

The aesthetics of touch in Bottled

As the theme for the inaugural PAN Gallery Award, 'Bottled' was selected in homage to the history of the bottle and its connotations. As an object, the bottle functions as a vessel to contain; as a metaphor, it connotes captivity. Take for example the popular cliché of 'bottling one's emotions', or even the common narrative of the 'message in a bottle' – the ultimate personification of hope. These associations would suggest that there is an inherent relationship between emotion and ceramics. Indeed the 18 practitioners featured in *Bottled* explore the ability of clay to function as an index of emotional investment. Here, the potential of ceramics to embody feeling transcends the purely metaphorical.

This association is precisely the subject of a scene from Jerry Zucker's 1990 film *Ghost*. Early on in the film, Sam (Patrick Swayze) checks up on his partner Molly (Demi Moore) as she works at her pottery wheel in an attempt to overcome a bout of insomnia. Through the glamorous lens of Hollywood, the clay becomes an instrument in their relationship and the nature of the material comes to stand in as a marker of intimacy. Soon, the pot is forgotten.

This scene in *Ghost* plays on the sensual process behind ceramics – the manner in which it requires complete attention and total immersion; the delicate, skilful ability of the maker's hands to sculpt, mould and transform the clay with a deftness of touch. As demonstrated by Sam's interfering fingers and Molly's subsequently ruined pot, a push (deliberate or otherwise) in the wrong direction could ruin hours of work. Similarly, a slight miscalculation caused by a careless thought or a preoccupied mind manifests itself in the memory of the material, resulting in an imprint in the clay and a reminder of cause and effect.

The PAN Gallery Award exhibition is a starting point for reinvigorating critical discourse around contemporary ceramic practice. The Award reminds us that the artist's touch is more relevant than ever in today's world of immediate material gratification that is at once pushing us apart while bringing us closer together. The various avenues of communication offered by technology today often takes place at the expense of our most basic of senses, touch. By investing in items that are lovingly produced, we make an effort to connect with everyday objects that could so easily slip into the background of our busy lives.

Each of the practitioners in *Bottled* have been carefully selected and sample a spectrum of approaches to the theme. The artists have manipulated their material to capture the seemingly intangible nature of emotion. From Ingrid Tufts' minimal bottles resembling the purse-lipped emotionally-unavailable parent, to Leah Jackson's pinched and pressed vessels, to Petra Svoboda's contemporary interpretation of post-colonial hangovers, the work in *Bottled* is a showcase of practice from some of Australia's finest emerging and established ceramicists.

It is precisely little touches like these that remind us to be appreciative of the effort gone into producing these works of art that have passed through the hands of skilled makers. Touch is, after all, an extension of the maker's passion and emotion and the work in *Bottled* represents a revival of the presence of not just the artist's hand, but the artist's heart as well.