



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NAREK GALLERIES

Simone Fraser, 'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired ceramic form, wheel-thrown and manipulated, dry glaze, ht 27 cm

THE VESSEL IN CONTEXT

The great strength of Simone Fraser's work is that she has pushed it along a continuum of expression and theme over two decades, each step involving effort and a determination to reach to the next limit.

Profile by Nola Anderson. Photography by Greg Piper.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SABBIA GALLERY

ONE of the more significant critical discussions regarding contemporary ceramics has been the question of which aesthetic "history" it fits into. There are a number of options. The one that has figured most often in early literature tracks its development from early Asian and European influences on Western practice, through the strident age of "studio" ceramics in the 1960s, and the subsequent interest in postmodernism shared with painting and sculpture. However, it was just this later development that has fuelled the discussion about which particular "history" is appropriate.

Add to this the growing interest by historians and curators in the study of material culture – the notion that an object will disclose much about the community which produced it, and can be usefully studied from the point of view of why it was produced and how it was used – and you have a very wide set of options for ceramic discussions.

I should state up front that frankly I'm happy with this embarrassment of critical riches. It is nonsensical to propose that only one framework is appropriate, when if postmodernism has taught us anything, it's that critical analysis should enjoy freedoms of association. After all, it is often the curators of exhibitions who suggest the associations, as Damon Moon so accurately points out in his 2006 article *Bobbing for Apples in Brisbane*. And I suspect artists have been following whichever inspiration they like, regardless of what niche it might fall into – and may, in fact, be

'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired ceramic forms, wheel-thrown and manipulated, dry glaze, three firings, ht 59 and 64 cm



'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired ceramic forms, wheel-thrown and manipulated, dry glaze, three firings, tallest 27 cm

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NAREK GALLERIES

alert but not alarmed about what curators might subsequently hypothesise.

But here is the problem, for the artists at least. In an age of such free association, where so many histories and references can be so elegantly argued by critics or curators, how on earth do you find the source, the thread, that strongest idea which, having weathered many decades, emerges as your own strong personal statement? If you can do it, that's when I think great work is achieved. This is the work that resists curatorial manipulation into strands of history which are not its own: Damon Moon's description of Gwen Hanssen Piggots' classic pieces striking a curious note when shown in the 2000 Sydney Biennale is a case in point. I can understand why such things are done in the name of placing work within a context, as a means of explaining what it is about, or where it fits. But sometimes we have to take the braver step of not fitting work to a preconceived idea. The idea, in fact, might lie close to the artist's own experience and biography, and the best curatorship will bring that out.

Which brings me to the work of Simone Fraser, who has developed her work piece by piece, thought by thought, step by step, over many decades. The work holds together, and can be called an *oeuvre* in the very real sense of that term. One idea has built on the next, a nuance added, a shape reworked, a glaze pushed – small, deliberate transformations. The work is influenced by the details of her own biography, her mentors, her own interpretation of the physical world; in short, those essential life experiences that seem to deny the historical determinism in which art historians delight. They are, however, the essentials behind personal and powerful expression.

I have been following Simone Fraser's work since she began her career in Canberra in 1981. And here, in fact, is the first clue. In the early years she worked closely with Alan Peascod. Fraser herself refers to the

'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired ceramic form, wheel-thrown and manipulated, dry glaze, ht 43 cm

"Islamic context", reflected in the wonderfully encrusted, deeply coloured and richly textured surfaces which have been a recurring quality in her work. From here it is a logical step to read Fraser's interest in a sense of history, or what she refers to as the 'footprints of our civilisation'. The shape and texture of her modern vessels make obvious references to the material culture

