



Recent Work by Cheryl Lucas

LYTTELTON-BASED ARTIST CHERYL LUCAS IS EASILY one of New Zealand's pre-eminent ceramists. Each object she creates is a harmonious sculptural piece, each a witty, whimsical narrative told through form, subverted function, texture, pattern and frequently illustration as a medium upon which to draw or to paint. Occasionally we need to be reminded that narratives, histories, may seem quite robust but are, in fact, all relatively fragile.

Lucas' work comes out of formidable formal training and rich experience. She majored in graphics at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin in 1975 and in 1978 earned a Certificate in Advanced Printmaking (Lithography) at the Wimbledon College of Art, London. For several years she taught drawing and ceramics at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), but since 2005 has concentrated on her practice full time. Her work is held in public, private and corporate collections in Argentina, Australia, China, France, England, South Africa, Switzerland and the US. In April 2007, Lucas along with New Zealand ceramists

Moyra Elliott, Richard Parker, John Parker, Chris Weaver and Mark Mitchell were invited to China to make ceramics at the prestigious FuLe International Ceramics Museums (FLICAM). Whereas the Western art world does not always take ceramics as seriously as it should, in China it is considered a highly sophisticated art form, intimately entwined with their identity and heritage. FLICAM consists of a complex of world-class international ceramics museums, a brick and tile factory, a hotel and a 65 hectares orchard. Lucas and the others were there to create work for the new Australasian Museum under construction. Lucas responded with pots resembling stylised human torsos, decorated *à la Chinoiserie* in blue on white glaze – the effect being similar to a tattoo.

This fits quite closely with the way Lucas has used more traditional jug forms as symbols for the human (particularly female) body, playing off an ancient lineage of symbolism familiar from both Victorian and Renaissance painting, but also found in the way the ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilisations depicted the Great Earth Mother. Lucas was



Facing page: *Royally Munted*. 2010.
Above: *Harder Larder*. 2011.

able to extend that classical synthesis to include both Chinese and New Zealand ceramics traditions and seeing that the relative brevity of New Zealand's ceramics lineage (despite the obvious influence of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada on 'art pottery') left her far more free to explore the metaphorical and aesthetic limits of ceramics as a contemporary visual artistic medium.

"The China experience was pivotal in freeing me up," says Lucas. "The realisation that New Zealand's 200 years of ceramics history could actually be a positive thing shot home to me."

In September 2010, February and June 2011, New Zealand's Canterbury region was rocked by severe earthquakes. Fortunately Lucas' studio emerged relatively unscathed but the catastrophic event resonates yet. Of course, nothing suggests the impact of such a disaster more strongly than the shattered shards of fired clay from generic domestic items to fine art ceramics but perhaps this too obvious. Lucas responded to the quakes by creating a *Royally Munted* (a play on Royal Minton and the commonly used trans-Tasman slang for wrecked, stuffed, bugged) series of objects consisting of strategically squashed pots and ubiquitous road cones. The road cones themselves are primarily orange but everything else

is finished in a dull grey glaze inspired by the liquefaction silt that bubbled up seemingly everywhere in shattered Christchurch. Lucas had experimented with firing the silt itself but, being primarily ferrous, the result was a rather boring terracotta colour. These are probably the most interesting New Zealand-made ceramics to reference geological activity since Len Castle's "inverted volcano" bowls of the 1980s.

Royally Munted was first exhibited at the inaugural exhibition at Chambers241 gallery – a response to the lack of exhibition spaces following the ravages of the earthquakes, in a show themed around the city in flux. While Lucas' piece was relatively small in scale and a return to the museum tradition of objects on a plinth rather than a more expansive installation, its whimsical charm and narrative eloquence made it stand out.

Lucas' work frequently tells such stories. On a happier note, 2011 saw Lucas awarded the inaugural NZ\$10,000 Sculpture on the Peninsula Award as part of the event of the same name based at Loudon, Teddington on Canterbury's Banks Peninsula. The





award was for her installation *Harder Larder* in a farm slaughterhouse, barely large enough to accommodate a farmer, a sheep and a knife. While there is, perhaps, an echo of Grahame Sydney's iconic egg tempura painting *Killing House* (1983), the interest all lies in the fascinating abstract ceramic shapes hanging from the ceiling by wire hooks, suggesting (but not exactly replicating, which would be boring, much to often and easily done, mimesis) dismembered animal carcasses, offal, pots, pans and knives. The vibe is sinister rural Gothic with a dash of death and utterly arresting. Unified by their creamy, aged-seeming glaze, there is a visual dialogue of formal logic between these shapes.

There is a direct connection between *Royally Munted* and *Harder Larder*, in that the latter highlights how the urban dwellers of 21st century Christchurch have lost many of the survival skills of their settler ancestors; something all too apparent during the crisis periods following the earthquakes when everything ground to a shell-shocked halt and shut down.

One might be forgiven for suggesting a townie artist was sniggering up her sleeve at the less picturesque aspects of country life but far from it. Lucas was born and raised in the farming life in Tarras, Central Otago. On the farm, rustic jugs, bowls and other containers, often handed down from mother to daughter, are central to daily life and special occasions alike. Lucas takes those utilitarian forms and transforms them in to the purely aesthetic.

This work, in essence, closes that circle with

Facing page and above, left and right: *Harder Larder*. 2011.

the land, as Cheryl Lucas says, "Remembering my early experiences of discovering 150 year old glazed shards of fine porcelain amongst the schist and tussock in high country New Zealand (pieces left from the departed gold miners) seemed to put it all in clearer perspective. And now we are surrounded by shards from the earthquakes. This is another new beginning."

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