



# 2012 SYDNEY MYER FUND AUSTRALIAN CERAMIC AWARD



As ceramic artists extend their art form well beyond the handmade and the mastery of a narrow skill set — and as processes and materials used in the ceramic arts are increasingly drawn upon by fine artists — the historical distinctions between craft and art and the place of design have become uncertain.

The 2012 Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award features works by Australian artist Kirsten Coelho, international artist Michal Fargo and emerging artist Alexandra Standen and is a good illustration of the broad base and risk-taking state of contemporary ceramic art.

Since its inception in 1991, then as a national prize, and later in 1997 as an international biannual, the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award has been linked with the Shepparton Art Museum in central Northern Victoria. The craft revival in the 1960s and 1970s led to a burgeoning of studio potteries in central and Northern Victoria, which led to the Shepparton Art Museum building a significant collection of Australian ceramics, including decorative pieces from long-established commercial potteries, including Bendigo Pottery, and works by Merric Boyd and contemporary artists Stephen Benwell and Deborah Halpern.

Reflecting an ever-increasing diversity of ceramic work, in 2009 the award became a commission-based award; rather than shortlisting and exhibiting the work of many entrants, it now

exhibits three commissioned works by artists from each of the three categories: Australian, International and emerging. This broadening of the scope of the award to encourage international and emerging artists, and the greater depth of the exhibition, suggests an opening out and embracing of contemporary ceramics and ceramic artists.

Coelho's matt-white porcelain vessels grouped on simple white oak furniture — a shelf, a bench, a table and two open boxes — convey the domestic simplicity of the early settler. The minimalism of the setting and the irregular groupings of the vessels give a dual sense of a living memorial to aspirations in the new world and of survival and dislocation. The rust-like patina on the lips of these hand-thrown works suggests, too, a sense of usage and time passed, and of the beautiful imperfections of old bottles and porcelain containers.

Fargo's elegant molten-like forms play on materials and surfaces, conjuring meteorites, coral formations, volcanic rock and ancient slag. Displayed on a perfectly poised white triangular bench, her abstractions inhabit an unfamiliar terrain in space and on earth. Based in Tel Aviv, Michal created her own technique, using sponges to construct models, which she then covers in a porcelain compound. The sheer variety of forms and subtle colours — ice white, bone,

powder blue, sulphur yellow, glassy black — is a testament to her experimentation.

Standen's work is based on a short story, *The Distance of the Moon*, by writer Italo Calvino. An allegorical tale about yearning and identity, a mass of tiny ladders moves upwards in a sweeping flight formation, from darker earthbound stoneware ladders up to pale blue feather-like porcelain ladders, making a leap to reach the moon and an elusive freedom. A small convoy of thin ethereal boats floats on a horizontal plane in line with the lowest ladders — reflecting a launching pad for the aspirational climbers as well as an earthbound even keel.

Ruth Learner

Above left: Michal Fargo, *Else*, 2011–12, porcelain, mixed technique. Shepparton Art Museum.

Above right: Kirsten Coelho, *Toward the end of the day*, 2012, porcelain, pale grey-white and iron oxide glazes. Shepparton Art Museum.