



MUSEUM OF  
NEW ZEALAND  
TE PAPA  
TONGAREWA

# Above the kitchen sink

Mark Amery on the exhibition  
*Inspired: Ceramics and jewellery  
shaped by the past*

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Jugs, jars, bottles, and bowls jostle for space on shelves and sills. This is my home's exhibition space. *Form follows function, form follows function*, I mutter to myself as I wash the dishes.

Yet real life is more complex, messier, than this modernist mantra. We collect things – or do they collect us? Certainly, they outlast us. They give pleasure for their form, the memories they evoke, and, sometimes, their function. There are vessels we can't bear to part with. And there are vessels we simply never get around to getting rid of. The stories told by the fragments in history's midden are no different.

Take the windowsill above my kitchen sink. There's a small, flat-bottomed glass jug with a well-worn cork for salad dressings sitting by some plastic Russian doll measuring cups. An elegant wee ceramic yoghurt pot (produced in their millions) from Beijing's narrow hutongs (alleys) is employed as a tiny vase. Beside it is a strange, bulbous green ceramic vessel with a spout for drinking wine, picked up on a callejoneada (street party) tour of the back streets of Guanajuato, Mexico. Then, just past the basil plant, an odd op-shop find: a small cream hollow ceramic log, holding shells, feathers, and an aloe vera cutting. In the corner, utensils spring like a bouquet from a '70s mustard-yellow Australian plastic jug. A happy, riotous mess.

In *Inspired: Ceramics and jewellery shaped by the past*, the curator's arrangements and the artists' own works also mix geography and history, space and time. The exhibition recognises that, for the contemporary artist, what inspires is often a jumble of rich personal experience. Visiting an artist's studio, I'm often impressed by the diversity of well-thumbed books. These outstanding artists resist categorisation – their works distil libraries.

## **Tetra Pak towers: Ann Verdcourt's *Still life with red jug***

High on a shelf behind where I wash up – away from young hands – are different-shaped tall bottles and containers: oils, sauces, wines, tonics, bottled fruit, and De Ruijter chocolate sprinkles. Ann Verdcourt's *Still life with red jug* is a similarly eclectic arrangement of containers juggling for shelf space. Worked in clay, these are objects that have been drained of content and erased of labels. We are invited to enjoy the diversity of design.

The interplay between Verdcourt's ceramic objects is sculptural, like cubist collage – a miniature

modernist towerscape. But the form references within are far broader, crossing big perceived boundaries. Looking at a pair of peaked, milk carton-like forms, I'm reminded that the Tetra Pak is now in the Museum of Modern Art's design collection. There is also Brâncuși in black and a blue bottle worthy of a Matisse print. But the red jug of the title has a shape from Roman times.

It's the humanity Verdcourt gives forms that I love. Consider the way these works gracefully tip and bulge. How, like dancers, they express through figure our exertion, our care, and our love. The elongated Tetra Paks have an emotive line wobble that makes me think, terribly, of the fallen Twin Towers.

We are good at limiting our view to a century or two. And even closer, missing those things under our nose, at the kitchen sink. Verdcourt speaks as much to the milk carton as to an Egyptian amphora – a jug from 14 centuries before Christ. The amphora's shape is 20th-century surrealism. Yet consider how function-perfect it is for both storage and tipping a large volume of fluid by hand.

## **Unruly vessels: Picasso and the Greeks**

Life thrives on exceptions to rules: in *Inspired*, Picasso is the odd non-New Zealand artist out. The bold art history slasher, as influenced by the so-called African primitive as the European classical. As comfortable creating a jug as painting. A brand as at home on the shelf as the wall. History made personal.

Would I use that little Picasso jug? Perhaps when Verdcourt comes over for sangria. After a few, Verdcourt might challenge us to think about whether Pablo's multiple – *Picador* is one of an edition of 500 – really has stronger cultural value than those vessels on my windowsill.

I love this jug's cheek: its generous, loopy handle with its snaky stripe; the fluid, blotchy, trotting silhouettes of bull and picador on horse, forever following each other around. And as for the large penises of the animals ... it has spunk. Best used for liquor to give you some pluck.

In form, the Picasso speaks most to the small, squat lekythoi, ancient Greek oil vessels, each bearing a female portrait. Then there is the askos, or oil cask (all these lost names for different vessels). Its cartoon panther reminds me of both Picasso and Bronwynne Cornish, another artist drawn to motifs from the ancient world.

The crudeness of these designs smash assumptions that it was just our modernist forebears who abstracted classicism. They're completely different to the wonderful Greek amphora on show, with its sophisticated decoration and more complex storytelling. The elegant overlapping of figurative form and colour is all in a stately dance. It was most likely used for wine at the Greeks' symposia – convivial gatherings as much for drinking as for intellectual discussion.<sup>1</sup> Its bud and vine designs remind me of the stylised floral forms on our 1960s-designed plates that I see as I wash up.