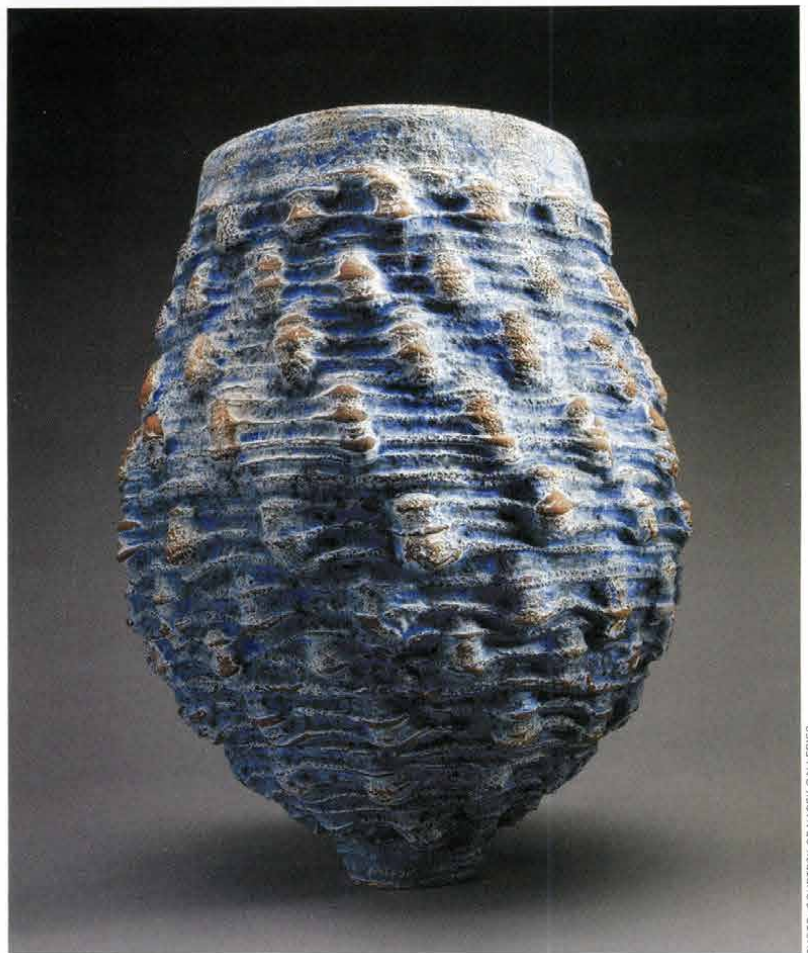
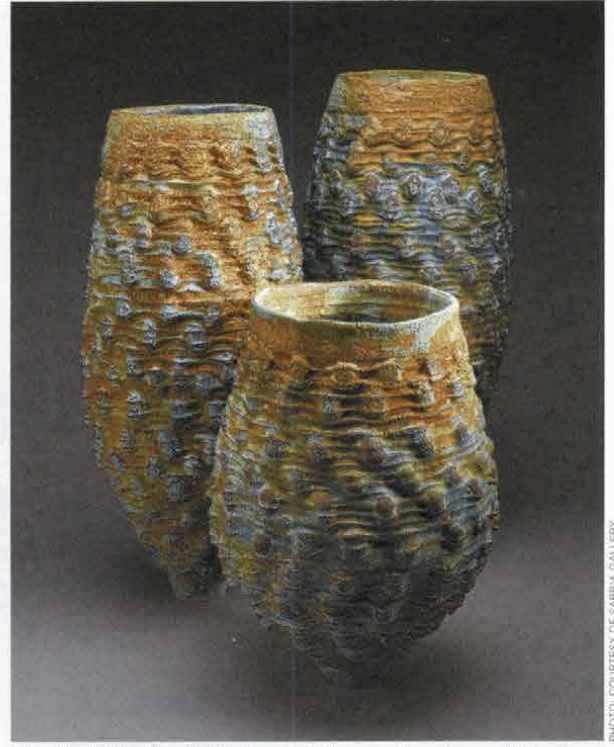


PHOTO: COURTESY OF NAREK GALLERIES



'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired ceramic, wheel-thrown and manipulated, dry glaze, ht 15 cm

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HAREK GALLERIES



'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired, wheel-thrown, dry glaze, tallest 66 cm

