

Focus: The Function Issue

POETRY OF THE EVERYDAY THE WORK OF ULRICA TRULSSON

by Sophia Cai



When discussing the differences between fine arts and craft, one of the most common points of consideration raised is an object's function. That is, while both art and craft objects can be appreciated for their aesthetic forms alone – we can admire a painting as well as a ceramic pot – there remains a keen sense of distinction between the two in terms of what one may do with them. It's almost as if the less one may do with an object, the more autonomy it retains as an object of artistic contemplation. Craftsmanship and materiality come second to conceptualism.

I have never been comfortable with this hierarchical definition of art and craft, or the way that discussions of contemporary craft continue to be framed within these terms. Luckily for me, and for artists working at the intersections between disciplines and approaches, it appears that this dualistic model of aesthetic definition is increasingly shifting in today's art world. Scholars like Glenn Adamson have pointed out that we are currently living in a "post-disciplinary era" – where boundaries and hierarchies between artistic mediums are increasingly challenged.¹ A look at the recent success of the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award at Shepparton Art Museum and critically acclaimed exhibitions of textiles, such as *Can't Touch This* at Verge Gallery, confirms this picture.

Within this climate of experimentation and fermentation, Ulrica Trulsson is a ceramicist who makes works that are deceptively straightforward and simple. While many of her peers are making a splash with bold gestures and ambitious scale, Trulsson's restrained and formalistic approach to her subject gives her works an altogether different quality. To appreciate the full breadth of her works, we need to pause, look closely, and be patient in our contemplation. Her pots and vessels are a gentle reminder that art and beauty can be found in the simple pleasures of everyday life, and that perhaps 'function' isn't a negative connotation or antithesis to artistic contemplation, but one of charged potential.

Opposite: A group of Trulsson's pots on her studio workbench, 2016; photo: Josie Withers
Below: **Ulrica Trulsson, *Materialise #3***, detail 2016, stoneware, matt and satin white glaze tallest h.34cm; photo: Grant Hancock
Bold Subtlety, Sabbia Gallery





Originally from Sweden and now based in Australia, Trulsson is a self-described studio ceramicist whose career has been shaped by rigorous training and experimentation with the medium. Following an early stint studying photography at the Victorian College of Arts, where she felt connected with the process but not the outcome, Trulsson began studying ceramics at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE in Victoria. She spent the formative years of her early career honing her skills at the highly esteemed JamFactory in Adelaide, first taking part in the Associate Training program for two years before continuing on as a studio tenant. Recently relocating to Brisbane, Trulsson looks back on her time at JamFactory as having played a key role in shaping her career, and her regard and love for ceramics.

Trulsson speaks about ceramics with a keen passion in her voice. She works predominantly in wheelthrowing, and relishes the hands-on nature of this process to shape the clay. While Trulsson describes herself as a perfectionist, she also appreciates clay's more unpredictable or uncontrollable aspects – particularly during its firing, where the outcome to a large extent is out of her hands.

One of the key inspirations for Trulsson's work is the Australian landscape, and the colours and forms found in surrounding nature. This is clearly evident in her use of colours, which often consist of earthy



Ulrica Trulsson, *Unearth #3*, 2016
stoneware, porcellaneous stoneware, matt
satin white and clear glaze, tallest h.26cm
Photo: Grant Hancock
Bold Subtlety, Sabbia Gallery

tones of browns and yellows, as well as in the textures and shapes. Some of her previous works suggest rising sedimentary soil lines, while series such as *Below Zero* made reference to abstracted ideas of snow and the visual marks it leaves on objects. For Trulsson, her works are not about the depiction or visual narrative, but rather are focused on emotional interpretation and sensory suggestion. They are a way for Trulsson to chart her own emotional geography and memories of the landscape that surround her.

Like many of her peers, Trulsson creates work for production and exhibition. Her ceramics are stocked in shops including Mr Kitly in Melbourne and Beaver Galleries in Canberra, while she has exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions in galleries across Australia including Sabbia Gallery where she is currently represented. While the process of making and the physical materials remain quite similar for production and exhibition output, there is a notable difference in the manner that Trulsson approaches exhibition work. In particular, working for exhibitions allows her a more experimental space to make work without necessarily a predicted outcome, whereas production work is still very much defined by its requirement to meet particular functional parameters.

That is not to say, however, that function isn't a concern for Trulsson's work for exhibition. Rather,



Trulsson in the studio, 2016; photo: Josie Withers

her works operate in an expanded field to incorporate functional concerns within broader aesthetic concerns and playful exploration. What is intriguing about Trulsson's exhibition works are how they are displayed in configurations, which sees singular pieces grouped together and arranged in suites rather than on their own. This method of display emphasises the physical relationships between the works, as well as allowing for individual quirks of each piece to be highlighted through a process of contrast and comparison. Through this process of arrangement, attention is also drawn to the negative spaces and shapes formed in the interplay between the objects – which emphasises the exploratory and experimental approach to Trulsson's practice. These configurations are not pre-determined or planned ahead during the artist's making, but are allowed to evolve and come together like "pieces of a jigsaw puzzle".² When a buyer takes these pots home, the grouping can be made again, but in a different manner.

Trulsson is interested in how we interact with objects, and this is key to the work's meaning and what makes it so intriguing. In a consumer-driven, fast-paced, throw-away culture, Trulsson makes objects that can be appreciated purely for their aesthetics but also play an important function in our life. Her pots and vessels, while giving off an appearance of simplicity and order, are different from mass-manufactured objects because they are imbued with minor differences and specific details that make each one unique. Her main goal throughout the making process she says is to "stay connected" to each pot she makes, and to treat each one with the utmost respect and care.³ In this way, she focuses on the micro rather than the macro, and draws attention to the present moment. And this is something she hopes is passed on to the users of her pots' each time they reach for them.



Ulrica Trulsson, Below Zero series, exhibition detail, *These Things We Hold*, 2014
Photo: Lara Merrington, Light Square Gallery

After all, what is the use of surrounding yourself with beautiful objects if they are to remain behind glass doors or display cabinets? Trulsson's ceramics, whether created for production or exhibition, are made so you can interact with them, directly and physically. It is through these everyday encounters – drinking tea, filling canisters, or putting flowers in a pot that we gain a greater appreciation for her work. Trulsson's works are not designed to be viewed in an exhibition catalogue or contemplated from a distance, they are made to be touched, handled, and incorporated into everyday life.

Ulrica Trulsson is a Swedish-born artist now based in Brisbane. She is represented by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney. Instagram @ulricatrulsson; www.ulricatrulsson.com.

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1 Glenn Adamson (ed), *The Craft Reader*, p.586, Oxford; New York: Berg, 2010
2 Interview with artist, 28 August 2017
3 Ibid