

Kelly Austin

# Still Life Propositions

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Over the past few years, Kelly Austin has been undertaking a systematic exploration of the ceramic still life, and with each exhibition shifts in focus are apparent. In a November 2017 exhibition at Craft ACT in Canberra, she forensically examined how dialogue might be initiated between the artist, the ceramic still life and the viewer, asking questions such as: What role does light play? What happens when a viewer moves around the work? How does expectation affect perception? How carefully do we look?

For an exhibition in November 2018 at Canberra's Beaver Gallery, and then at Bett Gallery in Hobart, her preoccupation shifted to the development of precisely shaped forms. These generated new experiments, and everywhere apparent in this work was her querying of the impact of texture and colour on form, shape and surface and on the assemblage overall. The work also shows further consideration of the effects of object juxtapositions, with form placement becoming much more propositional than previously.

Art historian Norman Bryson's 1990 text on still life painting, *Looking at the Overlooked*, is a seminal work for many working in the area of ceramic still life. In it, he offered an argument about nomenclature that is especially relevant to Austin's work. Rather than use the term 'genre', he wrote, 'series' could act as a more useful description of the still life oeuvre because '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'. This is particularly true for works in the ceramic medium and Austin's work is a case in point; family resemblances can be recognised but with each iteration the questions being asked mark out different territory.

Illusion and reality are always at issue in still life painting but are rarely in play where work includes ceramic domestic forms; rather, the real is inescapable. Austin's compositions do engage with illusion though, especially in works where hollow and seemingly solid forms appear together. In some work, these quasi-solid forms – thrown and then sealed, hollow after all – reference tools such as a pestle, a grinding wheel or a rolling pin, and act to suggest an abstract linking of process and object. Currently though, forms mimicking

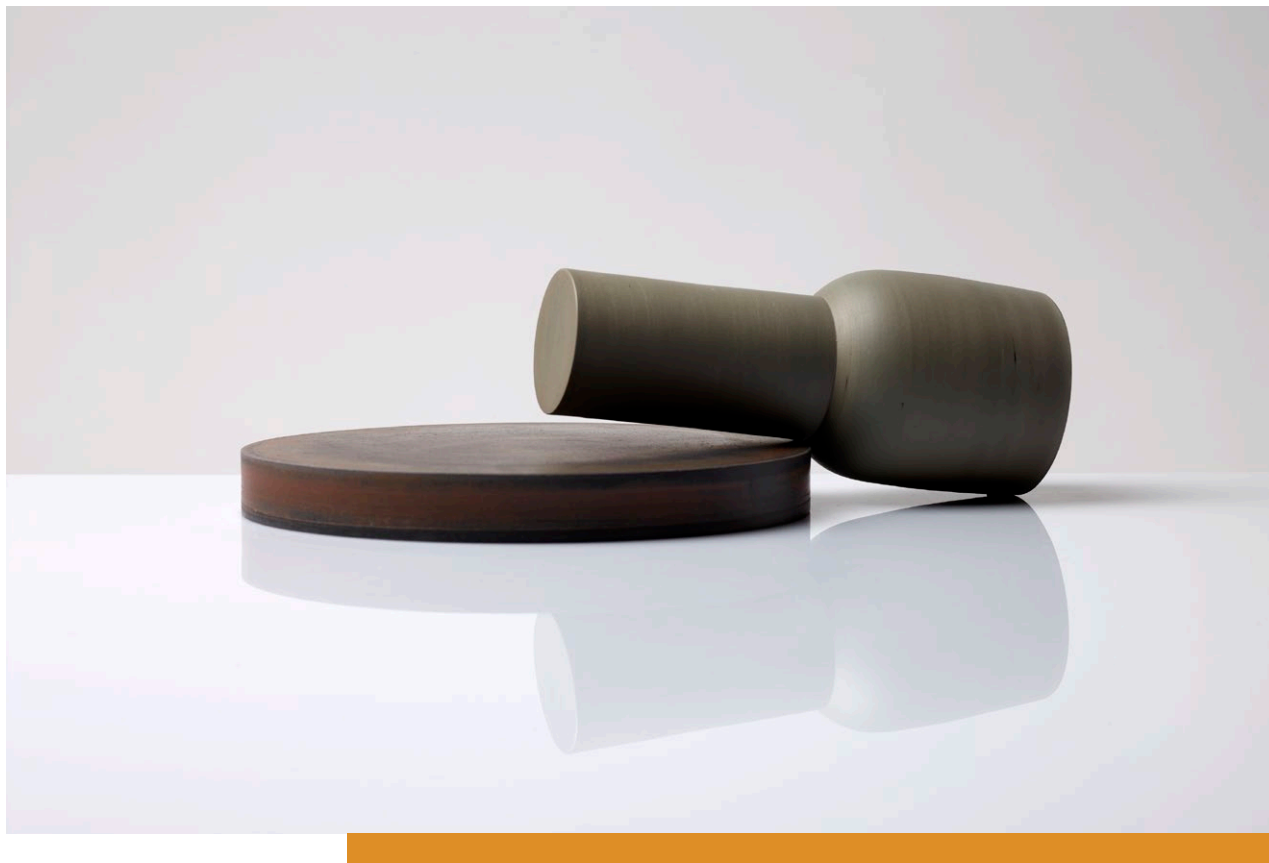
a vase, or a bottle, things *made* rather than things *used to make*, have been introduced and these present much more complex scenarios.

