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Reviews

A Voice of the Soul: The furniture of Adrian Potter

Historically, furniture has carried in some distilled from the political ideology of its time; Neo-classical, Empire, Federation, Modernism: it carried narratives about the hopes and directions of nations, of peoples, of societal revolution. In this collection, Adrian Potter speaks about what has, and what will determine the form of future Australia - about the future determinant resource and politics of water. Rodney C. Hayward reviews the work.

If he holds back the waters, there is drought,
If he lets them loose, they devastate the land. Job 12:15

Water is vital to life, as we understand it.

The presence, or absence of water is taken as a benchmark to the possibility of other life in our solar system or the Universe. Adrian Potter

Australia has a complex, essential relationship with water. Australia is an island continent whose balance of life has always had to adapt to the wanderings of the landmass. It is an old land whose history has been one underscored by a fickle play by water: aridity, drying, browning, burning and... the seas that surround it.

That the relationship of Australia and Australian society to water should be explored and commented upon by an Australian artist is perhaps not surprising. However, that Adrian Potter has done this through the vehicle of a collection of beautifully composed, functional furniture possibly is. The themes he has chosen to comment on are deeply personal, but they are also central within contemporary Australian society and its future. The furniture stresses its functionality. The narration is through the craft of the pieces; the materials, the detailing. Here, this is not restricted to saying something of the making process, but is allowed to flow on to say things about values, beliefs, and the soul.

Our legacy from Modernism is that our furniture is ordinarily silent, mute in commentary; stilled. However, why shouldn't there be a connection to other things through image, movement, even sound? In a recent exhibition of furniture by Adrian Potter at the Jam Factory in Adelaide, Australia's relationship to water is explored through motion,



sound, or image. The narration might be responded to at many levels.

The tall chest of drawers surmounted by a display case containing a model ship abstracted from James Cook's 'Endeavour' is the most animated of the collection. Potter has invested this piece, *A Certain Maritime Affair*, with the resonance of eternal themes about humanity, Australia, its history, and its boundary seas, - James Cook's possession of Australia, the European settlement of Australia, ghost ships, and the "Death Ships" of the American sculptor H.C. Westerman. Carved into the stern of Potter's ship is an "X" representing the SIEV - X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel - X), a small ship that foundered on October 19, 2001 while making its way to the Australian territory of Christmas Island with the loss of 353 of the 397 lives on board including some 150 children.

At one level, the placing of the scaled model within a glass case gives enormous importance and implied permanence to the message. Yet, such a case could isolate too well, cutting off intimacy with the viewer and remove and still the narration. Cleverly, Potter engages the viewer by having them turn a crank on the side of the case and animate the simulated waveforms the vessel rides through. No new forms are needed for this synthesis; no new structures, only the will to revive what was assumed stilled. By this one thing, the cabinet and its stories escape the trap of being history and forever have intimacy and continuity with the present of the viewer.

Gently, so gently sound animates *Water Music*, a music cabinet. It is a cabinet designed to hold contemporary music: sound equipment and CDs. Nothing like as overtly political as the previous piece this cabinet celebrates the joy of the music in water. However, while we can enjoy this, there is a bittersweet quality as it is a reminder of the part that clean, clear water plays in our lives and our soul. The sounds of water - waves, rainstorms, flowing water - are generated through a programmable sampler when each door or drawer is opened.

The remaining pieces in the collection are visual; surfaces that carry images. Possibly the most powerful image that we might have of water, life, the Earth, and the frailness of it all were the images of Earth taken during the Apollo 11 mission. The beauty of the Earth, its extra-ordinary sense of finiteness in the blackness of space was a turning point in our sense of place within the Universe. For white Australians their sense of place might well have been re-set during the battle to stop the wholesale damming of the wilderness-rivers of South West Tasmania. The Gordon Dam was built and Potter's chest of drawers, *The Real Gordon Dam* made solely in Tasmanian timber species reminds us of this - and that although alien to the sense of place, the dam as seen by an engineer is a truly beautiful structure.

The battle to stop the Gordon Dam was lost, but the planned Franklin River Dam has not been built. Potter sees this as the point where White Australia chose another way: to value wilderness for its own sake over industrial development and "progress". There are no answers given here, simply a contribution to the discourse. That the dam is used to produce inexpensive electricity via a renewable natural resource is now piquantly part of that discourse.

The qualities of surfaces argue the message of the remaining two pieces in consonance with their design. The tall drinks cabinet, *Parched*, is fronted by a veneer portrayal of the cracking crust of mud as might be found in a drying dam - the dry continent could do with a good long drink. In the sense of drying, firing, the cracking of a surface is one of the welcome imperfections of the Eastern ceramic tradition. A tracery of cracks gives an unselfconscious

sense of form and entrée to what lies beneath. Does water lie beneath? If it does, how pure, how cool might it be?

The hall table - *High Water Table* - this tall side table was made from River Red Gum sourced from along the River Murray. While furniture made from this species produces a warm glow in the onlooker, to work it and work it finely is an arduous process. However, the material is wholly appropriate to carry commentary about the critical state of Eastern Australia's inland river systems. The River Red Gum requires cyclical flooding for regeneration and vies now for its water with diminished precipitation and man's water control practices. It is a touchstone for the river's problems.

Soil salinity and water quality are critical issues for mainland Australians, a point only further emphasized by the standing panel on the tabletop. The image is a black and white photograph of the Murray River at Waikerie, South Australia set on stained glass over a layer of salt: the salt is allowed to show through and traces in stark whiteness the course of the river itself.

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