a feeling of subtle strength. The work gels instantaneously and the weight of fired clay pieces evaporates, leaving a curious, highly profitable, feeling of weightlessness. Brilliantly, Lucas transforms the theme of dead animals skins (usually rabbits strung-out to dry on a fence) into a successfully resolved artwork using an everyday object – the humble jug.

Undeniably, *Skin Fence* is the highlight of *Dip Paddock* installation and arguably Lucas' most conceptually resolved work to date. As Christine Whybrew observes, "The skinned jug is reduced to a surface and rendered totally redundant as a utilitarian object." Moving from jug to jug, subtle variations in the tone of the glaze are evident. The rich cream-coloured glaze appears

parched and dry, as if baked by sunlight. Yet, surprisingly, *Skin Fence* unites and sings with a quiet elegance, an independence and humanity all of its own.

In this installation, Cheryl Lucas takes the viewer on an exploratory journey to rural New Zealand, as the exhibition catalogue essay clearly identifies:

The kitchen and the farmyard intersect as domestic vessels are commandeered for farming purposes. Jugs serve as an implement in the slaughter of livestock and for the mixing of chemicals and poisons for the eradication of plant and animal pests. The jug's role in the chain of nourishment has shifted ... As a metaphor for landscape, stains, cracks and flaws resemble the scars on the land caused by earlier occupation and activity.

In the context of contemporary New Zealand ceramics, *Dip Paddock* goes a long way in opening up possibilities. And, Lucas' installation not only raises questions about personal histories, farm practices and issues of sustainability but also fosters her desire for ceramic objects to have relevance and meaning in today's society.

The jug (instantly recognizable as functional, aesthetic, historical and here, somewhat 'bloodstained') is given new life by Cheryl Lucas, reinvested with heaps of potential and currency.

