



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Front cover: Gerry Wedd, *dead roo*, 2010

Back cover: Honor Freeman, *leaky bucket*, 2011



Art, Architecture
and Design



Helpmann
Academy



2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale
28 September - 1 October 2012
Special Exhibition, 2012, UniSA





Post Skangarooivan

4 September - 12 October 2012

SASA GALLERY

Post Skangarooovian Damon Moon

This essay is dedicated to Robert Hughes 1938 - 2012.

Keep your eyes on the road, your hands upon the wheel¹ – *Skangarooovian Funk* and the demise of the Australian automobile industry.

For those not familiar with the term, Funk ceramics describes sculptural or non-functional work that combines a Pop Art sensibility with the history of ceramics as a decorative art. At its inception Funk could even lay claim to being a regional style, centred around San Francisco, where its iconoclastic look drew on the street culture, comics and band posters of early hippydom.

Originally a term applied to a whole range of the visual arts² – painting, sculpture, even early installation work – a defining feature of the Funk movement was its engagement with ceramics. In part this was due to the presence of that towering figure of American ceramics, Peter Voulkos, who was working in California as early as the mid 1950s. Although Voulkos was not a Funk ceramist *per se*, he demonstrated quite clearly that ceramics could develop an distinct artistic language beyond its functional roots, heralding what the influential writer and editor Rose Slivka had termed the ‘new ceramic presence.’³ But the real advent of the Funk ceramics movement occurred in 1961 when a young Robert Arneson, who was teaching art and design at Mills College in Oakland, California, ‘goofed-off’ during a throwing demonstration at the Sacremeto State Fair, topping a small, traditionally thrown bottle with a cap and adding the words ‘No Deposit, No Return’⁴, in a comic and subversive gesture that would ultimately echo throughout the ceramics world as powerfully as had Bernard Leach’s quasi-Oriental calligraphy of fifty years before.

Soon after, Arneson was appointed to teach ceramics at the University of California’s Davis Campus on the outskirts of San Francisco, and the slightly ramshackle building that served as the ceramics department (TB9 or Temporary Building Nine) would become the crucible of one of the most influential and controversial ceramics movements of the twentieth century.

Recognizing that despite (or maybe even because of) the lack of facilities or a long tradition, Davis was a place where he could do exactly as he pleased, Arneson set about creating a ceramics department where experimentation was not just encouraged but demanded, where ... ‘there was nothing, and so anything could happen. Arneson taught attitude, not style.’⁵

Arneson had many talented students at Davis, but there was one student in particular who provided the connection between the cutting edge of American ceramics and 1960s Adelaide, and that was Margaret Helen Dodd.

Dodd had originally studied at the South Australian School of Art before travelling to the USA, where, after several moves, her husband had gained employment in the University of California’s physics department at Davis Campus. Given her status as a ‘faculty wife’ Dodd could sit in on courses without being formally enrolled. She initially chose to study sculpture and so found herself working with Arneson in TB9, since that building housed both the ceramics and sculpture departments.

It was during a ceramic sculpture course with Arneson that she was set an assignment to make a ‘double illusion’, thus

initiating a course of work that would last to the present day. Dodd had recently seen the American artist Dennis Openheim's work *Funk Truck*, a sculpture made from foam rubber on a wood core and covered with polka dot and leopard skin fabric. She took the idea one step further and made a *Fake Funk Truck* out of clay, a piece which certainly qualified as a double-illusion, and then some. Even the title was in keeping with the spirit of funk, where punning was all the rage and the idea of the fake was gaining an artistic and theoretical credibility, a concept aligned with Pop Art as it was with the very beginnings of appropriation and Post Modernism, although this latter movement was still to be named, or properly identified.

Dodd continued to make a veritable production line of ceramic automobiles: Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Cadillacs, and a fleet of that ubiquitous marque of hippydom, the VW Kombi van. Her work was included in important exhibitions, including the 1966 survey show *Ceramics from Davis*, put on by the American Crafts Council at the Museum West Gallery in San Francisco.

