

Jennings Kerr

Julie Pennington
Talking in Texture

There is something in the lifting of material from the earth, shaping it in the fingers, scorching it in the kiln, that echoes Pennington's previous engagement with, and continued interest in, textile. There is an admiration for material harvested, fine fibres spun, dyed and woven into larger surfaces. This area of interest continues to inspire the ceramic practice and one can easily recognise the fascination with surface, weave, and pattern in these sculptural pieces. Structures or building blocks exposed and in repetitive sequence. Some like rope coiled on itself. Some with organic patterns pressed onto their surfaces like bark skins. Pennington is focussed on revealing the interior structure, but more importantly pushing construction processes and techniques in new directions. This series is a continuation of these formal concerns with the meticulous detail and a level of finish that brings to mind the control of a 3D printer. They speak to Pennington's ability to handle her material to the highest of level. The vessel like forms in their exposed state offer no place to conceal error. Wall thickness, symmetry, surface application and form are all controlled with incredible precision and we see this across the varying materials.

In the 'Trunk V' and 'Trunk VI' pieces it is evident that Pennington continues to focus on bark and natural tactile surfaces. In her sculptures they form not just the outside skins but through very careful manipulation of the material, through patient and repetitive gestures, the form is completely constructed from these smaller units. I can't help but think of an old stone cottage, weathered by a thousand storms, slate tiled roof with its perfect imperfections. Stone boulders gathered from the field and stacked up to form rooms. The rock smoothed over generations of use. How natural material sings with time and wear. Pennington's sculptures look incredible now but her hand and touch operate outside of trend and it is safe to assume the formal qualities in these works will endure. These works will always be beautiful.

I compared the laying down of coils to a computer guided rapid prototype device, however these helix forms also bring to mind nature's ability to work in repetition, to grow in pattern and sequence. The architecture of ants nests and even termite mounds with their soft undulations and rich earth tones are certainly relevant but I also consider the structure of hives and bees busy at work. All this natural architecture sits as vessels for life, protection and spaces for work. Pennington's touch is soft and sensitive, her understanding of form and volume is very much evident. Something that continues to impress is the light play through the walls of the sculptural forms. We see this in the works 'Light and Shadow I and II' where the wall structures bring to mind breezeways and in the case of 'Burnt Weave' we can see the acknowledgment of light play and negative space through recognition of basketry. Pennington has an interest in basketry and weaving of natural material and her surface treatment directly relates to her background in print and pattern design in textiles. Pennington pushes these tactile surfaces, pushes or imprints nature onto them. In the 'Fragments' series there are noticeable indentations and patterns that extend the structural patterns of the form.

Pennington strikes a balance of classic vessel forms with new and fascinating applications of hand building. Perhaps the coil is not new but through Pennington's hands it reads like raffia and rope, like woven baskets. The other construction methodologies also reveal the way the form and structure act as the outer surface. This show sits softly in space, it interacts with the room in a very light and calm way. It speaks quietly but with absolute confidence. The pieces will endure while other trends fade and the formal qualities and technical proficiency will continue to impress. Pennington passes her materials through her fingers with the most elegant expressions. I see the space around her forms. I see the air contained within and passing through their walls. These vessels are full of life, they are open and honest but most importantly they are true to Pennington's nature.