

## **Craft By Kerry-Anne Cousins – The Canberra Times “Arts” 8<sup>th</sup> May 2013**

*Vessel as metaphor - ceramics by Elizabeth Charles, Simone Fraser, Gail Nichols.*  
Drill Hall Galley Kingsley Street, Acton. ACT.

This beautifully presented exhibition provides a diverting change of mood to the colourful visual fireworks of Sally Gabor's paintings in the adjacent gallery.

It is heartening to see this innovative and significant group of ceramics by these three established women artists. In this centenary year it is also salutary to add that each of these artists has some connection with Canberra. Elizabeth Charles and Simone Fraser are former graduates from the ANU Canberra School of Art. Gail Nichols lives near Braidwood, regularly contributes to exhibitions in Canberra and is a lecturer at the ANU Canberra School of Art.

At the beginning of their careers Elizabeth Charles and Simone Fraser studied with Alan Peascod (1943-2007) who was at one time lecturer in ceramics at the ANU Canberra School of Art. The influence of Peascod is obvious in their early work. They shared his interest in situating forms within an art historical context as well as in Middle Eastern ceramics. Two decades on, each artist has now developed her own ceramic style yet they have continued to work with dry or matt glazes - a legacy perhaps of Peascod's own work and tuition.

Gail Nichols conversely is well known for her knowledge of soda vapour glazes. She studied ceramics after she migrated to Sydney from the United States in 1978. Her continuing interest in and development of an experimental approach to soda vapour glazes culminated in her PhD at Monash University in 2002. She is now recognised internationally for her innovations in this field.

Simone Fraser works with surface texture and dry glazes. The simplicity of the forms of her large ( approx. 65 cm in height) vessels suggests funeral urns from a past age yet the application of texture and coloured surfaces indicates a strong personal approach that is very much a dialogue with contemporary practice. Her forms are thrown on the wheel and then their corrugated surfaces are created by hand. These surfaces seem to ripple with continuous movement. Fraser uses layers of coloured matt glazes that seep into indentations and then are rubbed back along the ridges to suggest weathered surfaces. Small perforations occasionally appear that open up the form. Most of the vessels are coloured by warm grey and blue matt glazes through which other layers of colour subtly appear. However in a striking set of three vessels *Contained Impressions nos. 13, 1, 8*, an intense blue is married with vivid oranges and greens. Fraser uses this heightened and more vibrant colour palette to give these works a sense of drama. It is hard not to see in these beautiful pots created with such imaginative sensibility the textures and colours of nature. Associations abound. The corrugated ridges spiral dynamically around the forms like the cellular structures constructed by insects. Yet they are not prescriptive and remain open to individual interpretation.

The closed form of a vessel provides a base on which Elisabeth Charles constructs her assemblages of organic free-flowing forms. There is the suggestion of Eastern calligraphy in this interplay of positive and negative space where vertical and horizontal forms connect to construct potent encoded symbols. In these ceramic sculptures that are the artist's own interpretation of household shrines or reliquaries, Charles uses her own household objects as well as fruit and vegetables as the inspiration for her arrangements. And can that really be a dachshund dog? The use of a restricted range of dry glazes and coloured slips that cover all these objects makes them uniform in appearance and suggests age and weathering. By ignoring each

object's individuality and subsuming the objects into the larger whole, Charles turns them into submissive participants in the mystery of ritual in the same way that we take ordinary objects which have an association with something or somebody special and elevate them into relics. In this series Charles suggests empathy with the sacred and other cultures and religious practices but by using domestic objects close to her own life she firmly anchors these works within a personal narrative.

Gail Nichols by contrast makes large full bellied vessels with their surfaces enlivened by the effects of soda vapour glazing. Traditionally soda vapour glazing is the use of salt or sodium bicarbonate in the kiln when firing pots. The soda vapour leaves surfaces pitted with encrustations and texture and causes intriguing markings like dark red flashes on the plain terracotta surfaces. Nichols' experiments have meant that she uses high alumina clay bodies in her vessels that react with the soda vapour to create thick opaque glazes which seem to erupt from the vessel itself. This highly volatile technique of firing means is that the final result has always an element of chance but Nichols' experience means that a certain degree of control is possible. The result is a group of beautifully made vessels where surface markings are integral to the form of the vessel and are not applied in the sense of decoration. Nichols relates these works through their titles to the moods of nature - *Cloudy Mist*, *Moon in the Mist* among others. These vessels like the work of Simone Fraser and Elizabeth Charles are made with a certain sensibility that encourages reflection and the full expression of the poetic imagination.