

- 1 *Adamah I*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H79cm
 2 *Aspaklaria IV*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H67cm
 3 *Igeret I*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2007, H68cm

Deep Earth

Louise Martin-Chew unravels the many layers in Avital Sheffer's ceramics.

The past is no longer the past.
 The past is now the continuous present.¹

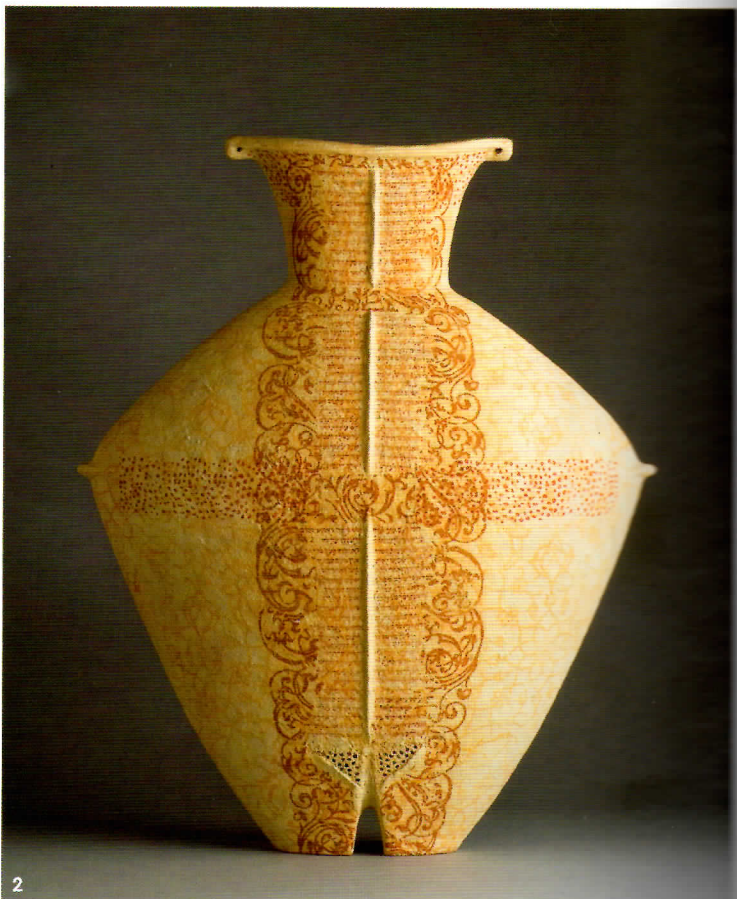
Avital Sheffer's ceramics have a disquieting presence. The vessels are large, standing solid and stolid, the height of a toddler, with the gravitas of a small child. Elevated on plinths they meet your gaze, adorned with texts relating ancient histories as complex and interrelated as natural systems. They confront, especially when grouped together, with a solidarity informed by their heritage. These vessels are anthropomorphic – my nine-year-old daughter authoritatively claimed some as female, others as male, reading the gender for each vessel in its form and in some other, less easily identified, ambient emotional expression.

It is this latter quality, an ambiguous emotional connection, which defies the solid physical presence and cerebral resonance of each vessel, developed so strongly in Avital Sheffer's ceramics during a relatively short period. The many threads of her past come together with the force of a vocation found late. Sheffer's ceramics draw on her genetic heritage as a Jewish woman born in Tel Aviv, Israel. Her family was part of the diaspora of more than two millennia; in their return to Israel, Sheffer suggested, they were 'old wares in a familiar place. In our flesh we remembered the Canaanite, the Greek, the Roman. The earth was a constant reminder – our story enmeshed with those of others.'

ARCHAEOLOGY Like the country she left, where ancient shards of glass, ceramic and marble are layered into the soil, Sheffer carries her history of archaeology and languages within her and this sense of its sources resonates in her creative work.

Sheffer identifies as a secular Jew and as a person of the Middle East; her associations and sympathies lie with the peace movement. Early on her curiosity about the archaeological wealth immediately beneath her feet and outside her country's border was present. 'I love digging, finding things – the fragments of metal, shards of clay, stone, time-patinated glass – they all spoke to me. I could hear stories and secrets beyond their indifference. I am intrigued by other traditions and their inherent dilemmas, especially those that are familiar yet different. I'm acutely aware of the relevance those histories have to contemporary affairs.'