## The mudlark: Richard Stratton's personal archaeology

In 2014 Richard Stratton went mudlarking on the banks of the Thames, that great brown midden. A day's findings provided an amazing array of ceramic shards from across time.<sup>2</sup> Stratton's own work brings together an eye-popping array of styles from across ceramic history. A kind of crazy paving, held within the elegant forms of European ceramics of the 17th and 18th centuries. Blended in is his own biography. There's a deep knowledge of tradition behind the funfair mirrors and punk anarchism. Irreverence and reverence in one form.

*The clown from Fulham Road* has the shape of a vase but has been closed to use. Instead, it's like a giant, melting, marbled chocolate cake, bulging with history. I'm reminded of a toppling helter-skelter or tower of Babel. Brown supports puncture its sides, suggesting history is forever under personal construction. There to be played with. Like the antique stores of London's Fulham Road, it's a bric-a-brac experience. A confluence of ornaments from around the world, like those I remember on the shelves of my grandparents' homes. Its pinched base and curves remind me of a female figure – all generous breasts and buttocks.

All these ideas whirl out for me. And that's without even considering the work's strong historical references – Asia, Europe, and the English stoneware produced on Fulham Road from the 1670s – or Stratton's own personal memories of Britain in the 1980s and 90s (which explain the words '16 year itch' painted on the base). The 'clown', Stratton says, is himself.<sup>3</sup>

Stratton's work also evokes the wonkiness of the process of firing ceramics; its ability to bastardise the best of intentions and fuse together mistakes. Take the piece of defective Sawankhalok ware from the famed kiln group that operated in Thailand between the 13th and 16th centuries: two bowls

cradled around a third, like two people who've come together to catch the fall.

## Tide wasters: nature and culture in Raewyn Atkinson and Areta Wilkinson

Raewyn Atkinson is interested in exploring the tension in ceramics between nature and culture. The fragility of the environment and the impact our use of it has is evoked powerfully, poetically in her work. Her 2013 series 'Wasters' (a term used to describe discarded or defective pieces of pottery) was inspired by shards recovered from the stretch of northern Californian shoreline used for more than 30 years as a dumping ground for the Tepco pottery factory.

Atkinson clearly thinks deeply about what we place value in. Since returning to New Zealand, with a life more focused on family, she has returned to making vessels for use and shared experience, of which the porcelain wheel-thrown cups and plates from the 2014 'On a Plate' series are an example. Dipped in an exquisite icy blue, they're ordinary yet extraordinary, elegant yet cheekily pinched, minimalist yet creamy-full of natural and human character.

Areta Wilkinson also considers the value of forms as holders of memory and the weight carried by the worth of material and function. She does so in relation to the artefacts of her iwi, Ngāi Tahu. Her hei matau (fish hook) is in a European precious metal, silver, rather than the traditional Maori pounamu, or greenstone, but it hangs on polyester fishing twine. The shape of the hook has become as fluidly abstract as the illustrations on Picasso's jug or a jellyfish. Like water pooling in a rock pool, it evokes that tension between nature and culture. 'Audacious' is a word that comes to mind here, as throughout *Inspired*.

## Home and heart: Octavia Cook's and Bronwynne Cornish's domestic keepsakes

The scarab presented in *Inspired* wouldn't be lost in my windowsill collection. These domestic-scaled mementoes were the most popular of amulets in ancient Egypt, intended to be carried and held by individuals.

Likewise, Octavia Cook's eye pendant is intended to be loaded up with personal meaning. To be fingered in times of need. There's silver here too, but it's mixed with a deliberately gaudy mosaic of material

that, like Stratton's *Clown*, takes your thoughts every which way. I'm in the art deco 1930s as much as I am ancient Egypt. I take from that pierced eye the strength to think and look differently.

Bronwynne Cornish, represented here by the installation 'My Creatures', embraces like no other artist in New Zealand the importance of the domestic keepsake, the small art object as a holder of memory and strength. A guardian of your personal flame. She draws deeply from history, then swallows it into her own whimsical, wonderful mystery. (The name of one of her creatures, Riad, was chosen, according to Cornish, 'because I like the sound of it'.<sup>4</sup>) Hers is a treasuring of what warms us and is held sacred to us in our homes.

In Cornish's extraordinary work, the cat is as special as the dragon and the rabbit (all feature in 'My Creatures'). It was considered sacred in ancient Egypt. What might be considered hokey in any other artist's hands is, in Cornish's, made both humorous and holy. Those beautiful, open, amused faces - there's a gentleness that makes you breathe more lightly. One figure's eyes are closed in utter delight, lips pursed in a sly smile. Cornish seems to say, 'This is for your pleasure and no one else's.' These are talismans. They empower.