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SABBIA GALLERY



PHOTO: COURTESY OF HAREK GALLERIES

of past civilisations. If you were dead set on fitting this into a contemporary aesthetic framework you would call it postmodern, but I'm not sure that's essential to an enjoyment of the work. You could call just about everything postmodern these days, relatively speaking. Fraser has also been consistent over many decades in using the colours and patterning on her vessels to make references to similar textures in the natural world. The formal qualities of her vessels, the encrustations, patterning, organic shapes, refer both to historical artefacts as well as the natural world, to the shifts of sand, weathering of rocks, knurl of bark. It's one more way of connecting us to a natural world which, in city life, is becoming increasingly elusive. She is also aware that the "hand of the artist", expressed in the swells and impressions on the clay surface as it is formed, adds another level of richness to a vessel, but one that is also authentic. I know the postmodern industrial era is quite capable of imitating the hand of the artist, but at least with Fraser's ceramics we don't even have to suspend disbelief. Her intervention in the medium is obvious in the wheel-thrown forms which are then manipulated by hand to produce a richly articulated surface, and in the slips, oxides and washes that build up layers of colour

So, where does all this lead to in an understanding of Fraser's vessels? For a start, her interest in the history of civilisations allows them to take their place in the long accumulation of centuries of material culture in which vessels have played a seminal role, as both a revolutionary technology and as an expression of beauty. That's not bad for an aesthetic lineage if you need one. In his breathtaking sweep of the history of the world, Geoffrey Blainey refers to the cultivation of grains and the concomitant ability to store them as a turning point in the emerging civilisations of the Middle East and China. The modern ceramic vessel lays claim to this astounding heritage. Hence it is not difficult to read Fraser's references to history through the medium of the vessel.

On the other hand, Fraser is also conscious of the pleasure a beautiful object can engender in our cultural
Detail of manipulated dry glaze surfaces, mid-fired, three firings



'Untitled', 2007, mid-fired, wheel-thrown, dry glazes, ht 19 cm



View of Simone Fraser's solo exhibition at Narek Galleries in Tanja, NSW, 2007

experience. While vessels were certainly a technological turning point in human civilisation, they also played a profound role in the development of art – the Greek black-figure ware is just one example in which the vessel became the artist's canvas. This may well be one reason why ceramics at times make a poor bedfellow with contemporary art, as critics long ago eschewed the pursuit of beauty as a rather dubious occupation. Thank heavens all artists did not follow suit.

Fraser is not at all afraid of sumptuous beauty. In past years the surfaces of her vessels have been enhanced with intricate gestures of gold leaf and the rich hues of precious stones, reminiscent of ancient Persian arts. Again, from here it is easy to read her interest in the roots of civilisation, this time with a nod in the direction of that other human proclivity – the sheer delight in beauty. Fraser often tempers this, though, with a slight whimsy, in small handles, wings or protuberances that are almost biomorphic, and with slight deformations in the form which give life and character.

In her most recent solo show, at Narek Galleries in Tanja, NSW in 2007, Fraser's work carried more direct references to the natural landscape. The vessels were fairly large, the forms a little more simplified than her previous work, although there was still the same rich palette of colours. There is a stateliness, or grace, about these vessels; less whimsy, as if they are more truly conscious of a place in history. Their surfaces carry rich suggestions of pods, ripples, bark, stones, eddies, sand – a delightfully nuanced dance between human civilisation and the natural world. In short, we have all the great themes of history and beauty rolled into one. Simone Fraser's work has evolved from one point to the next without losing its essential energy, and without relying on a change of direction mid-stream to keep her aesthetic fresh. That is surely one test of outstanding artistic achievement.

Nola Anderson

Simone Fraser's work can be accessed at Narek Galleries in Tanja, NSW (www.narekgalleries.com) and at Sabbia Gallery, Surry Hills, Sydney (www.sabbiagallery.com).

Detail of manipulated dry glaze surfaces, mid-fired, three firings



Detail of manipulated dry glaze surfaces, mid-fired, three firings