Later Sheffer and her family established an alternative village in Western Galilee: one without fences, a rare phenomenon in security-conscious Israel. They had strong connections with neighbouring communities, experiencing traditional farming and craft-making practices. She worked with textiles and trained as a classical homeopath before emigrating to Australia in the 1990s.





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4 *Omphalus IV*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H72cm
 5 *Ostraca I & II*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H77cm max
 6 *Penimah IV*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H64cm
 7 *Temimah II*, earthenware, dry glazes and printwork, multiple fired, 2008, H59cm



AUSTRALIA Initially they lived in Sydney before moving to Mullumbimby to embrace the environment of the new country. 'I had this painful but exhilarating ignorance. I had to start learning the language of place, the flora and the fauna, the collective memory of Australia, one of which I knew I could never be fully part. I planted trees to throw new roots into the ground. I was painfully aware of my otherness. I went from being well-planted in a place and in a language, where history connects me right into the ground, to knowing nothing. In that inherently uncomfortable process I found an awakening, an opportunity for renewal.'

The solemnity imbued in Sheffer's vessels is a direct result of their initial inspiration and the cultural transference in which she found herself. On a visit to Israel in 1996 she saw the Dead Sea Scrolls, noticing, as if for the first time, the containers in which they were found. It was a serendipitous moment, 'like falling in love', when she knew instantly that she was to work with clay.

COMMUNICATION The painstakingly physical construction of her vessels evokes the ancient tradition of coil pots; the earthy and porous tactility of the finished dry glaze harks to the sun-bleached earth of her heritage but also exhibits a distinctly Australian resonance. Inscriptions on the vessels are sourced from many parts of the world. Jewish manuscripts, often in Sheffer's native Hebrew language, are researched, restored and then transcribed onto screens,



which she collects in a visual archive. After firing, the text is embedded permanently into the skin of the work.

The inscriptions are strong points of connection, with Sheffer following the hand of a calligrapher some one or two thousand years ago, in her own language, still spoken today. These texts represent an exchange of knowledge, communication and sharing across the centuries and continents. 'They feel as fresh as today. Everything to do with human experience and emotion and thoughts is there.' They also describe shared origins of clashing cultures, narratives that connect warring civilisations, basic human exchanges transcending territorial disagreements and cooperation, with exchanges of knowledge across cultures and nationalities.

Ancient vessel forms and fertility figures inform Sheffer's recent work. Here the solidity of the ceramic form is disrupted by a split at the base, creating a shape with a moving aesthetic and physical vulnerability, giving the work a humanity that is both grounding and metaphysical. They evoke primal instincts and, simultaneously, make abstract reference to ancient female votive figures that stand like sentinels on the verge of our consciousness.

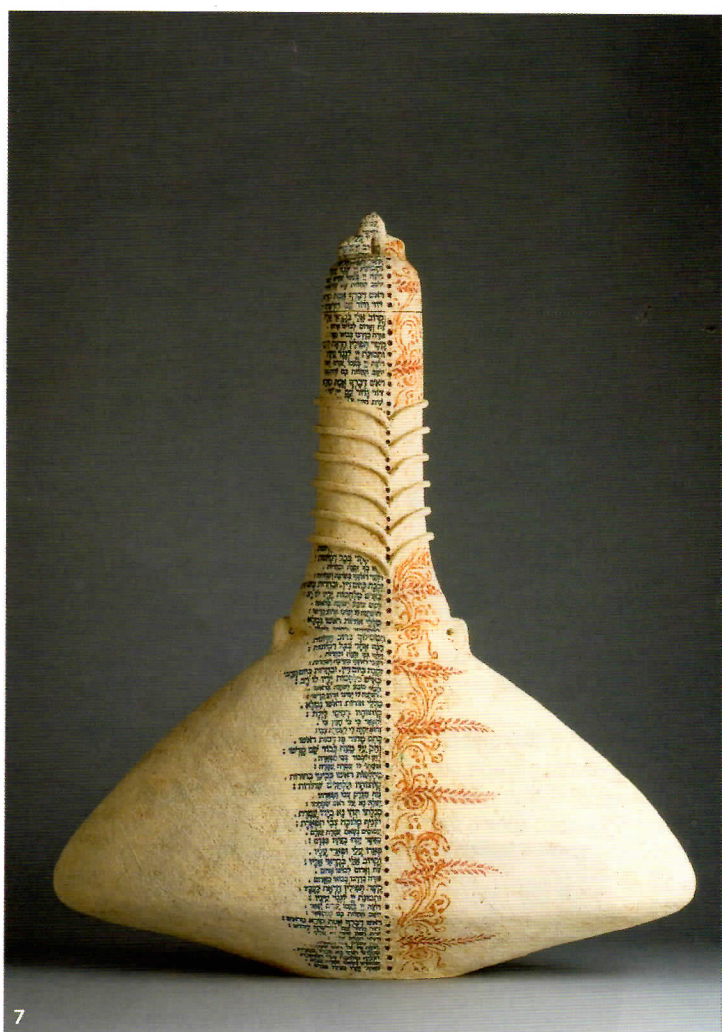
Omphalus IV incorporates a sinuous central divide, a line elevated like a cicatrice to evoke the shimmy of a belly down the centre of the vessel. The script relates to an engagement deed from Nah-Amon from Alexandria, Egypt from 1833, with scroll designs developed from a prayer book from fifteenth century Lisbon in Portugal. Tiny