Given her involvement in an exciting new ceramics movement, it was with some reluctance that Margaret Dodd faced the prospect of returning to Australia, again following her husband's academic career. Soon after graduation from Davis in 1967, the famous Californian 'summer of love', she found herself back in Adelaide living in the suburb of Holden Hill, which, given her subsequent oeuvre, must be one of the oddest co-incidences in Australian art history.

Given all the complexities (and failures and erasures and mistakes) of tracing the origins of any art historical movement, it is always useful to try to set the work within the

context of the time. In looking at what shaped Skangarooian Funk there are several overarching factors which might shed some light onto what was made and why people made it, and these fall into the broad categories of sex, politics and money.

Although Adelaide in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a long way from being a cultural powerhouse, it was also not an entirely philistine destination. There was an internationally recognised arts festival in the days where few cities could boast of such a thing. The political climate certainly favoured the arts, and when there was a sympathetic confluence of state and federal governments, as there was for a period in the early 1970s under Don Dunstan and Gough Whitlam respectively, it might be argued that South Australian artists found themselves a kind of genteel, provincial nirvana.

Ceramics found itself suddenly empowered by virtue of its position in 'the Crafts', that field of remnant hand-skills and materials-based practices which had gone from being the province of hobbyists to having serious representation at state, federal and even international level in the form of various boards and advisory bodies.

The radical questioning of authority that had begun during the 1960s still resonated powerfully within society, with Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War providing a central and defining cause around which many groups within a broadly leftist demographic coalesced. Also, following the sexual liberation of the 1960s, the 1970s was a period that where many people enthusiastically followed-up the range of possibilities within this newly liberalised sexuality.

Feminist theory contributed to the debate, but the public manifestations of this rather hedonistic period were most evident in the gender-bending aspects of popular culture. After all, this was the era of glam-rock, and if it was OK for David Bowie or Brian Eno to affect make-up and six inch platform heels then why shouldn't this aesthetic also work its way into the art of the time?

The common thread was one of questioning and pushing boundaries, and so it was with *Skangarooovian Funk*, where contrary to the rusticated Orientalist aesthetic that was so popular in Australian studio pottery, these strange new ceramic objects bore a direct relationship to the popular culture of the day. But times inevitably change, and during the nineties and noughties the dominance of Design (with a capital D) saw small groups of uber-cool porcelain cups and bottles replace the excesses of *Skangarooovian Funk*, a trend which – apart from anything else – says a lot about the preparedness of artists to take risks, which again reflects the changing nature of Australian society.

The legacy, such as it is, of *Skangarooovian Funk* is hard to assess, partly because where once appropriation was so new it didn't really have a name, the fashions and theories of the past thirty years have meant that any style is assumed to be a pastiche, which, in the case of *post-Skangarooovian* work, may indeed be a pastiche of a pastiche.

In the case of the recent ceramics of Margaret Dodd, it seems that a singular and enduring vision has again adapted itself to current conditions, where working in the ceramic Mecca of Jingdezhen (if that is not a contradiction in terms) has resulted in a new body of work. These ceramic Holden Commodores were indeed Made in

China, although their construction was overseen by Dodd, just as many foreigners now utilise Chinese manufacturing to realise their dreams. I wonder how long it will be before the real thing is also made in China, and if art historians far in the future will consider Dodd's cars as votive objects made to celebrate the fecundity of the automobile industry, little Venus's of Willendorf for the reciprocating engine?

Endnotes:

1. From 'Roadhouse Blues' by The Doors, 1969.
2. One of the first mentions of the term Funk in relation to the visual arts appears in two essays for the March/April 1967 edition of the journal *Art in America*: 'Funk Art' by Peter Selz and 'Sweet Land of Funk' by Harold Paris, both of which appeared under the title 'West Coast Report: Funk Art'.
3. Rose Slivka's, 'The New Ceramic Presence', *Craft Horizons* No. 4, 1961.
4. Robert Arneson interviewed by Ken Kelly.
<http://www.verisimilitudo.com/arneson/bobart1.html>
5. John Natsoulas, Bruce Nixon (eds), *30 Years of TB9 – a Tribute to Robert Arneson*, John Natsoulas Press, 1991, California.