

Lusus Artefactae

Rust Never Sleeps It Just Dreams

Article by Kevin Murray

IT IS TEMPTING TO SEE PAUL LEATHERS AND TRUDY GOLLEY as a craft equivalent of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Both couples have travelled the world as artists, seeking to engage creatively with their new sites. And both couples adopted similar strategies of 'revealing by concealing', in wrapping what they find in order to give it presence. Though while Christo and Jeanne-Claude were renowned for the scale of their concealing – they wrapped an entire coastline in Australia – Golley and Leathers focus on the minute fragments that they find around them. Conversely, while the visual artists have created purely ephemeral works that survive only as documentation, this craft couple create works that could potentially endure millennia.

The aesthetic of wrapping first came to Leathers and Golley during a Canberra residency. The head of ceramics, Janet DeBoos, mentioned the 2002 exhibition *Skin: Surface, Substance + Design* by curator Ellen Lupton. A highlight of the exhibition was the *Egg Vase* designed by Marcel Wanders for Droog Design, which was produced by stuffing a condom with eggs and casting the result. So in this case, it was the egg that came first – the bird followed later.

In pursuit of wrapping, Golley and Leathers experimented with various materials. In 2005, on returning from Australia, Paul developed jewellery pieces by taking silicone moulds from stuffed latex party balloons. These moulds formed models in dental acrylic, which Leathers had used since the 1980s for his precision casting.

First attempts in China to enlarge and cast the objects in porcelain were unsuccessful. During their 2008/2009 trip to China and Australia they used polyolefin heat-shrink tubing stuffed with found materials like Banksia pods, cyclone fencing and even cannibalised fragments of porcelain.

The concealing was only the first step: then there was the revealing. As with *Faux Banksia Vase*, the cast forms were pruned to expose the empty interior space. This pruning creates a wonderful contrast in colour between skin and epidermis. But in a conceptual manner, it also enfoldes the relation of inside and outside in a looping way similar to the Moebius strip.

This work does resonate with the thesis of *Skin: Surface, Substance + Design*. Modernism disavows the surface in its quest to find internal structures beneath the surface. This quest is cleverly evoked by the forms that seem contained within the vases



Faux Banksia Vase. 2009. Glazed slipcast porcelain with 24kt gold decals. Collection, SODA, Western Australia.

and so distort their outward shape. This quest is poetically undermined by the exposure of emptiness within. Is there something phenomenological about the appearance of interiority that resists exposure? As Heraclitus is known to have said, "Nature likes to hide itself."

But while the latex-like surface appears to shrink-wrap the world, preserving it forever, the artists also play with a surface that suggests its antithesis – rust. For classical philosophers such as Aristotle, rust was emblematic of the process of decay, to be eradicated through heat. Of course, as the Japanese well appreciate with their *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, the patination of rust has its own beauty.

Pendant Reliquary adds new layers to this mystery: the fragment of slip-cast form is contained in a semi-open casket whose outer panel is covered in rust. Where do you start or end with such a form? What is normally a decaying body part is replaced by pristine porcelain. The immutable container is now corroding with rust. This is a temporal parallel to the spatial inversion of the vases, where time is turned inside out.

Rust colours their journey. In his commentary on the Idea of South,¹ Leathers wrote about the colour shift from North to South, from the lush green underbelly of Canada to the red centre of Australia. Contemporary Australian architecture, such as the Wood/Marsh designed Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, reflects the red soil of the outback with monumental slabs of rusted COR-TEN steel. Such building technologies have enabled the construction of durable buildings surfaced with the appearance of decay. In such circumstances, rust actually appears the more sustainable surface, not needing the constant polishing and cleaning required by stainless steel or glass.

The title for their exhibition *Down Under* is drawn from the Roman naturalist Pliny. The concept of *Naturae lusit* (nature jokes) is remade as *Lusus arte-factae* (playful making). Rather than looking at nature analytically, as in the case of Aristotle, this ludic view reveals a world of hidden meanings and ironies.

