

# Kelly Austin: A Space for Softness

Written by **Patsy Hely**

**W**ith this current exhibition, *A Space for Softness*, Kelly Austin continues to experiment with form-types while shifting her focus from the generalised contemplation invited by still life works to a more forensic exploration of looking. Here she questions the connections between perception and expectation encouraging the viewer to use the eye of an investigator as well. How carefully do we look? How might what we see help build meaning out of form, surface, colour and object relationships? And, as this work also asks, what are the ways in which broader concerns might be signalled through still life composition? These are the concerns at work here.

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Stilled composition 36

“... the series has no essence, only a variety of family resemblances” and further, that series “... regroup themselves around the individual work, the boundaries of the series fluctuate around each new case.”<sup>1</sup> I think this particularly holds true for works in the ceramic medium and Austin’s new body of work is a case in point; family resemblances can be recognised but the questions being asked mark out different territory.

Illusion and reality, always at issue in still life painting, are rarely in play where work includes ceramic domestic forms; rather, the real is inescapable. Austin’s compositions here do engage with illusion though, where everyday forms – beaker, jar, bowl – are seen in juxtaposition with less immediately recognisable objects. These unknown items seem familiar – they are wheel-thrown, they seem hollow – but on closer inspection their interiors are inaccessible, tool-like perhaps, rather than implements. What to make of this

pairing? Austin refers to the wheel as a “form-making tool”<sup>2</sup> and her use of it here to mimic other analogue tools, a grinding stone, a pestle maybe, acts to keep the heritage of her own practice in play while alerting us to our habits of looking.

Austin is thoughtful about using the potter’s wheel; it is where her skills lie and so she uses it, but it also suits her purposes by connecting her work in a historical and cultural sense to the act of making, and to the world of made objects. In this exhibition, each work is thrown but the choice of differing clays, colours and surface treatments builds a complex scenario in the groupings. Key in this strategy is to play around with how far difference can be pushed without a group becoming too discordant or unruly and it is here that the work finds resonance with issues in the world today. A Space for Softness, it becomes clear, is for Austin a space where she can rehearse her version of what might be a more thoughtful, accepting place.



Stilled composition 24

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These issues infuse the grouped compositions, but the solitary works act differently. In these, one example has been lifted into three-dimensional space where its particularity can be closely examined. There is potential for analogy in these singular works too but I think what is at work is rather a celebration of the object just as itself and viewers are invited to witness the acts of skill and enculturation that have brought it into being.

In the works grouped on backed shelves where back and forms are close in colour, the objects visually dissolve in and out of silhouette. This brings to mind an influence on Austin, the painter Jude Rae.<sup>3</sup> Rae concentrates energy along the edges of her still life subjects through lively brushwork so objects appear to oscillate in and out of the picture plane. Austin's light on light and dark on dark works achieve something similar but it is through her handling of the muted palette that these compositions manifest as tonal painting one moment, solid form the next.

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A recent mentorship with Kirsten Coelho in Adelaide and dialogue with Ben Richardson in his Tasmanian studio have been highly valuable in the development of this work. The work here shows her refining processes with greater sophistication and attention to detail. Further, use of local Tasmanian materials and the incorporation of diverse processes and finishes – woodfiring, surface polishing, matt and lustrous glazes – give complexity and a lovely variety to the work.

In a still life painting nothing moves; here, a series of carefully crafted and curated objects have also been stilled. But as you move around before the work, reflections morph, highlights fade or shine, shadows re-position or disappear completely. In this way the body, each according to its own specificity, re-animates the work. I think this is why Kelly Austin's new work compels: by inviting us to think about looking, about encounters with things and about difference, it takes us both into the studio and out into the world, more curious about what we find in both places. ■

All images courtesy of the artist.

#### References

1. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Reaktion Books: London, 1990, p11.
2. Personal communication, 23 August 2017.
3. See <https://www.juderae.com>

#### About the Author

Patsy Hely is a practising artist whose work has been exhibited widely in both public and private galleries. Her initial training was at East Sydney Technical College (National Art School); she holds a Master of Arts from Southern Cross University and her PhD from the ANU School of Art, 'Ceramic Objects and the Articulation of Place' was completed in 2007. She has taught at the University of Newcastle, the College of Fine Arts (UNSW), Sydney University (Tin Sheds), Southern Cross University, and has been on staff at the School of Art since 2003. Her research interests are in ceramics and place, colonial ceramics, the roles that ceramics plays in representing the remnants of nature including the use of bird life as ornament. Her work is held in public collections overseas and in many Australian State and Regional Galleries including the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum.