

Craft review

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Vessels with magisterial demeanour

WANDERLUST CERAMICS

By Avital Sheffer - Beaver Galleries. Until August 27.

Avital Sheffer's vessels stand silent and enigmatic like sentinels at the gate to an ancient past. Their forms and decoration are at once familiar yet mysterious, readable but indecipherable. They provide an evocative but not descriptive representation of the arts and ancient traditions of the Middle East filtered through the artist's personal experience.

Avital Sheffer lived in Tel Aviv-Jaffa experiencing a life grounded in the age old traditions of not only the local Jewish culture but the melting pot of different ethnicities that is the Middle East. Her academic background includes studies in textiles and fashion, which may account for her strong sense of pattern and design. In 1990 she emigrated to Australia and now lives at Mullumbimby on the north coast of NSW. Sheffer studied ceramics at the Lismore TAFE graduating in 2003. When she was living in Israel her interest in clay forms was inspired by the long cylindrical ceramics that held some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. She recreated versions of these vessels in her early ceramic forms. It may be that the idea of a clay vessel holding the wisdom and spiritual traditions of a society found its response in the artist's creative imagination. Sheffer's ceramics attest to the fact that she is fascinated by the cross fertilisation between the cultures of the Middle East, which is now seen from her perspective as a present day migrant in Australia.

Sheffer's vessels are hand-formed. The clay base is coiled into a plaster mould that holds it as the form evolves. Clay details are added and oxide coloured slips and engobes are used as decoration and the vessel is fired in several processes. The most painstaking process is the silk screening of the designs in coloured oxide that become part of the fabric of the pot. These designs are taken from many sources including architecture, textiles, calligraphy, and decorative tiles. They form a distinct personal language that has been constructed by the



artist using universally recognised cultural patterns and designs.

Sheffer's early ceramic vessels were more signifiers of ancient rituals and guardians of cultural mysteries. They were more aligned visually with ancient vessels on which, as part of their history decorations can be traced. As the artist has developed her practice, the vessels have become more decorative and more elaborate - handles have transmogrified into curlicue decorations; sturdy necks

have become swanlike; pots such as *Kalos I* have become elongated and wider and transformed into flat almost two-dimensional objects that provide surfaces for the overall ornate patterning.

In the collection of ceramics on display at Beaver Galleries, decoration and pattern can seem at times to overtake the form of the vessels. In some works, as in *Agora IV*, deep cut bands of clay swathe the core forms and linear patterns score into their surfaces. Decorating these bands are the patterns and motifs derived from textiles. These swathed bands of clay and the floral patterns underscore the human quality of the pots so they appear almost to be "dressed".

This effect is underlined by the rows of gold lustre "beads" that in some pots (*Agora I* and *Atalaya I*) appear to hang like necklaces.

Small architectural details that are a characteristic of Sheffer's style make their appearance on the tops of some of the urns, which are fashioned like mosque-like domes (*Atalaya I* and *II*).

There is in all Sheffer's ceramics a strong sense of structural design that divides the surface of the pot into symmetrical areas of decoration. This and the use of only a limited palette of colours of blue and red/ brown maintains a sense of order and harmony.

It is this sense of order that enables the vessels to retain their magisterial presence that is so characteristic of Avital Sheffer's ceramic practice.