For Pliny, nature became particularly playful at the extremes of the world. He followed the classical notion that order was concentrated in the temperate zones. Too far to the north and people were fair-skinned, fierce and brutish. While at the southern extremes, people were dark, wise but tame. It was particularly at these nether reaches of the world that nature became most mischievous. Pliny was himself fond of the Greek dictum *ex Africa semper aliquid novi* (out of Africa there is always something new). He saw this reflected in the strange aberrations down South, such as the Pteomphane who have a dog for a king and the Blemmyis, who have no heads but hide their eyes and their mouth in their chests.

The antipodean bestiary is a continuing trope of European letters. The 18th century novel, *La Découverte Australe par un Homme Volant* (*The Discovery of Australia by a Flying Man*) by French writer Nicolas-Edme Rétif, populated the antipodes with weird hybrid creatures such as lascivious donkey-men and bashful elephant-men. While the idea of a rational nature was celebrated in Enlightenment

Europe, it presupposed a place where nature had deposited all of its mistakes, on the other side of the world. This was the



Above: (Pendant) Reliquary with Removable Neckpiece. 2009. Glazed porcelain with palladium lustre. Sterling silver, neoprene with a rust finish. 48 cm/h. Collecton of the artists. Below: Auspicious Cloud Spiral: Red, White and Gold. 2009. Press-moulded porcelain with underglaze transfers and 24kt gold lustre. 61 x 41 x 5 cm. Private collection, Western Australia.



attitude that greeted the strange anomalies of New Holland, such as trees that kept their leaves and lost their bark, or mammals with duck bills that lay eggs.

In their exhibition, Leathers and Golley employ devices such as the *Wunderkammer* and reliquary to frame the aberrant forms that they have produced. And in recognition of their location in wild nature, they surface the coverings and shelves in rust.

Auspicious Cloud Spirals are ceramic forms inspired by the traditional Chinese motif. Their interior surface of gold lustre enables the work to glow when struck by direct light. This highlights a distinctive feature of hard crafts like ceramics in the 'white cube', where usually direct sunlight is scrupulously blocked to preserve the delicate works contained inside.

But in the case of ceramics, direct light is often a godsend, bringing lustres and glazes to life. They took great advantage of this by placing the work in the front window of the Perth Galleries.

This inversion of positive and negative space is another of the polarities that emerges in the antipodes. As we look at the night sky from the other end of the world, we are aware that certain constellations are limited to particular hemispheres. The Southern Cross has become an icon of countries at the bottom of the world and interpreted by visitors from the North as a sign of their preordained colonisation. Of course, such a star cluster can be interpreted different ways: the artist Alex Selenitsch's 1994 exhibition *n Versions of the Southern Cross* created all of the other combinations possible by connecting the five stars in a continuous line.

But the post-colonial astrology is not just reconnecting the stars in different ways; it is to think beyond the very process of 'joining the dots' itself. If we look at Australian indigenous astronomy, there it is as if nature had deposited all of its mistakes on the other side of the world. If we look at Australian

indigenous astronomy, there is a very different way of reading the stars. The Boorong people of western Victoria focus not on the stars themselves but the region of darkness within. What has been sometimes called the 'coal sack' is for them the mythological creature *Tchingal*, the emu. As with *Auspicious Cloud Spirals*, we look to the light inside rather than the form itself.

But while this turning inside out can seem a response to Australia, not everything seems equally at home in the bottom of the world. Leathers and Golley's exhibition glances back to pre-Enlightenment times, with the use of Latin in the exhibition title and the inclusion of devices such as the reliquary, which connote superstition. This seems quite at odds with both the Australian and Canadian cultures, which locate themselves either post-Enlightenment in the colonising principle or the seeming 'pre-historic' period during which indigenous cultures were formed.