All of Austin's work is thrown on a potter's wheel, which she uses thoughtfully. It is where her skills lie 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. The studio wheel may become extinct in the future but here, now, it enables her to concentrate closely on nuances of shape and form and make split-second alterations in response to form, material and process, as the work happens.

More recent work shows her refining processes with greater sophistication and attention to detail. Use of local Tasmanian materials in slips, and the incorporation of diverse processes and finishes – woodfiring, surface polishing, matt and lustrous glazes, and greater attention to colour relationships – give complexity and a lovely variety to the work. Key in this approach is to play around with how far difference can be pushed without a group becoming too discordant, unruly or simply unintelligible. In this way the work might signal broader concerns in the world today, and a need to make such connection has been a constant in her shifting terrain. The still life, in Austin's hands, provides a space to rehearse a version of what might be, for her, a more thoughtful, accepting place.

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

In 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 the influence on Austin of the painter Jude Rae. 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 colour that these compositions manifest as tonal painting one moment,



solid form the next. In 2019, her plans include further work exploring colour, with a solo exhibition, *Placing Things*, at Devonport Regional Gallery in March and work in a group show, *Interstitial*, with three other artists at Bett Gallery during the Australian Ceramic Triennale Hobart in May.

In a still life painting nothing moves, and in Austin's work, carefully crafted and curated objects are also stilled. But as you move around before one of her works, 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 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. ▼

– Patsy Hely

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Kelly Austin is a ceramic artist born in Canada and living in Tasmania. Her work has been exhibited across Australia, Canada and the USA. In 2018, Austin's work was included in two finalist award exhibitions in Australia: Hutchins Australian Contemporary Art Prize and The Churchie National Emerging Art Prize.

Patsy Hely is an artist and writer. She worked as an academic from 1989 to 2014, and is currently an Emeritus Fellow at the ANU School of Art in Canberra. Her ceramic work is held in collections including the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

**Image p. 35:** *Stilled Composition 43*, stoneware, glaze, wood, acrylic paint, 38 x 145 x 48 cm (depth, width, height)

**Image p. 36:** *Stilled Composition 46*, stoneware, porcelain, glaze, wood, acrylic paint, 40 x 50 x 45 cm

**Image p. 37:** *Stilled Composition 57*, stoneware, wood, acrylic paint, 30 x 51 x 38 cm

**Image p. 39:** *Stilled Composition 62*, stoneware, 38 x 38 x 15 cm

All photographs by Peter Whyte