

# Kirsten Coelho

Words —  
Colin Martin

Adelaide-based ceramist  
Kirsten Coelho produces  
porcelain vessels that show  
restraint and stillness.



Above — Ceramist Kirsten Coelho.  
Photography: Tony Kearney.



Above — Porcelain vessels, with a band of iron oxide on the rim, were shown in *Transfigured Night* at the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Photography: Grant Hancock

“The installation’s title *Transfigured Night* alludes to Henry Lawson’s famous short story *The Drover’s Wife* (1892), which celebrates the stoicism of an outback woman who sits alone and awake all night, while her children sleep, waiting for a snake to emerge from a kitchen wall.”

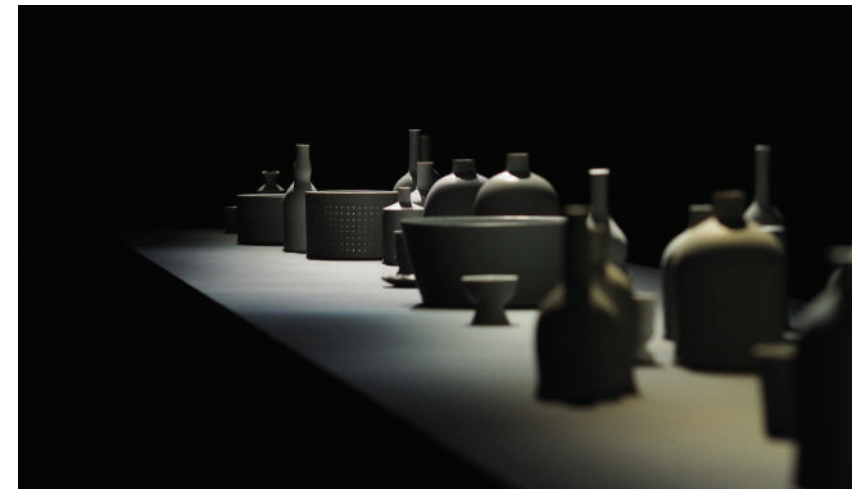
Kirsten Coelho “is asking us to see that what might, on first appearance, seem straightforward, even mundane, is not quite what it should be, but actually, miraculously, something altogether else,” comments Julie Ewington on the potter’s *Transfigured Night* installation at the Jam Factory, during the 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art.<sup>1</sup> “I feel so fortunate to be included among the thirty invited artists,” says Coelho. “It has been a big shift for me and the largest installation of my work to date.”

Displayed on a long, narrow plinth (fourteen metres by one metre) at a height of 1.2 metres, the ceramic works could, unusually, be examined laterally rather than from above. Accessed via an entry at the darkened gallery’s midpoint, the plinth and its array of seventy-three porcelain forms stretches away in both directions, illuminated only by directional lighting. Coelho’s repertoire of vessel shapes includes bottles, bowls, beakers, funnels, pierced forms alluding to colanders, lidded jars, pedestal dishes and stemmed cups. She achieves subtle variations within all her formal categories; her bottles, for example, have long or squat necks, plain or slightly flared rims, cylindrical or slightly bulbous

silhouettes. Similarly, there are subtle tonal variations between individual works, resulting from her use of three different types of porcelain: Limoges, David Leach and Walker’s Imperial. Each body gives a different glaze response and is used to make different types of forms. “Iron oxide is only used on some of the works ... others are just plain white in Limoges porcelain ... with the idea being that with those pieces it would just be about the light interacting with the contour of the form,” says Coelho. The works displayed in the installation are clustered into about fourteen discrete groups, but in fact these groupings merge into one continuous display. “That was the idea, one long meandering line of work ... positioned according to what looked appropriate during the installation,” explains Coelho. The installation’s title, *Transfigured Night*, alludes to Henry Lawson’s famous short story *The Drover’s Wife* (1892), which celebrates the stoicism of an outback woman who sits alone and awake all night, while her children sleep, waiting for a snake to emerge from a kitchen wall. “I am terrified of snakes ... that is what first drew me to that story ... it is my worst nightmare,” admits Coelho.



Above — *Transfigured Night*’s array of seventy-one porcelain forms is illuminated only by directional lighting. Photography: Saul Steed.



Above — Displayed on a long plinth at a height of 1.2 metres, the ceramics in *Transfigured Night* are to be examined laterally. Photography: Tony Kearney.

Profile



Above — The Necessity (2016) collection. Courtesy the artist and This Is No Fantasy and Dianne Tanzer Gallery. Photography: Grant Hancock



Above — The Delphinium (2016) collection. Courtesy the artist and Philip Bacon Galleries. Photography: Grant Hancock

Kirsten Coelho



Above — The Moonta (2017) collection was a collaboration with jeweller Julie Blyfield and features vessels with oxidized silver. Courtesy the artists and Gallery Funaki and This Is No Fantasy. Photography: Grant Hancock



Above — This bowl features a celadon glaze and brushed iron oxide dashes. Courtesy the artist and This Is No Fantasy and Dianne Tanzer Gallery. Photography: Grant Hancock

She was also inspired by Russell Drysdale's *Woman in a Landscape* (1949) from the Art Gallery of South Australia collection. "The works are really alluding to women in the landscape and their isolation, tenacity, endurance. There are also aspects of melancholy ... in the suggestion of absence ... of something that was once there now gone ... the feeling you get sometimes when driving through the Australian landscape," explains Coelho.

An intuitive sense of place is inherent in all Coelho's work. The matt-white glazed works with seeping bands of iron oxide, exhibited in London at the Collect fair in 2007 and inspired by the rusting industrial architecture of Port Adelaide, resonate universally. In 2015 she undertook an artist residency at Tweed Regional Gallery, where she immersed herself in Margaret Olley's still-life paintings, studio contents and collected objects. It was a dream come true for Coelho. "In Olley's paintings, her framing of objects in space elevates the everyday, inviting us to look

again at the essential nature and details of the objects that surround us," she commented. Works made in response to the residency, including some that atypically were glazed in a strong cerulean blue, referencing Olley's love of flowers, were exhibited in the gallery, arranged on the artist's paint-splattered work table. Coelho's sensitivity to the aesthetics of everyday household utensils and intuitive understanding of their cultural resonance both enriches her imagination and the universal aesthetic appeal of her nuanced forms and palette. In this regard Coelho's work is the equal of Giorgio Morandi's still-life paintings and Vilhelm Hammershøi's paintings of sparse, yet evocative Danish interiors. <sup>1</sup>

*Kirsten Coelho is represented by Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane, This Is No Fantasy and Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne and BMGArt in Adelaide.*

1. 2018 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, unpaginated catalogue.