The medieval strain in Australian craft is particularly associated with what might be called 'rich craft'.² This is not a literal category, referring only to work made for wealthy elites. It is rather a kind of work that expresses something beyond the everyday, often employing arcane references and intricate

procedures. Its aesthetic evokes what Mario Perniola called the 'enigma effect', a baroque sensibility for the elsewhere of meaning.³

This medieval sensibility is situated in pre-Renaissance Europe, before the world fully knew itself. As such, it is a northern phenomenon, seemingly foreign to life in the new world. The most prominent medieval mind of the South is arguably the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, for whom "reality favours symmetries and slight anachronisms". His story *The Lottery in Babylon* imagines an ancient scene where a simple game of chance eventually



Vase Form. 2009. Glazed handbuilt and slipcast porcelain with underglaze, rust finish. 48 cm/h. Private collection, Western Australia.

comes to dominate life. At first, the lottery is a source of prizes for the lucky. But as new prizes and schemes are invented, it becomes coexistent with reality, ultimately determining the life and death of individuals. This fantastic scene has its parallel with evolution, where the order of nature is seen as the result of chance mutations. This detour from reality of the rich aesthetic can sometime point us to new truths.

Of course, there is another side to the story. 'Rich craft' has its counterpoint in the poverty aesthetic. This relates to materials and ideas that can be found in one's immediate world. It is associated with expressionism and found objects. With writers, it is evident in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, who composes odes to ordinary things such as a pair of scissors or an orange.

This opposition between rich and poor reflects the polarity of specialisation and democracy that is at play in most cultures. In the case of Golley and Leathers's work, we find a complex imbrication of baroque and modern. There is the rich form in the use of Latin and the masking of objects through heat-shrink tubing.

This celebrates play and mystery. But there is also a substance in everyday life, with fragments and objects that are found in their immediate environment and incorporated into the work. They sourced forms distinctive to each of their residences, including dried grape vines in Hobart, Banksia pods in Canberra, and chain link fencing in Fremantle. This locates their work in the places that they have visited.

We are often at risk of seeing the rich and poor as exclusive. The weight of scholarship and cultural treasures preserved in the past seem to render our contemporary work into an ephemeral world of celebrity gossip and fashion. And the enlightened efficient present seems to cast a shadow on the ignorant malfunctioning past. The work of artists

like Trudy Golley and Paul Leathers reminds us that these realms are interchangeable. As Walter Benjamin says, "All modernism is worthy of becoming antiquity some day."⁴

FOOTNOTES:

1. [http://ideaofsouth.net/region/north/is-canada-south# comments.](http://ideaofsouth.net/region/north/is-canada-south#comments)
2. When you look hard, you do manage to find a medieval strain in Australian craft, particularly jewellery. The renowned goldsmith Robert Baines sought to represent Australia through a medieval lens. His exhibitions such as *Misteri Antipodei* in 1982 responded to the medieval preconception of the antipodes as a place of strange wonders. The Sydney-based jeweller Pierre Cavalan is best known for his suite of works incorporating found objects based on the theme of the seven deadly sins. Both uses of medieval narrative are playful, but there is a broader logic at play.
3. For Perniola, the enigmatic sensibility that so dominated Egyptian culture, particularly the *Book of the Dead*, has returned in the age of video where there is a much reduced sense of presence. See Mario Perniola *Enigmas: The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art* London: Verso, 1995 (orig. 1990).
4. Walter Benjamin. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (trans. H. Zohn) London: Verso, 1983 (orig. 1938), p. 81.



Cabinet, Mysterious Contents of, 304 (v.4.0). 2009. Mixed media installation on wall shelf. 61 cm/w.

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Canadian ceramic artist/educator, Trudy Golley is the Head of Ceramics at Red Deer College in Alberta and was on sabbatical leave during 2009.

Metalsmith/educator, Paul Leathers is currently a full-time studio artist.

More images of their work can be viewed on-line at www.alluvium.ca

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