In the seaward shadow of a coastal escarpment south of Sydney, an old farmhouse and studio embrace a concatenated compilation of artifacts. The objects of this collection, gathered and imagined, have become a well of inspiration for Lynda Draper, their stories sustaining her fascination with the domestic object.

Draper’s early interpretations of these artifacts of the everyday engender a poetry of form and usage. Her small scultpures imply a sometimes bizarre functionality as mounds give way to the fleshy organisation of tubes and vessels, admixed with fractions of the botanical world. Draper describes the works as evolving through “abstracting from specific objects often from one source” and “fusing them together to produce an object that appears to have an identity of its own”.

The emerging synthesis coalesces the language of pottery with companion forms of its domestic environment. Our familiarity with pottery in its most intimate domain emphasises a powerful haptic and symbolic language, physically resonating with the communal spaces of the home.

The ‘identity of its own’ referred to by Draper provides a clue to the emerging interests embodied in her more recent work. A language of the domestic is activated and charged with enquiry. The prominent traits of tactility, characteristic physical marks of raw intervention in Draper’s early work, give way to more deliberate contrasts of texture. Remnants of objects of handled origin are now more varied, incorporating fingered undulations alongside dramatic indications of tooling, and amalgamated with the more generic smoothed surface aesthetics of modern mass production.

The cumulative visual effect articulates a more edgy yet subtle hybridity and broadens the context thematically. The newer works conjure images of sugary still lifes, metaphors for memories of comfort and intimacy associated with childhood and the domestic space. Our memories are a formative part of our personal autobiographical identities.

José van Dijck reminds us that we use objects and media as an interpretive way of making meaning from our own experiences within the larger narratives of our history. We do this by inscribing experiences which facilitate future recall. Here van Dijck is referring to the emergence of digital media, and how, through its creative use, people make sense of their own lives and connections to the lives of
Dream Pony. Handbuilt porcelainous sculpture. 16 x 18 x 12 cm. Photo courtesy of Galleysmith.

others. Of course there is a filtering of these experiences through discursive conventions, social and cultural practices, and other technological tools. We are most familiar with this notion of filtering through the impacts of television, radio and the internet, but perhaps less so in the realm of the arts, and in particular, the genre of still life.

In the hands of artists, the projections of these experiences are more practised, resulting in qualified and considered personal visions. Still life paintings often closely imitate reality. But they also frequently contain many deeper meanings. Religious, economic, scientific and political beliefs and associations may be embedded in a single 16th century Dutch composition of flowers or fruit. This type of mediation recalls the work of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and the pot’s significance as a still life. The subtle yet significant vision behind the arrangement of her vessels appears as a convolution of the genre’s object and subject. From the physicality of the pottery vessels themselves emerges a semantic narrative more intimate than that available through the pictorial representation of painting. The written connection between Hanssen Pigott’s pots and Morandi’s paintings is well established. Comments by David Whiting in his introduction to Hanssen Pigott’s 2004 exhibition at Galerie Besson alert us to the shortcomings of a static still life reading in relation to that work, observing the arrangement of pots and their delineation, “is one of spatial pauses and intervals in the flow”.

Both Hanssen Pigott’s and Draper’s work share a sense of stillness characteristic of still life paintings, as if time has been frozen. Draper composes by selecting and arranging objects to create an order, using the qualities of light and surface to purify form. However, the spaces in Draper’s work differ in the way they
Still Life. Handbuilt porcelain stoneware. 7 x 16 x 6 cm.

link memory and time through usage. This is another type of flow. Ideas in her work are consolidated in single compositions rather than a series. A transformation occurs in the way memories are re-envisioned or, perhaps more accurately, repositioned in the work, combining materiality, autobiography and popular symbolism. Individual objects coalesce. They are transformed and sintered into place, fused together by an illusionary glazed whiteness, as if they had always existed in that form. The sugary mattness of the glazed surface sucks light into its whiteness, denying all but the tiniest intimate reflections. It saps and softens shadows, invoking a personal and temporal almost edible quality. The flatness acts to isolate and defecate, integrating the subjects as if they are sublime frozen dioramas.

As Robert Bell observes, Wonderland by Lynda Draper, "takes us to the crystalline and fragmented world of memory. While its imagery conjures 19th-century parian porcelain grave ornaments and disconnections of Lewis Carroll, this work also delights through its evocation of the more transient art of the confectioner in preparation for Easter".

Draper's work impacts at the scale of iconography. The small compositions could be scenes from a fairy-tale or myth, but the symbolism is contemporary and squarely located within the urban landscape of the late 20th century. The space, as Draper explains, is of a "female growing up in 1960s Australian suburbia", where she reflects on the "childhood home our first universe". There is an ambiguity in the way these small works appear temporal and sublime yet carry an enduring ceramic half-life, gifts of wonder that reach back into memory and outwards into daydream. The essence of the apparition invoked promises a magical comfort, alluding to a place of serenity and contentment, emphasised in some works by their location in ceramic visions of an arcadian landscape.

In her fascinating collection of essays, Living, Susan Stewart writes of souvenirs containing a type of failing magic, arising from the unattainable nature of the origin of an "out-of-context object from the past surviving to the present", therefore denying its full transformation. Stewart also argues that in nostalgia, by ignoring or turning away from the here and now, we create an inauthentic condition of the present.
falsely based on an idealised past of unattainable memories. Stewart builds a strong connection between nostalgia and utopian desire, proposing that its power may "depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal". Considered in this light, Draper’s works offer, perhaps nostalgically, a souvenir of our own contemplations and desires.

But these souvenirs are conjured from memories too dreamy to be real. As if deliberately inauthenticating the past, the quixotic compositions call on a sublimated magic more akin to the eidetic gestures of Gaston Bachelard. In considering the bedroom of her childhood home as a "shelter for imaging" and a "nest for dreaming", Draper calls on Bachelard’s sanctuaries as a source of inspiration rather than a focus of lament often associated with nostalgia.

The tranquil qualities in works such as Dove appear to enact a grand meditative narrative – an ideal vision...
anchored in memory. Yet the works appear more sectarian than utopian, a teetering balance between the playful and the sincere, not quite parodic. It is in this space of subtle irony that the tension in Draper’s work arises. Draper uses this strategy deliberately, blurring the interpretation of the narrative within a framework of familiar symbolism and the still life genre, wishing to maintain a mystery and evoke the dream-like quality of memory.9

There is another irony here that as change moves rapidly, shortening the cycling sequences of innovation and obsolescence, nostalgia needs to be continually updated, to a point where, as the postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson puts it, we can suffer a “nostalgia for the present”.10 Perhaps it is here, in its soft
dgingness, that Draper’s work is most persuasive: where contrasted stereotypes of utopian mass consumption clash with personal memories and idealised identities conveyed through our exposure to media. It delicately reveals the conundrum of our identity in a fast-changing world.

REFERENCES:
1. Quotations from interviews with the artist.
3. Conversation with Gwyn Hanssen Pigott at the opening of the exhibition where she first showed the grouped vessel forms in the early 1990s in Brisbane, Australia.
8. The capacity of both nostalgia and irony to create tension. In her essay, ‘Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern’ Linda Hutcheon draws parallels between the structures of irony and nostalgia, observing that a type of friction between the present and the past also exists in the ‘said’ and ‘unsaid’ opposites of irony.

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