



## CREATURE COMFORTS

### Contextualising Susan Flavell's Ceramics

Andrew Nicholls

When not engaged in art-making or writing, for my 'day job' I am lucky enough to work for Royal Doulton, managing a retail store with a very successful business in bone china collectables. This success is largely reliant on the enduringly popular 'Pretty Lady' figurine range and it is of continual fascination to me that the fervour for collecting these expensive, fragile and completely useless objects has not waned since they were first launched in 1913. While no doubt steeped in nostalgia and aspirant class-association, it seems an undeniable comfort is to be found in the habit, and while I do not share my customers' affection for small bone china women, I do collect (and covet) other ceramic figurines. There is an inherent intimacy to such objects owed to their scale, and a curiosity in the simultaneous durability and fragility of a medium that can survive millennia, yet be so easily broken.

My lounge-room mantelpiece showcases the prizes of my collection – numerous Royal Crown Derby paperweights, two Dresden replicas of members of Meissen's iconic rococo 'Monkey Orchestra', a Minton jug in the shape of a frog perched on a pumpkin and a shoal of Wembley Ware fish-shaped vases and ashtrays. Nestled alongside – and the only non-ceramic objects allowed on there – are a number of small cast-pewter sculptures by Susan Flavell. Like their neighbouring ceramics they are all surreal interpretations of animal forms. Materially, they speak a similar language; their miniature scale and finely-rendered detail lends them infinite charm. They cry out to be picked up and, when handled, absorb the heat of one's hand.

It was therefore not at all surprising to me when Flavell turned to the ceramic medium for her Mark Howlett Foundation commission. Indeed, it seemed idiosyncratic of an artist whose thematic and conceptual interests have remained largely unchanged for the duration of her career, namely, the body, the creation of hybrid animal forms, the relationship between animals and humans and the evocation of a sense of life or 'presence' in her objects. However, Flavell manages to consistently re-invigorate these concerns in unexpected ways. Having focused largely on the monumental application of cardboard in recent years (a non-precious medium that allows her immediacy and freedom), she has now embraced one of the most technically complex and failure-ridden processes imaginable. In so doing, Flavell has contextualised her works within the millennia-old tradition of depicting animal forms in clay.

It is not difficult to imagine her seated, dog-like figurine amongst the accoutrements of a deceased emperor or pharaoh, warding off evil spirits or guarding passage to the afterlife in a similar manner to animistic tomb figures and funerary jars dating from 2500 BC in China and 1900 BC in Egypt. Over ensuing centuries porcelain and bone china would become favoured by the European aristocracy as the ideal mediums in which to indulge their flamboyant tastes, resulting in some of the most outrageously opulent objects ever created (with animal motifs remaining an ever-popular theme).

However Flavell generally favours non-heroic mediums, and although she has employed cast bronze and other 'high art' disciplines, arguably the most joyous of her creations comprise cardboard, papier mâché or textiles. She has stated that she is drawn to the more domestic applications of ceramic design, rather than its lofty past in the homes of kings and emperors.

Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramic manufacturing became increasingly tailored to the tastes of the middle and working class, particularly following World War II when the buoyancy of the period and widespread affluence meant that novel items for the home were in high demand. Western Australia had a bizarre ceramic menagerie of its own via Brisbane and Wunderlich's Wembley Ware range of 'fancywares' produced from 1946-1961 in Subiaco, and the smaller artist-run Darbyshire factory's numerous animal-form salt and pepper pots from the same period. Higher sales taxes imposed on non-functional ceramics during this period lead to the mass-production of decorative items with a relatively superficial 'purpose', such as the ubiquitous Wembley Dhufish 'vase' in the shape of a leaping fish with a gaping mouth in which to arrange flowers, or its companion piece, a smaller, horizontal version marketed as an 'ashtray'. It seems unlikely that these top-selling items were ever widely put to any use other than being admired as chic and modern objects d'art. Flavell is well aware of this legacy having undertaken a public commission marking the Brisbane and Wunderlich factory site for the Subi Centro development in 2003, a huge bronze rendering of their iconic kookaburra garden ornament (one of the few purely decorative items in the range). Her new ceramic works resonate a similar quality of domestic optimism, even borrowing from Wembley Ware's pastel palette.

Indeed, optimism exudes from Flavell's new works. They revel in the accidents and experimentation that can occur when an artist moves into a new medium, and in this case, one particularly steeped in tradition and technique. Maintaining a flirtatious relationship to her historical precedents, Flavell startles by treating her ceramics as drawings, exuberantly layering seemingly non-related and out-of-scale imagery onto them and gleefully absorbing and re-working any mistakes. In referencing domestic ceramics, Flavell's new works also acknowledge the optimism that drives the collection of such objects. It is entirely appropriate that she has created these works to sit within our homes alongside Wembley Ware fish or Royal Doulton ladies, as all these objects act to signify the aspiration for something more. In the same way that a Doulton lady marks its owner as investing in a mythical past of luxurious English gentility, or a Wembley Ware fish signified allegiance to a bright and affluent future, Susan Flavell's figurines honour the fantastic other that resides just beyond our own world.

*Andrew Nicholls is an artist, writer and curator based in Perth, Western Australia. His practice draws inspiration from the history of commercial-manufactured ceramics and he has undertaken research residencies at the Spode, Wedgwood and Royal Crown Derby factories. In 2005 he was co-curator of Wembley Ware – Excitingly Different! the first retrospective of Wembley Ware at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.*

