

Ghost whisperer

Honor Freeman's life-like porcelain sculptures replicate humble everyday objects as a poignant reference to the metaphors of life and death. *Inga Walton* meets the artist to discover more

The work of Australian artist Honor Freeman has often been likened to still life, such is the hyper-realistic accuracy of her porcelain doppelgängers. 'I harness the mimetic qualities inherent in clay through the magic of slip-casting,' she explains. 'The works playfully interact with ideas of liquid made solid. The porcelain casts echo the original objects; the liquid slip turns solid forming a skin and becomes a precise memory of a past form. A ghost.'

The period when Freeman was studying at the South Australian School of Art in the early 2000s coincided with a reappraisal of the still life genre in the national art context, during which time the works of Australian ceramic artist Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, OAM, were highly prominent. Freeman's practice often focuses on 'unloved' domestic and utilitarian items – Tupperware, desiccated sponges, bath plugs, hand towels, light switches, door knobs – their nuances subtly tweaked so as to prompt reappraisal from the viewer. 'These banal and humble objects have a democracy to them; they are often full of the metaphors for life. There's a lot of layers to them, but they are also just simply what they are, and people understand them,' Freeman contends. 'It's a gentle way into my work for the viewer, a bucket or a bar of soap are something we all understand, we know how they feel in our hands, the weight of them, what they do, we have a relationship with them. I suppose there is an element of nostalgia that my work evokes, perhaps surprise in the material deception, maybe a little melancholy, but perhaps a little joy too – it's not all serious. I like for there to be a dry wit, or a little wink.'

ART PROMPTING MEMORIES

Freeman's work *Soap Score*, consisting of 656 porcelain casts of used soaps, provoked an amusing reaction when it was shown at Sydney Contemporary in 2017. 'One visitor remarked how they could smell the soap. They hadn't spent long enough with the work to observe what it was actually made of – art acting as a mnemonic device perhaps. I love to play with illusion, and riff on the idea of ordinary alchemy and transmutation,' she muses. 'To create the work I made moulds of discarded cake soap. Some were my own, but most arrived in the post as sweet floral, citrus and powdery smelling gifts that came from afar following a call-out. The used soap was in various states of decay, creviced, weathered and barely there slivers, intimate objects worn into odd shapes

Soap score, 2016, slip-cast porcelain, H3.5 x W156cm, consisting of 656 components



FROM TOP CLOCKWISE: Soap scale, 2019, slip-cast porcelain, H13 x W47cm; All that glitters, 2018, porcelain, H2 x W13.5cm; Wash, dry, fold, stack, repeat, 2018, slip-cast porcelain, H10 x W20cm

recalling the traces of an individual's touch and use. They've proven to be strangely evocative objects; I consider them perhaps like small memorials that are at once both compelling and repulsive.'

Freeman grew up in Bordertown, South Australia, which, as the name suggests, is near the state border with Victoria, on the main route for road and rail between the respective state capitals of Adelaide and Melbourne. She was first introduced to ceramics in secondary school, and loved the work of artist and filmmaker Margaret Dodd who had started making her series of ceramic Holden car sculptures as a response to being isolated in the northeastern Adelaide suburb of Holden Hill. 'I remember Dodd's work striking me then, and perhaps even more so now that I can understand the greater context for it,' she asserts.

'We had a magical art room at school that was in an old military hut and my art teacher was passionate about ceramics. I remember loving working with clay from the moment I first touched it,' Freeman recalls. 'I love its materiality, that it can mimic almost perfectly other surfaces and textures, while at the same time imbuing the object with some kind of otherness. Clay is a democratic material: both humble and humbling. It can be capricious in nature, and if ever you think you have it figured out

it will remind you that there is still much to learn. Sometimes I think it is a little masochistic; you have to relinquish all control in the end!'

POTS ON PLINTHS

Included in the 2018 Australian Design Centre national touring exhibition *Obsessed: Compelled To Make*, Freeman's installation *Evaporate* represents a departure from the more intimate pieces she has been producing for some years. Here, the humble concrete Besser block is used as the base for a pristine white bucket. 'I enjoyed the heft of working with these larger objects, and returning to handbuilding,' Freeman says. 'I'm also interested in how objects I am surrounded by in the studio often find themselves a part of, or a subject of the work. I have for many years had some painted Besser blocks that have travelled back and forth to furnish different studios. I was searching for an alternative to putting pots on plinths.'

