

Harmonies and Dissonances

Roy Ananda examines recent work by Wendy Fairclough and Honor Freeman

Within its deceptively simple framework, the humble still life has, over the last few hundred years, served to articulate an extraordinary range of ideas and experiences. From the fevered imagination of Giuseppe Arcimboldo and the morbid allegories of the Dutch Masters to the formal invention of George Braque and Ben Nicholson, the scope of the genre has proved to be enormous and continues to be expanded by countless contemporary artists. In their upcoming exhibition *Echo* at Sydney's Sabbia Gallery, Wendy Fairclough and Honor Freeman contribute to this continuum in their respective languages of glass and ceramics.

While consisting of two discreet bodies of work, the exhibition has grown out of a collaborative process of critique and conceptual development, bolstered by over ten years of friendship and collegiate practice on the part of the artists. Since meeting as students at the South Australia School of Art in the late nineties, Freeman and Fairclough have cultivated a shared aesthetic of elegant understatement and an acute sensitivity to the poetic possibilities of domestic objects in space. While a joint exhibition by these two artists seems like an entirely logical move, it is also a bold one. As an artist, coming across another practitioner whose work mirrors one's own can be bittersweet. On one hand, the experience can be validating, but on the other, the originality of one's own vision can seem undermined. However, rather than suggesting homogeneity, viewing the two artists' work together highlights important points of difference in their approaches and concerns.

While broad descriptors such as 'personal' and 'political' are potentially reductive, they go some way to pointing to the distinct emphases of Freeman's and Fairclough's work. It is not uncommon for Fairclough's installations and still life tableaux to derive from such weighty matters as the impact of drought and wars fought over oil. Themes of industry and agriculture resonate through the new work presented in *Echo* and increasingly her practice focuses on the common, shared experiences and needs of human beings across cultures. Conversely, Freeman's work is invariably tied to more intimate and singular engagements with the world around her: marking the passage of time, commemorating daily domestic ritual, and even indulging in the odd visual pun.

These divergent yet complementary concerns with universal and individual experience are subtly reflected in the works' materiality and physical presence in space. While both artists undertake to wrench the still life from the traditional, two-dimensional pictorial space of painting, the translations into three dimensions via glass and ceramics operate very differently. Translucent and ghost-like, Fairclough's glass brooms, buckets, pots and pans read as half-remembered dream objects that exist as much in the mind's eye as in a tangible reality. More concerned with a generic idea of 'bucket' (or any other given object) than the specific physical fact, the artist prioritises the object's broader metaphorical potential. Freeman's porous and opaque surfaces on the other hand, register a far more palpable presence. Trading in illusion and frequently employing a kind of three-dimensional trompe l'oeil, her slipcast ceramic forms seem more immediate in their evocation of day-to-day experience. Be they worn and weathered bars of soap, lemon juicers or stained coffee cups, Freeman's objects bear apparent traces of activity and use, whilst of course being entirely without function. In this way, they seem to exist in a shared space with us, not solely belonging to the rarefied gallery environment. Indeed, Freeman's objects have been known to make the occasional incursion into the 'real' world, in the form of slipcast power points affixed to public walls in Adelaide's west end or ceramic bread tags deposited in the coin return slots of public



Top: **Wendy Fairclough**, *Order*, 2012, cast lead crystal, h.22cm, w.30cm, d.21cm; photo: Craig Arnold
 Above: **Wendy Fairclough**, *Clothe*, 2012, cast lead crystal, h.21cm, w.24cm, d.22cm; photo: Craig Arnold



Honor Freeman, *When Life Hands You Lemons*, 2012, slipcast and handbuilt porcelain, h.8.5cm, w.58cm, d.37cm
Photo: Craig Arnold
Opposite page: **Honor Freeman, *Wrong End Of The Stick*, detail, 2012**, slipcast and handbuilt porcelain, h.3.5cm, w.52cm, d.38cm; photo: Craig Arnold

phones. Like so many of her works, these curious moments of benign, three-dimensional graffiti elicit a double-take from anyone who encounters them.

In producing works for *Echo*, Fairclough and Freeman have continued to pursue long-standing themes but have importantly allowed themselves the scope for experimentation and the testing of new possibilities. In the case of Fairclough's work, this is evident through the expanded repertoire of objects that populate her still life arrangements. Joining the ranks of her more familiar motifs are increasingly obscure objects such as the kumara (sweet potato), industrial cotton spools, and a range of simple mechanical objects – clamps, hand drills, callipers and the like. The exhibition also encompasses the artist's first explorations into the light-filtering potentials of dichroic glass as well as an increasingly thorough investigation into the glass-casting process. Freeman also brings new strategies to bear on her practice, most notably in a new body of work derived from familiar expressions and idioms. Extrapolating on a range of well-known sayings until an appropriate ceramic analogue can be arrived at, the artist celebrates the stubborn optimism of finding silver-linings in clouds and remaining philosophical about life giving you lemons. Freeman's penchant for wordplay might prompt a closer examination of the title under which she and Fairclough bring their work together. In its most immediate reading, *Echo* would seem to refer to the close kinship and on-going dialogue between the artists' work: a far-reaching chorus of call-and-response bouncing between Freeman's suburban studio and Fairclough's workspace nestled in the Adelaide Hills. Importantly though, an echo is a reflection, not merely a copy, subject to change, transformation and slippage. The acoustic phenomenon of an echo also encompasses notions of cause and effect that are central to both artists' work. However, unlike an acoustic echo, which invariably fades with time, the work of Honor Freeman and Wendy Fairclough seems to only gain in its clarity and resonance.

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**Wendy Fairclough and Honor Freeman are represented by Sabbia Gallery, Sydney.
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