TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC: WHEN ART AND SCIENCE CONVERGE

THE Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft and Design recently exhibited a major body of new work from West Australian artist, Angela Mellor (November, 2003 until mid-January, 2004) that highlights a number of important initiatives in her field.

Craftwest is one of the few remaining State-run craft bodies in Australia that is not only surviving, but vigorously thriving. With the success of the international “Designing Futures” – Craftwest’s Executive Director, Lynda Staffel, now under its belt, Craftwest has once again illustrated the ongoing viability of practices and the continued value of its work.

“Ocean Light” was an important exhibition for a number of reasons, not least of which was the acknowledgment of Mellor’s growing international status as an artist of considerable merit. By presenting this exhibition, Craftwest continues to promote and educate its audience in this specialist craft area which reflect the ongoing relevance of the medium in contemporary society.

Mellor’s “Ocean Light” exhibition is important not only for the excellence of its execution, but in its recognition that one way to advance the forging of innovative partnerships, particularly those of an academic nature–between studios and company, artists and experts in the field of illumination technology, is not just a technical means to illumination, but also produces an important physiological and psychological part in our lives.

The small light emitting diodes (LEDs) which Roth implanted in many of the pieces reveals the full gamut of Mellor’s subtle textural and tonal quality. However, light isn’t merely a technical means to illumination, it also produces an important physiological and psychological part in our lives.

Fibre optic lighting has virtually no heat, no ultra violet light, and is very energy efficient. Only light and not electricity is transmitted through the fibres, so it is safe to use near water.

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Mellor’s work needs light to bring it to life. Until now, in order to fully demonstrate the translucent qualities of her medium, Mellor chose to light her work from above, often utilising a narrow beam of down light to illuminate the vessels’ interiors. This has created the theatrical effect of capturing the work in a state of beamed and frozen animation – like creatures immobile on a lonely highway at night by the dazzle of a car’s headlights. Caught in the glare – rather than generating a glow – Mellor’s works reveal only half their narrative.

‘Light does not only illuminate, it tells a story. Light gives meaning, draws metaphors and sets the stage for the comedy of life.’

Light has always played a key role in Mellor’s ceramics, as it was the harsh qualities of the Australian landscape and the sharp clarity of its light that she sought to capture in her earlier individually lit pieces, her work has now reached a more unified maturity.

By bringing a light source to the piece, the very core of each ceramic element, Roth and Mellor have created a series of related groups that seem to vibrate softly with a sensuously intimate life force that unifies each component, forming of these light-bowls that enables washing away areas of clay to produce organic stripes and dots of differing thickness. This process is the signatory technique of the Norwegian potter, Arne Åse whose use of it in his fine porcelain bowls resonates with metaphorical sound in his allusions to poetry and musical compositions. The surfaces of his luminously thin-walled bowls, with their improvised and energetic textural surfaces, explore tones and densities more akin to a jazz musician’s musical score. Mellor’s approach to the same process, however, is more controlled. Her simple marks, resembling water ripples that change the light’s density and tone, are like the passing seasons, adding further emphasis to the paradoxical allusion of fragility and the suggestion of fluid mobility.

While Mellor is still in awe of the Australian landscape and the sharp clarity of its light that she sought to capture in her earlier individually lit pieces, her work has now reached a more unified maturity. By bringing a light source to the very core of each ceramic element, Roth and Mellor have created a series of related groups that seem to vibrate softly with a sensuously intimate life force that unifies each component.

The simulated constellation of stars in the domed ceiling of this bathroom was created by Mondo Luce using an innovative fibre optics system that emits light through strands of fibreglass beamed from an illuminator box which is more controlled. Her simple marks, resembling water ripples that change the light’s density and tone, are like the passing seasons, adding further emphasis to the paradoxical allusion of fragility and the suggestion of fluid mobility.

By working together, Mellor and Roth have both shown a generosity of spirit, each letting go of their own ideas and trusting the other to bring out the best of both their worlds to create a unified whole. Their willing compliance to “give and take” on the design procedure has resulted in these works creating a sense of spatial ambiguity in the gallery by redifining its interior with the use of light as it emanates softly from within her ceramics.

The combination of Roth’s luminance and Mellor’s ceramic forms, has transformed the gallery from a large open space, flooded with light, into a series of intimate environments, each resonating with its own emotive forces that positively hum with waves of vibrant energy.

Penny Smith is a full-time practising artist and writer based in Hobart, Tasmania.