Freeman works from her home studio in Adelaide, although the lack of insulation can sometimes make it prohibitive to endure for any length of time in the extreme heat often experienced in the summer months. 'The weather plays a big part, and often dictates when I take a break,' she notes. 'Clay is influenced by the extremes of hot and cold,

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Evaporate, 2017, slip-cast porcelain, handbuilt stoneware, life size; Spill, 2017, slip-cast porcelain, H24.4cm; My silver lining runneth over, 2017, slip-cast porcelain, handbuilt stoneware, silver lustre, H54cm



'I especially love the personal narratives and memories we all have that are associated with familiar objects, and how the transformation from their current form into porcelain can transport us through time'



ABOVE, FROM TOP: *Midden (all that glitters)*, 2018, slip-cast porcelain, gold lustre, gold leaf, various dimensions;
Everyday luxury II, 2018, porcelain, H7 x W28cm, both part of *Spring 1883*, Jan Murphy Gallery, at The Hotel Windsor, 2018
OPPOSITE: *Small monument*, 2018, slip-cast porcelain, H16.5 x W12cm

and the wind and the damp. So, summer tends to be my thinking time, or a limited making time: early mornings and late nights. Being in the studio when there's a good rhythm, when you're understanding the weather, how the clay is drying, when there's work at different stages covering the benches and tables, and a Thermos of tea at the ready – that is particularly lovely.'

As part of an annual collaboration called *The Collections Project*, between the Guildhouse in Adelaide and the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), last year Freeman was granted a residency that provided her with the opportunity to access and research AGSA's extensive collection in order to develop new work. The resulting exhibition, *Ghost Objects*, is being exhibited at AGSA to coincide with the *South Australian Living Artists Festival (SALA)* this year.

Working with Leigh Robb, curator of Contemporary Art and Lisa Slade, assistant director, Artistic Programs at AGSA, Freeman spent her time absorbed in the collection. 'It has been tremendously re-invigorating and stimulating for my practice, and at times overwhelming, feeling the weight of the sheer volume of objects and stories (especially, but not exclusively, ceramics) stretching back centuries held in the database, library and stores,' she relates. 'At times my head hurt and my hands couldn't move fast enough to capture what it was I wanted to say. The recurring theme of ghosts – the invisible, the unknown makers, the disappeared – emerged as I explored objects found in ancient Roman tombs, ritual objects, objects of mourning and pieces that show proudly the signs of mending and repair. The resonance and power of the stories both surrounding and held within these pieces is compelling.'

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Freeman recently became aware of the term *Saudade*, a Portuguese word expressive of a deep emotional state of nostalgia or a melancholic longing for something absent or for someone one loves. Her father died during the early stages of the *Ghost Objects* project, adding greater poignancy to Freeman's interrogation of the AGSA collection. 'Mum gave me dad's last used cake of soap and a stack of his old hankies in the weeks after he died. I've held on to them in the studio and they were a starting point of sorts. It has been confronting on a personal level too,' she admits. 'I guess there are many ghosts within the work. In working with these objects, I have been considering the role ceramics has played over the centuries, specifically the important cultural aspect it performs in religious rituals, and around funerary practices. I have made sense of my grief through making, and experienced the meditation on beauty, loss, scars, wounding, transformation and rebirth these items convey. In that regard, the show is a very personal expression, but I hope it will speak more broadly to the audience, and engage with their ideas of mourning and remembrance.'

Elusive histories and fragile forms, what an object's purpose is and where it has been, perennially intrigue Freeman. The latent power of these objects is not expressed

by their size, or their prominence, but in their everyday resonance and relation to the individual. 'I especially love the personal narratives and memories we all have that are associated with familiar objects, and how the transformation from their current form into porcelain can transport us through time,' she observes. 'I'm also drawn to the potential contradictions or tensions located within various objects.'

Freeman would also seem to have tasked herself with communicating the ephemeral within her practice. 'I think there's an embedded and unspoken language within the objects that say so much without needing words, an existing poetry, I guess. I could never write poetry, but for me this would be the closest I could get,' she concedes. 'Almost like making things for the words I don't have.'

Ghost Objects, Art Gallery of South Australia, 27 July–27 September 2019, assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council; agsa.sa.gov.au Obsessed: Compelled To Make, Australian Design Centre touring exhibition, until 2021; australiandesigncentre.com/obsessed Represented by Sabbia Gallery; sabiagallery.com, honorfreeman.com

FREEMAN'S JOURNEY

- **1998–2001:** Bachelor of Applied Arts (Hons), Ceramics and Glass, South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia
- **2002–03:** tenant residency as a Design Associate, Ceramics Studio, JamFactory, Adelaide, South Australia
- **2004:** artist-in-residence, Guldagergaard Museum of International Ceramic Art, Denmark
- **2007:** visiting lecturer and artist-in-residence, Henry Radford School of Art, Indiana University, USA
- **2008:** finalist, *Redlands Westpac Art Prize*, Mosman Art Gallery, New South Wales, Australia
- **2010–11:** visual arts outreach co-ordinator, Barkly Regional Arts, Northern Territory, Australia
- **2013:** finalist, *City of Hobart Art Prize*, Tasmania, Australia
- **2017:** winner, *Sustainable Arts Foundation Award*, San Francisco, USA
- **2019:** finalist in the *Deakin University Contemporary Small Sculpture Award*, Victoria, Australia

