

Kirsten Coelho: In the falling light

White exists on the periphery of life. Bleached bones connect us to death, but the white of milk and eggs, for example, speaks to us of life.¹

Kenya Hara

In the falling light represents Kirsten Coelho's reflections on the allegorical potential of objects and their relationship with light and shadow. She cites as a particular point of reference for this new body of work, composer John Cage's observation in 1961 that Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) were 'landing strips' or receptors for light and shadow.²

Coelho's latest work is a paean to the resonant qualities of white porcelain in assemblages of objects of consummate fineness including, bottles and narrow-necked vases, lidded jars, a delicate, curvaceous petal bowl and a large, heavier ridged bowl. Their immaculate white surfaces, which are subtly differentiated (with variations in tone and translucency) through experimentation with different porcelain bodies, are defined by the discreet punctuation of iron oxide banding and brushed rims. A dramatic counterpoint is offered with the introduction of an occasional vessel with saturated, iron oxide glaze – emulating a rusted metal canister perhaps, or the kind of wide-based pan with a shallow rim, typically employed by nineteenth-century gold diggers panning for gold.

Although the influence of traditional Chinese, Korean and Japanese wares continues to resonate, an increasingly vigorous strand of Coelho's output is generated by the aestheticization of vernacular (frequently historical) Australian objects, as well as machinery. Specific examples of these modest and robust everyday wares from *In the falling light* include a rustic 1870s footbath, an early nineteenth-century, salt-glazed tobacco jar and more unexpectedly the ridged interior of an old washing machine. Details are precise and evocative – a spout resembling that of an old petrol can, the undulating throat of a bottle, a meticulously shaped pouring top based on old ink bottles, or a ridged neck inspired by Victorian glass bottles. Coelho views her highly refined vessels as abstractions of modest domestic ware, rather than literal interpretations, allowing the construction a socio-cultural narrative, in which the sparseness of their arrangement is suggestive of the austerity of the Australian landscape.

Thus, with their evocations of narratives of colonisation, Coelho is able to graft an additional layer of complexity onto her assemblages. In considering works for *In the falling light*, for

example, she imagined the kind of objects used by German-born explorer and naturalist Ludwig Becker, the artist on the Burke and Wills expedition, who tragically died not far from Cooper's Creek in 1861. His remarkable sketchbook, diaries and scientific observations from that ill-fated expedition survive. There is a sense therefore, in which it is possible view the pristine form and whiteness of Coelho's objects as a shroud or screen for underlying chaos; a palimpsest of nineteenth-century explorer and settler narratives of hope and despair.

In a lively 1999 interview, Robert Rauschenberg stated that he considered his *White Paintings* – created at Black Mountain College in North Carolina almost half a century earlier – so responsive to their surroundings that an observer sensitive to the changes occurring on their surfaces might estimate the time of day. In this way, given the attentiveness of viewers to fine shifts in colour, light and texture, they resembled clocks.³ For Coelho, who similarly regards her objects as a conduit for reverie, but also for recall⁴ – a means of connecting the past with the present – the quiet, yet powerful assemblages of *In the falling light* constitute an invitation to slow down, to pass some time in contemplation.

Wendy Walker, May 2015

1. Kenya Hara, *White*, trans. Jooyeon Rhee, Zurich, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2010, p. 011

2. See: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25855/research_materials/video/WHIT_98.308_005#ixzz3aCHQ04nA

3. See: http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25855/research_materials/video/WHIT_98.308_005

4. A point of difference is that whilst Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* anticipated Minimalism in their eschewal of all external references, Coelho embraces narrative content.