

BEEING

Dr Julie Bartholomew and Mahala Hill

Artworks drawing on the natural world are common across craft, design and art but it is only relatively recently that they convey such a sense of urgency, an urgency mirrored daily in other spheres. In this show, Julie Bartholomew and Mahala Hill give voice to one particular area of concern: the planet's bee population.

Bartholomew and Hill met in 2017 when Bartholomew, then Head of Ceramics at ANU School of Art and Design, supervised Hill's Honours project. Since, their shared interest in environmental issues has seen their dialogue develop in ways profitable for both.

Bartholomew presents two bodies of work referencing the ovoid beehives commonly found hanging from tree branches or attached to other natural (sometimes man-made) structures. One group of works is primarily sculptural in intent while the other can, with minor additions, act as a functional habitat – a beehive for a domestic setting. These latter, in the spirit of ceramics from the domestic realm, propose answers to questions. How might a beehive serve both bee and beekeeper? How might it be both useful and aesthetically pleasing? Her research process for this project has been, as always, rigorous; previously she has worked with scientists involved in Antarctic geological investigation and here she worked with beekeepers, learning their craft, testing her ideas and designs.

There are distinct echoes in her forms of a European ceramic heritage with the glaze, known - appropriately - as 'Honey glaze', along with its red earthenware clay understrata, familiar from early English domestic ceramics. Like all of Bartholomew's work, all is finely considered and crafted, with materials knowledge, construction skills and attention to detail everywhere evident.

Mahala Hill's works are also the result of a keen interest in how material and process might communicate ideas. Her works are at once beautiful and fearsome and although they appear at first glance to be alien from ceramic tradition, her materials are clay and glaze, her methods exaggerations or amplifications of usual ceramic process. Rather than thin glaze coatings, litres of glaze are fired in clay forms then wrenched from the kiln at high temperatures causing fault lines and shattering as chemical forces suddenly collide; these provide the base terrains. Hill draws on research into bee types to invent her insects (a wing borrowed here, a leg there), all constructed in multiple segments using organic matter dipped in liquid clay. Then once dry, in a process that brings to mind the smoking of bees from the hive, the organic material is burnt out, leaving the fragile bee parts to be painstakingly assembled into one mutant insect-form. Attached then to their solid now-fired glaze terrain, each arresting figurine-like work spells out an unsettling vision.

Art intersects with the real world in *BEEING*, by way of dialogue coupled with theoretical and studio research. Bartholomew's expressive sculptural forms posit solutions, albeit on a small scale but the impulse here is optimistic, constructive at heart. Hill's work on the other hand presents a dystopian vision, a warning of sorts broadcast in mutant form and post-apocalyptic colour. The choice, the artists seem to lay out, is ours.

Dr. Patsy Hely
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