Ever Present Past, *The Weekend Australian*, 3-4 January 2009. 2 Quoted in Michael Hamilton Morgan, *Lost History: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers, and Artists*, National Geographic, 2007, p117. **Exhibition** *Deep Earth*, Manly Art Gallery

The Ceramic Art of Avital Sheffer, Anthea Polson Art, Main Beach, Australia, 21 August-4 September 2010; *Art London*, Royal Hospital Chelsea, London, 7-11 October 2010; International Academy of Ceramics Members Exhibition, Sèvres,

Sheffer, Gadfly Gallery, Dalkeith, Australia, 12-28 November 2010. **Stockists** Mossgreen Gallery, Melbourne, Australia; Anthea Polson Art, Main Beach, Australia; Robin Gibson Gallery, Sydney, Australia; Beaver Galleries, Canberra,

Jane Sauer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA; Thomas R Riley Galleries, Cleveland, Ohio, USA; Studio E Gallery, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, USA. **Email** avital@avitalsheffer.com. **Web** www.avitalsheffer.com



handles on *Temimah II* emerge like nipples from the memory of the clay itself. *Igeret* has greater formality alluding to the meaning of its title – a letter – found in a repository where Jewish ritual objects, sacred books, personal and community documents no longer in use are put aside and buried. Clay, like our bodies, has molecular memory, so these pots often revert to their earliest sculptured incarnations in the kiln. This adds to the technical difficulties in the symmetry of the large oval form that Sheffer applies less than strictly, allowing natural variance. There is implied respect from any ceramist for the weather, the earth and the fire in the kiln; in the process of making, the elements may also destroy the most painstakingly created pots.

Sheffer splices the physical clay with texts that celebrate the cerebral, the work about 'the urgency of connecting stories without flattening their layers'. The texts expose cultural complexities, with Islamic designs arrayed on one side of *Igeret* and Jewish script on the other, like a yin yang pattern that shifts the balance around the perimeter of the experience.

Penimah IV illuminates the shards of multiple histories embedded in Sheffer's aesthetic. *Penimah* means inside (in the female form), the script drawn from the Xanten Bible created in Germany in 1294. The tattoo-like dotted line is developed from a wall tile at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, arguably the most contested place in the world given its history and importance to both Jewish and Muslim faiths. The form of the pot is unambiguously contemporary, the main

body like an upward-facing arrow. A punctured core draws the eye back to the centre line that traces from the fluted top to the small split at the base, a mousehole no less significant for its understatement.

In comparison *Adamah I* is a simpler lidded shape, given all-over decorative treatment with architectural motifs from a nineteenth century woodcut. *Adamah* is the Hebrew word for earth, with resonances to Adam and dam (person/blood) and its aesthetic evokes the irresistible lure of place to culture. Sheffer describes elements of her work as a 'clash of religions and cultures, like the love-hate relationship that we have with the other but also with ourselves because we are mixed too'.

Sheffer, now as much from Australia as from elsewhere, creates contemporary monuments to history and memory in her studio in the lush environment of northern New South Wales, making the point that cultural transformation is meaningful everywhere. The work utilises the past and unites traditions in a way that seems impossible in the light of current events in the Middle East.

It is not for the sun to overtake the moon,
nor doth the night outstrip the day.
They float each other in an orbit.
(Qur'an, XIV:30)² CR