

## OVER FLOW

The durable remnants of fired clay vessels are among the earliest remaining artefacts of domestic life on earth. Pottery sherds found in the Xianren caves of China's Jiangxi province have been radiocarbon dated to at least 20,000 BP (calibrated years before present) – i.e. 18,000 BCE. Pouch-like in shape, these simply designed, coarse-paste forms were made with sand and clay from a nearby site. Assessment of their blackened bases suggests that they were most likely used for food preparation and cooking, though little else is known about them or those who used them. After the Neolithic revolution (~10,000 BCE), an increasing number of sedentary agricultural communities developed various types of glazed ceramics and non-porous stoneware receptacles to store surplus produce and liquids in preparation for inhospitable seasons. As production advanced, these vessels – and their surfaces – became a site for cultural and artistic expression. Some were used to hold offerings, others for human remains. They spanned both ritual and the everyday.

Today, historical ceramic vessels are collected and exhibited far from where they were made. Never to be used again, they are arranged and displayed according to colour, patination or time period. Contemporary scientific analysis of vessel form and function has yielded insights into historical practices of domestic food production, consumption and systems of measurement. They also illuminate aspects of public life. Ceramic remnants found at ancient sites illuminate local economic practices, and offer some of the earliest indications of travel, trade routes and contact between cultures. This concept of transportation, flow and exchange is fundamental to the vessel's etymology in the English language. It stems from the Latin root *vascellum*, shared by vase and floating craft, or ship. In anatomy, vessels refer to the hollow canals that contain and convey the fluids of the body. Where vessels hold and protect, there is a latent sense that if subjected to too much pressure, they will constrict, overflow, crack, sink.

Snaith's exhibition title *Impossible Bouquet* references a tradition of Dutch still life painting, perhaps best associated with artist Jan van Huysum (1682–1749). Revered at the time of his death as Europe's greatest painter of floral compositions, his realistically rendered arrangements often featured more than thirty different species of flowers and fruits. Barely contained by their ornate vases, van Huysum's

heavy blossoms and ripe fruit are captured in their zenith. These bouquets were deceptive, however: they could never exist together in a single vessel in his Amsterdam studio. Seasonal subjects like roses, tulips and sunflowers could not be referenced simultaneously, and each painting required at full year, or longer, to complete. The public wonderment that these works elicited is difficult to imagine today, where practically any flower or fruit can be procured regardless of season or location – even during a pandemic. Look closely at one of van Huysum’s illusory bouquets, and you notice the first signs of wilt. Insects creep into the edges of the canvas, lone envoys for the swarms that will arrive as petals drop and the rot begins. Symbols of *vanitas*, these creatures served as a reminder of life’s cycles and flows: the ephemerality of beauty, the inevitability of death, decomposition and regrowth.

Snaith gradually produced the vessels for this exhibition in her home studio since the start of the pandemic. Her own impossible bouquet of roles – caring for a family, making a living and making art – has been pushed over the past eighteen months. For many in Victoria who are not engaged in front line work, we have retreated into apartments and houses to escape the virus, and our public lives have crept in behind us. ‘Third’ spaces have been sealed off. Personal and professional obligations have continued, compounded. The myriad roles and labours of public and private life have coalesced inside a single space. The natural separations and shifts between these often-conflicting identities have been blurred through continuous, simultaneous platforms, communications, technologies, mediums. Like a vessel filled too high, overflow is inevitable. For Snaith, the process of making ceramics is a temporary reprieve. It requires full attention and focus, and clay-covered hands demand a separation of time and roles.

‘Heide I’ cottage is one of Victoria’s best-known domestic settings. It was home to Sunday and John Reed from 1934 to ’67 (and again in 1981), a period punctuated by war, ideological struggle and a redefining of the roles of women at home and their participation in public life. Enabled by privilege, the Reeds withdrew from mainstream Melbourne society and retreated to Heidelberg to live by the seasons and foster a ‘modern home-grown culture’ and fertile haven for avant-garde artists. Albert Tucker described Sunday as the ‘key mother goddess figure’, the maternal vessel who actively worked to sustain creativity and equilibrium at Heide.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Harding L, Morgan K. *Sunday’s Garden : Growing Heide*. Miegunyah Press; 2012

The memory of the cottage has long been idealised in modern Australian history. Books have been written extolling its rhythms of daily life, routines, recipes and famous kitchen garden. Mary Boyd's hand painted tiles still line the kitchen mantel, immortalising the Reeds pet cats and flowers from the grounds. In photographs taken at Heide I in the decades following Sunday and John's deaths, the family's crockery is styled atop kitchen dresser shelves as though just washed and put away after one of the infamous long meals that took place in the house.

Redolent of insects inspecting for decay, Snaith's ceramic intruders appear at the edges of the cottage's interstices: the oven, fireplaces, mantels, the bath, and library bookshelves. Though rarely subject to contemporary intervention or critically engaged with, these romanticised domestic spaces were the setting against which so much of Heide's complicated social history unfolded. A history of blurred boundaries, of obligation, control, and of pressures to balance conflicting public and private identities. A history based on the physical and spiritual displacement of those who lived here before. Entering through the widening cracks, Snaith's clay slugs and snails quietly circle decomposing narratives. Mushrooms and ambiguous organic forms emerge from dark corners and feed on the matter collecting in the damp, still recesses of the cottage's memories.

If excavated millennia from now, what would these vessels reveal about the time in which they were produced? Will their conceptual multivalence remain? Perhaps they will be collected and displayed as physical imprints of a moment when microscopic agents and parasites proliferated beyond control, dictated the boundaries of human existence, and returned, repeatedly, to our thoughts. For now, each empty vessel encountered throughout Heide cottage is a reminder of life's phases and cycles – the inevitability of death, and from it, the potential for new growth.