## Shelf lives

The ancient Greek figurines in the exhibition offer a fascinating comparison with Cornish's work. These bear the wear of having been much held. Like the Egyptian scarab, they were numerous and for everyday use. Low cost in their time, they could be considered the equivalent of the well-used plastic objects in our homes today.

In *Inspired* we cross continents and time, but always find ourselves back at home. These art works and artefacts are publicly owned, but they weren't created for vitrine display. How then, should we look at them? Octavia Cook offers an answer. She has said that she wants her work to be 'something you couldn't resist touching and loading with your own personal sentiments, much like the feeling I've always had when seeing small, intriguing objects behind glass in museums'.<sup>5</sup>

Take that notion home with you. Value those things on your own shelves and sills and the stories they give you.

## Endnotes

1. Notes from Diana Burton, School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies, Victoria University of

Wellington, to curator Justine Olsen, 5 February 2016.

2. Richard Stratton, 'Notes from a battered suitcase', *Art News New Zealand*, winter 2015, p. 102.
3. Notes from Richard Stratton to Anna Miles, sent to Justine Olsen, 18 October 2014.
4. Author's conversation with Justine Olsen, 4 February 2016.
5. Octavia Cook, email to Justine Olsen, 11 November 2015.



Ann Verdcourt, *Still Life with Red Jug*, 2001, ceramic, coloured slips. Te Papa (2002-0012-2/1-9 to 9-9).



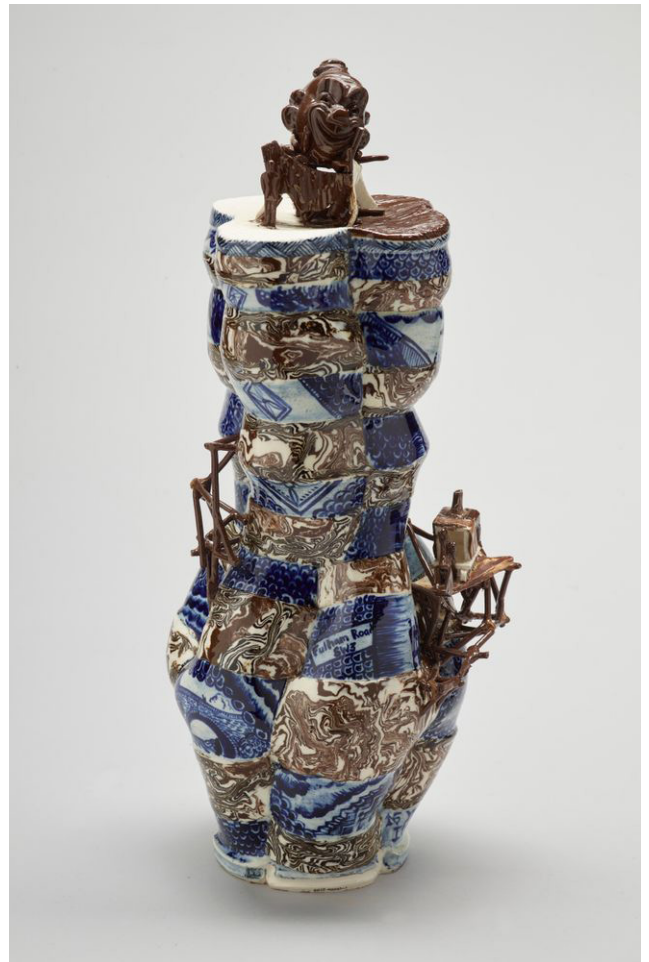
Bronwynne Cornish, *My Creatures*, 2007-2009, ceramic; hand-built with slips and stains. Te Papa (2011-0022-1/A-G to G-G).



Areta Wilkinson, *Hei Matau*, 2013, oxidised sterling silver, polyester twine. Te Papa (2015-0008-2).



Maker unknown, *Artemis*, 600BCE-501BCE, moulded terracotta, white and yellow slip CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Te Papa (CG000032).



Richard Stratton, *The Clown from Fulham Road*, 2014, white clay (mid-fired), agate veneers, underglazes, lead glazes; wheel thrown, press moulded. Te Papa (2015-0010-1).



Octavia Cook, *Abstract R.E.G.A.R.D. Pendant*, 2012, acrylic, epoxy resin, oxidised sterling silver, cubic zirconia, cord. Te Papa (2012-0008-1).

**IMAGES NO LONGER AVAILABLE DUE TO LICENSING**

Pablo Picasso, Madoura, *Picador, jug*, 1952, earthenware with painted and glazed decoration. Te Papa (2015-0044-1).

Mark Amery, Kitchen windowsill, 2016.